



Photo # 80-G-300215 First African-American U.S. Navy officers, 1944

KNOWN AS "THE GOLDEN THIRTEEN"

GRAHAM EDWARD MARTIN SEATED FRONT ROW SECOND FROM LEFT

Golden Thirteen, group of [African Americans](#) who in 1944 became the first group of black servicemen to complete officer training for the [United States Navy](#). In 1977 members of the group organized the first of several reunions, some of which were highly publicized and even promoted by [navy](#) recruiters. The group became known as the Golden Thirteen in honour of their having begun the process of racially [integrating](#) the navy, which at the time of their service may have been the most tradition-bound and segregated branch of the U.S. armed forces.

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During [World War II](#), as military conscription brought tens of thousands of black recruits into the navy, senior white commanders and government officials became concerned at the lack of black officers to lead them. In 1943 the secretary of the navy agreed to commission black officers, and 16 candidates were chosen from the ranks to undergo accelerated officer training at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station in [Illinois](#). Most, but not all, of the 16 had been to college, and some had

advanced degrees; most of them also had been athletes, and all had [exemplary](#) service records. From January through March 1944, they went through officer training in segregated facilities at [Great Lakes](#) under the tutelage of white officers. All passed the course, but only 13 received commissions, 12 as ensigns and 1 as a warrant officer. (The reasons for the rejection of the final three were never given. Some have speculated that the navy, accustomed to a certain failure rate among officer candidates, did not want the black group to be seen as performing better than whites.)

The graduates were given assignments that fit within the navy's segregated system—for instance, training black recruits, overseeing all-black [logistics](#) units, or commanding small vessels such as harbour tugs, patrol craft, or oilers that were mostly crewed by black sailors. Only one made the navy his career after the war ended; the rest went on to a number of civilian careers, including education, business, social work, and the law. In their later years they were frequent guests of honour at gatherings of the navy's growing number of black commissioned officers. Oral histories taken from eight surviving members and three white officers associated with them are transcribed in Paul Stillwell (ed.), *The Golden Thirteen: Recollections of the First Black Naval Officers* (1993).