

LOCAL&STATE

Military career helped dismantle stereotypes



Looking back
at our history

Fred Zilian
Newport Daily News

Note: This is the second essay in a series on "Race and Racism in America."

While I grew up hearing the normal racial and nationality slurs common among teenagers in middle class America of the 1950s-'60s, it was in my first few months at the U.S. Military Academy that I heard unvarnished racism with a Southern drawl from the mouth of a classmate. I thought he was kidding, but he was dead serious when he challenged me about my intention to do something with an African American classmate.

Dreaming to lead the Army football team as quarterback over Navy on national TV, I played freshman football next to a small number of African American classmates.

And then senior year came, and there was Gary Steele, a tall, athletic, handsome African American classmate, a star offensive end on the football team. We worked closely together during that year. Strong in body and in dedication to West Point's values of "Duty, Honor, Country," he and I are still friends today.

Overall we had just a handful of African Americans in our class, certainly not a number representative of our country's population. Of the 749 of us who graduated in the Class of 1970, I count seven apparent African Americans in my yearbook.

Following graduation in 1970, I reported to Airborne School and Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia. There I was taught by many sculpted, dedicated, long-serving, highly professional African American sergeants who instructed me on how to jump from an airplane, make a parachute landing fall, tie a bowline knot, rappel down a cliff, and navigate through a swamp. Most important, they taught me about myself and about leadership in stressful situations.

After all the academic schooling and military training, in March 1971, I reported to my first duty assignment in the 1st Brigade, 8th Infantry Division, Mainz, West Germany. The US was locked in the Cold War



Sage Steele and her family at her father Col. Gary Steele's induction into the Army Sports Hall of Fame at West Point in September 2013. From left are wife Mona, Steele, daughter Sage, and sons Chad and Courtney. PHOTO PROVIDED BY U.S. ARMY

with the Soviet Union; we stood watch in a reserve position on "freedom's frontier" behind the Inter-German Border.

What a shock it was to meet my first platoon. This was still a conscript Army then; the draft did not end until 1973. The Vietnam War had decimated the Army, called frequently then a "hollow" army. I knew my platoon would not be its official size of 33; however, 14 soldiers? It was more aptly called a reinforced squad, rather than an infantry platoon.

The majority of my platoon was composed of people of color, mostly African Americans and also one Native American.

The culture of the Black troops was in stark contrast to the culture I experienced at West Point. Most of the troops had been to Vietnam and were just finishing the last few months of their draft enlistments. Some showed minimal and grudging respect for me; others had no qualms about showing their disdain for this young, overzealous, white, pretty boy who had not tasted real combat. A small number displayed outright

contempt and white-hot hatred. My first day I was called "pig" and "cracker" behind my back.

And then, when I became a company commander, there was Sgt. First Class Thornton, whom I elevated to first sergeant of the company. A well-built African American, he brooked no disrespect or nonsense. With his help, the company became more disciplined and professional.

In three-and-a-half years in that unit, I served with soldiers of color, jumped out of airplanes with them, marched, bivouacked, played lunchtime basketball, and socialized with them. I even had a great game of basketball with the one who called me "cracker." I learned that sports could transcend the color/race line.

Several years after returning stateside, I had a teaching assignment in the Social Science Department at West Point. And here there were African Americans Fred Black and Bill Lowry. Both were great officers and educators, and colleagues and friends. Fred, as well as Gary Steele, will read this column.

In the early 1980s, after many years in the world of military education, I found myself back in a frontline unit on the DMZ in Korea, serving as a principal staff officer in a brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division.

And here there was short, sturdy, tough-as-nails, African American Sgt. Major Wall. Having been away from the front line army for so many years, I lacked much knowledge and experience for my position. SGM Wall took the time to teach me. Many times he would enter my office, close the door, and offer me counsel and direction. We developed a mutual respect which turned to admiration.

He rotated out of the unit before I did. At his official departure ceremony, after I saluted him, I hugged him — totally unheard of and in contrast to normal military protocol.

In my 25-year military career, any negative stereotypes I may have harbored about African Americans were dismantled. I had met, worked with, played with, danced with, and soldiered with great ones, incompetent and unprofessional ones, and all in between.

Fred Zilian (zilianblog.com; Twitter: @FredZilian) is a retired educator and a regular columnist.



Harbor seals sunning at low tide on exposed rocks around Newport Harbor. KRIS CRAIG/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

Chilling with the seals in Newport

Amy Russo

Providence Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Aboard the Alletta Morris on a brisk February day, two dozen sightseers brave the cold, binoculars at the ready, in hopes of spotting it.

The voyagers are told to keep their eyes peeled for what looks like a shiny gray basketball bobbing in the water. Not to be confused with a rock or a buoy. *This* has saucer-like eyes, a heart-shaped nose, and a face full of whiskers.

If you're lucky, you might even catch one on a rock in a "banana pose," arching its body into a U-shape.

If you haven't guessed yet, the object in this game of "I spy" is a harbor seal. It was an unlikely sight some 60 years ago in Newport, where the creatures had gone practically extinct, culled by fishermen seeking to guard their catch. But much has changed since then, thanks to the enactment of the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972 that has shielded seals from their human predators, resulting in a population boom.

Each winter, Save The Bay, a nonprofit dedicated to a "swimmable, fishable, healthy Narragansett Bay," shuttles boatloads of visitors out near Rose Island, where a spot called Citing Rock offers a chance to see the seals.

Save The Bay Lead Captain Eric Pfirrmann helmed my trip earlier this month, accompanied by Jeff Swanlund, a member of the organization's education team, which informs about 15,000 people a year with its programming.

Participants ship out from Bowen's

Wharf on what's no more than a half-hour journey over to the sighting location. Along the way, Swanlund presents us with a map of our outing, along with a quick round of facts on harbor seals, complete with photos.

They grow up to 6 feet long and can weigh up to 285 pounds, clocking in around the poundage of a giant panda or a baby elephant.

What separates harbor seals from nature's land-loving creatures is that they can hold their breath for 30 minutes during a long dive, slowing their heart rate to a creeping four beats per minute.

Unlike the seals of yore, threatened by fishers, these seals lead a relatively calm existence. Elsewhere in the world, they'd find themselves the snack of polar bears, orcas or large sharks, though Swanlund says the waters along Newport's coast aren't deep enough to attract any aquatic adversaries.

Instead, you'll see them poking up from the water, occasionally hoisting themselves up onto rocks rather ungracefully, to the amusement of on-lookers.

To see them, you'll have to bundle up, as they're only around for the colder months. In the fall, they migrate south from Maine and coastal Canada, opting for Rhode Island waters that are a crisp 40 degrees this time of year.

Thick fur and 6 inches of blubber serve as built-in wetsuits to keep these off-season tourists warm.

The rest of us might opt for somewhere a little closer to the equator.

Save The Bay's seal tours run through April. To book one, go to savebay.org.

Providence Journal staff writer Amy Russo moved from New York City last March, and she's eager to experience her adopted state. If you have suggestions for this column, email her at amrusso@providencejournal.com.

Talk on Irish women fighting for labor rights

Newport Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK

NEWPORT — The Museum of Newport Irish History announces the fourth talk in its 20th Annual Michael F. Crowley Lecture Series, to be presented "virtually" on Tuesday, Feb. 22 at 6 p.m. via Zoom. Elizabeth Stack, executive director of the Irish American Heritage Museum, located in Albany, New York, will present an illustrated talk titled, "Irish Women in the American Labor Movement."

Stack will discuss the work of Mother Jones, Leonora Barry, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and other Irish women who were instrumental national leaders for labor rights for all Americans. The talk will examine the role their background, experiences and faith played in inspiring these women to advocate so strenuously for better conditions for workers across the country.

The lecture is free of charge, but reservations are required to receive the Zoom login information. For a complete lecture overview and speaker bio and



Mother Jones in 1902 PROVIDED BY MUSEUM OF NEWPORT IRISH HISTORY VIA LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

the link to reserve, please visit the "Lectures" page at newportirishhistory.org.

For additional information or assistance, please contact Ann Arnold at newportirishhistory@gmail.com or 401-841-5493.

WEATHER

Coastal Rhode Island

Monday: Sunny, with a high near 45. Southwest wind 10 to 16 mph. **Monday Night:** Partly cloudy, with a low around 35. Southwest wind around 6 mph becoming calm in the evening.

Tuesday: A chance of rain, mainly after 3 p.m. Mostly cloudy, with a high near 50. Light southeast wind becoming south 9 to 14 mph in the morning. Chance of precipitation is 40%. **Tuesday Night:** Rain, mainly before 3 a.m. Low around 47. South wind around 17 mph, with gusts as high as 32 mph. Chance of precipitation is 90%.

Extended

Wednesday: A chance of rain before 7 a.m. Mostly cloudy, with a high near 55. Southwest wind 14 to 17 mph. Chance of precipitation is 30%. **Wednesday Night:** Partly cloudy, with a low around 29. Northwest wind around 15 mph, with gusts as high as 26 mph.

Thursday: A chance of snow after 3

p.m. Partly sunny, with a high near 37. North wind 7 to 13 mph. Chance of precipitation is 30%. **Thursday Night:** Snow before 5 a.m., then snow, possibly mixed with rain. Low around 29. Northeast wind 8 to 14 mph. Chance of precipitation is 80%.

b Rain and snow. High near 40. East wind 13 to 15 mph becoming north in the afternoon. Chance of precipitation is 90%. **Friday Night:** A chance of rain and snow. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 22. Northwest wind around 15 mph. Chance of precipitation is 30%.

Marine

Monday: SW wind 9 to 14 kt, with gusts as high as 20 kt. Sunny. Seas 1 ft or less. **Monday Night:** Variable winds 5 kt or less. Partly cloudy. Seas 1 ft or less.

Tides, etc.

Monday's low tides: 4:04 a.m., 4:11 p.m. **High tides:** 10:56 a.m., 11:25 p.m.

Monday's sunrise: 6:33 a.m. **Sunset:** 5:27 p.m.