



MESSAGE FROM THE VEEP



The Court Martial of Jackie Robinson

By Clarence M. Hatcherson

April 2013

JACK ROOSEVELT ROBINSON was born on January 31, 1919, into a family of sharecroppers in Cairo, Georgia. In 1920, the family moved to Pasadena, California. In 1935, Robinson graduated from **Washington Junior High School** and enrolled at **John Muir High School** (Muir Tech). Recognizing his athletic talents, Robinson's older brothers Mack and Frank inspired Jackie to pursue his interest in sports. At Muir Tech, Robinson played several sports at the varsity level and lettered in four of them: football, basketball, track, and baseball.

After Muir, Robinson attended **Pasadena Junior College** where he continued his athletic career by participating in basketball, football, baseball, and track. In 1938, he was elected to the *All-Southland Junior College Team* for baseball and selected as the region's Most Valuable Player. That year, Robinson was one of ten students named to the school's *Order of the Mast and Dagger (Omicron Mu Delta)*, awarded to students performing "outstanding service to the school and whose scholastic and citizenship record is worthy of recognition."

Robinson transferred to **UCLA**, where he became the school's first athlete to win varsity letters in four sports: baseball, basketball, football, and track. In the spring semester of 1941, despite his mother's and **Rachael Isum's** (who would become Robinson's wife) reservations, Robinson left college just shy of graduation. He took a job as an assistant athletic director with the government's **National Youth Administration (NYA)** in Atascadero, California.

After the government ceased NYA operations, Robinson traveled to Honolulu in fall 1941 to play football for the semi-professional, racially integrated **Honolulu Bears**. After a short season, Robinson

returned to California in December 1941 to pursue a career as running back for the **Los Angeles Bulldogs** of the **Pacific Coast Football League**. By that time, however, the Japanese attack on **Pearl Harbor** had taken place, drawing the United States into **World War II** and ending Robinson's nascent football career.

Robinson was drafted and assigned to a segregated Army cavalry unit in **Fort Riley, Kansas**. Having the requisite qualifications, Robinson and several other black soldiers applied for admission to an **Officer Candidate School** then located at Fort Riley, Kansas. Although the Army's initial July 1941 guidelines for OCS had been drafted as race-neutral, practically speaking few black applicants were admitted into OCS until after subsequent directives by Army leadership. As a result, the applications of Robinson and his colleagues were delayed for several months.

After protests by heavyweight boxing champion **Joe Louis** (then stationed at Fort Riley) and the help of **Truman Gibson** (then an assistant civilian aide to the Secretary of War), the men were accepted into OCS. This common military experience spawned a personal friendship between Robinson and Louis. Upon finishing OCS, Robinson was commissioned as a second lieutenant in January 1943.



After receiving his commission, Lt. Robinson was reassigned to **Fort Hood, Texas**, where he joined the **761st "Black Panthers" Tank Battalion**. *On July 6, 1944, Robinson "became entangled in a

dispute that threatened to end his military service in disgrace." While riding on a military bus returning to a hospital from "the colored officers club," Robinson sat next to Virginia Jones, the wife of one of his fellow officers. Jones looked white -- at least the white bus driver thought so. After a few blocks, the driver abruptly ordered Robinson "to move to the back of the bus." Robinson, justifiably outraged, refused. Among other things, he had read that segregation was no longer allowed on military buses.

* Robinson's reportedly stated what happened next: *"The bus driver asked me for my identification card. I refused to give it to him. He then went to the Dispatcher and told him something. What he told him I don't know. He then comes back and tells the people that this nigger is making trouble. I told the driver to stop f--in with me, so he gets the rest of the men around there and starts blowing his top and someone calls the MP's." Robinson was placed under "arrest in quarters," which meant that "he would be considered under arrest at the hospital, although without a guard. Robinson was then taken to the hospital in a police pickup truck." A white officer would recall that Robinson "was handcuffed, and there were shackles on his legs. Robinson's face was angry, the muscles on his face tight, his eyes half closed."*

Robinson was transferred to the **758th Tank Battalion** on July 24, *"where the commander signed orders to prosecute him." On that day, he was arrested. *"At 1:45 in the afternoon on August 2, the case of The United States v. 2nd Lieutenant Jack R. Robinson, 0-10315861, Cavalry, Company C, 758th Tank Battalion, began." Robinson's fate was in the hands of nine men, eight of them white: "One was black; another had been a UCLA student [where Robinson had been an undergraduate]. Six votes were needed for conviction." Robinson faced two charges: "The first, a violation of Article of War No. 63, accused*

him of 'behaving with disrespect toward Capt. Gerald M. Bear, CMP, his superior officer' ... The second charge was a violation of Article No. 64, in this case 'willful disobedience of lawful command of Gerald M. Bear, CMP, his superior.'" Three other charges were dropped before the trial began.

Testimony reveals how bravely Robinson had fought to defend himself on the evening of the incident, including reportedly saying quite heroically, *"Look here, you son-of-a-bitch, don't you call me no nigger!"* After a four-hour trial, Robinson was exonerated: *"Robinson secured at least the four votes (secret and written) needed for his acquittal. He was found 'not guilty of all specifications and charges.'" Although his former unit, the 761st Tank Battalion, became the first black tank unit to see combat in World War II, Robinson's court-martial proceedings prohibited him from being deployed overseas, thus he never saw combat action.*

After his acquittal, he was transferred to Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky, where he served as a coach for army athletics until receiving an honorable discharge in November 1944.

The rest, as the adage goes, is history. I believe that it is safe to say that Rosa Parks' act of defiance in refusing to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery Alabama on Nov. 27, 1955 was one of the most important symbols of the modern Civil Rights Movement. But how many knew that this exact act of defiance successfully challenged and defeated Jim Crow over a decade before. And the challenger was a young Army 2nd Lieutenant who would become on April 15, 1947, the most significant figure to affect professional sports to that point in American history.

*Jackie Robinson: A Biography by Arnold Rampersad from an article *"Was Jackie Robinson Court-Martialed?"* by Henry Louis Gates Jr.