

# FORT MONMOUTH: The U.S.

# “Black Brain Center”

By Melissa  
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*“Because professionally trained Jews and blacks couldn't easily get jobs in industry, they found jobs in the Signal Corps. And they were also moving up through the ranks faster than the local white Christians.”*

According to African American engineer William Jones in the above quote from a 1993 oral history interview, the Signal Corps at Fort Monmouth offered unique opportunities for minorities in the 1940s and 1950s. African American electrical engineer **Thomas E. Daniels**, who worked there for thirty-five years, concurred with this sentiment in a 2003 interview with journalist Gloria Stravelli. He stated, “Fort Monmouth was known as the Black Brain Center of the U.S.” Daniels affirmed that this post “provided a place where black scientists and engineers could find jobs and advance their careers,” while other research facilities closed their doors to African Americans.

These employment opportunities did not inoculate the Fort's African American employees from the culture of discrimination and segregation that marked this period in our country's history, however. Keep in mind that the Army itself institutionalized discrimination until President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948, ending segregation in the United States Armed Forces. Jim Crow ruled in the private sector, and even here in New



**NEW DEPUTY** — Thomas E. Daniels, Oakhurst, has been named deputy project manager of Navigation/Control Systems. Announcement of Daniels' selection was made by NAVCON Project Manager Col. Leroy White.

**Project Diana**, named for the Roman moon goddess Diana, was an experimental project of the US Army Signal Corps in 1946 to bounce radar signals off the Moon and receive the reflected signals. A transmitter, receiver, and antenna array were constructed at a laboratory at Camp Evans, part of Fort Monmouth. A highly modified radar transmitter from World War II, sent a 3 kilowatts, 111.5 MHz signal in quarter-second pulses through the antenna. Return signals were received about 2.5 seconds later, the time required for the radio waves to make the 477,000 mile round-trip between the Earth and Moon. The receiver had to compensate for the Doppler shift in frequency of the reflected signal due to the Moon's orbital motion relative to the Earth's surface. The antenna could only be rotated in azimuth, so the experiment could only take place as the Moon passed through the 15-degree wide beam at moonrise and moonset, with the antenna's elevation angle fixed to horizontal. About 40 minutes of observation was available on each pass as the Moon transited the various lobes of the antenna pattern. The first successful echo detection came on January 10, 1946 at 11:58 a.m. local time by John H. DeWitt and his chief scientist E. King Stodola. Project Diana marked the birth of radar astronomy, which was later used to map Venus and other nearby planets. In addition to proving it possible to communicate with later space missions were also military and intelligence-gathering applications.

Jersey Ku Klux Klan chapters marched openly in the streets into 1920s (losing steam but still existing in the decades that followed). Despite its best efforts, the Signal Corps could not ensure uniformly equitable treatment for African American Army personnel.

Examining the experiences of just a few of the Fort's early African American employees illustrates the dichotomy between the Signal Corps' relatively progressive hiring policies and the day-to-day lives of the African Americans benefiting from them in central NJ. **Harold Tate**, for example, began working as a civilian electronics technician at Fort Monmouth in 1942. He recalled in a 1993 oral history interview that the government paid him \$2,600 a year, "quite a bit of money in those times." When Tate completed his undergraduate degree, his unit chief tapped him to train as a radar officer. Tate remembered, "there were only two blacks in the whole class of somewhere in the neighborhood of about 200 officers. The other was fair skinned and passing for white."

Tate encountered discrimination and segregation despite the opportunity afforded to him by his Fort Monmouth supervisor. He remembered difficulties in finding off post restaurants, transportation, and housing. As he recalled, "Blacks had to go scrounging around for a place to sleep." His experience at Fort Monmouth was so good, though, compared to other places he had been, that when offered the option to return to the Fort after training at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he said, "I'd be tickled to death to be sent back to the lab."

Ever mindful of the obstacles impeding African Americans' success, Tate and his fellow African American engineers and technicians started programs to educate their coworkers and even local high school students. According to Tate, these "tutorial programs for black Fort Monmouth employees did a respectable job of trying to get people better educated."

According to Tate, **Dr. Walter McAfee** helped teach these tutorials. McAfee, a renowned physicist, held numerous supervisory positions during his four decades at Fort Monmouth. He is perhaps most famous for his participation in the Diana Project, the 1946 radar experiment that resulted in our first contact with the moon. (This project occurred at Fort Monmouth's Camp Evans outpost in Wall Township, at a site that had, coincidentally, served as a KKK headquarters prior to the Army's WWII-era takeover).

McAfee recalled in a 1994 oral history interview that several government agencies initially rebuffed his attempts to gain employment, based on his race—something he



Dr. McAfee works in his laboratory, 1946. The McAfee Center at Ft. Monmouth, opened 1997, honored McAfee's lifetime achievements.

couldn't hide during the application process, as most applications required a photograph.

Fort Monmouth's application, however, did not. McAfee received instructions to report to the post almost immediately after submitting his paperwork. He resigned from a steady teaching job in order to do so, despite fears that he would be fired when Fort officials discovered his race.

Those fears dissipated when McAfee arrived and found a number of African Americans already at work. Upon arriving in New Jersey, he, like Tate, noted that off post segregation and discrimination made it difficult to get housing and meals. Interpersonal discrimination occasionally reared its head on base as well, sometimes making it difficult for African Americans to receive promotions. As McAfee described it, ". . . if they had one position and had a black man and a white man competing for it, the white man got it. Mainly, there's less friction that way. The black man isn't going to fight that hard. Of course, today you wouldn't say that. I guess we were just getting into the jobs."

But McAfee's section chief, like Tate's, championed him, and McAfee received his initial promotion. Many more followed, to the point that "I never had trouble on an Army base after '48. So when Truman integrated the Army, my rating was high enough they didn't bother me. I went to places and they gave me good quarters. They gave me the best— I usually got the VIP quarters."

That experience was in stark contrast to his first travel experiences in 1946, which required McAfee to carry a booklet denoting accommodations open to African Americans (this "Green Book" was recently made famous by a feature film of the same name).

**William Jones**, who noted the Signal Corps' reputation for accepting qualified African Americans, shared in a 1993 oral history interview that forty-eight private employers and the U.S. Air Corps rejected him before Fort Monmouth hired him. His opportunity to work there, like so many others, was marred by the fact that, as he put it, "you couldn't eat anywhere else in the county" other than the African American boarding house. He endured repeated humiliation when he could not dine with co-workers at local eateries. Luckily, the man for whom Jones worked early on in



**White House ceremony:** Dr. Walter S. McAfee (right) is shown with Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956 shortly after the president presented the Fort Monmouth physicist with one of the first of the Secretary of the Army's research fellowships, which provided for post-doctoral study at Harvard University and at laboratories in Europe and Australia.



Lt. Colonel Johnson and Brigadier General Thomas M. Rienzi, commander USASCS, entering MARS radio station, October 23, 1966. Note the QSL cards (contact confirmation postcards sent by HAM radio operators) around the world on walls.

his career, radar pioneer John Marchetti, "didn't care what kind of people worked on (his projects) as long as they were qualified."

As Jones rose through the ranks, he, too, refused to select employees based on the color of their skin, despite the past slights he himself had endured. According to Jones, ". . . I didn't want an 'all colored' department. I could see no advantage in spite of the arguments put forth by the colored who wanted me to do so 'in order that we could show them [the whites] what we can do.' . . . there was and is no advantage from self-segregation."

Thomas Daniels, who pointed out the post's reputation as a "Black Brain Center," addressed the imperfections of the opportunity afforded him by the Signal Corps, saying, "Working at the Fort, you still had a microcosm of people who really didn't think blacks were smart enough, but you still had opportunity."

While our discussion thus far has focused on civilian employees of the base, African Americans soldiers, too, report finding unique opportunities there. **Colonel Albert Johnson** serves as just one example. The man who would become the first African-American colonel in the US Army Signal Corps arrived at Fort Monmouth shortly after enlisting following the outbreak of WWII. Then Fort Monmouth commander Major General George Van Deusen reportedly told every company commander that there was to be no segregation of African American personnel on post. Remember, the Army was segregated until 1948. But, according to Van Deusen, the men were to be "scattered around," as Johnson recalled it, noting, "That worked out very well and I began to admire Fort Monmouth very much . . . this was one of the few posts that I was assigned to where everybody was considered as good as everybody else, and everybody worked in harmony trying to get the best things accomplished."

This doesn't mean Fort Monmouth was perfect. **Walter Holtz**, First Sergeant of Company T, 803<sup>rd</sup> Signal Training reported a "delegation" of white soldiers showing up at his desk saying they would not sleep in the same barracks as African Americans. First Sergeant Holtz arrived at a quick solution to the problem. He had the "delegation" and anyone who agreed with them put up pup tents and sleep in the company street. It rained that night. The following day, as Holtz recalled it, everyone was back in the barracks.

Another example of frustrating racism, as relayed by Johnson, occurred when he went to see a movie off-post with a white friend. Albert was told he had to sit in the balcony. Neither Johnson nor his friend took kindly to this. They conducted a little experiment, trying to sit together at



Colonel Johnson with his wife Norma.



Mary Pinkett



Emmett Paige

movie theaters in other local Monmouth County towns. They encountered the same problem. They promptly reported this to General Van Deusen, who reportedly called all the local mayors and told them that they would either treat his African American personnel as equals, or face a boycott by all the thousands of personnel under his command. Johnson remembered Van Deusen fondly, saying "I became very proud of him."

Johnson served in the Pacific Theater and the occupation of Japan. Postwar, he was sent to Texas to help establish communications among White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico, Fort Bliss in Texas, and other such sites in the area working on nuclear weapons and other cold war era technologies. This was the Deep South, and command leadership was not as progressive on race relations as General Van Deusen had been at Fort Monmouth during the war years. Despite the fact that Truman had by now desegregated the Armed Forces, not everyone embraced the new rules. For example, African-American personnel were banned from the pool at Fort Bliss. Johnson approached Command leadership with the issue, telling them "You know, we're really tired of being in positions where we could get killed as well as anybody else could, and we should be provided with the same things as everybody else." His pleas were met with resistance, and he was ultimately told that the post would deal with the issue when he returned from the leave he had planned to take for his wedding.

Johnson left Fort Bliss to marry his fiancé, Norma. While they were honeymooning with family in West Virginia they discovered that they had been transferred back to Fort Monmouth. Johnson felt "that was the best news . . . I had, because I knew how Fort Monmouth is." Upon arriving, Johnson and his wife were relieved to see "it was almost just like it was when General Van Deusen was there and we were . . . very happy." Johnson later served in Korea and Vietnam, always managing to make Fort Monmouth a home base and staying in the area after he retired.

The trail blazed by these World War II and Cold War era pioneers paved the way for later African American leaders at the base, like Mary Pinkett, reportedly the first black woman to attain the high civilian rank of GS-14, or Emmett Paige, the first black general in the history of the Signal Corps. Other notable African American leaders from the post include John Patterson, the first black Chief of Staff of the US Army Communications-Electronics Command (CECOM); CECOM Commander MG Robert Nabors (September 1998- July 2001), Fort Monmouth's first African American Commanding General; and CECOM

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Commander MG William H. Russ (July 2001-June 2004).

For more information on the experiences of Fort Monmouth's African American personnel, see Professor Robert Johnson Jr.'s documentary "No Short Climb," or Thomas Daniels' article, "Contributions of Black Americans to Electronic Research, Development, Production Distribution, and Training at Fort Monmouth, 1940-1982." You might also visit the African American heritage room at the InfoAge Science History Learning Center in Wall Township.

*Fort Monmouth, NJ, initially began as a Signal Corps training camp in 1917, after the US entered World War I. The Signal Corps is the branch of the military started during the American Civil War and charged with all manner of military communications. Fort Monmouth was first called Camp Little Silver, based on its location, and then Camp Alfred Vail, in honor of the NJ inventor who helped Samuel Morse develop commercial telegraphy. During the "Great War," it trained men for battle, and its laboratories worked on cutting edge technologies like air to ground radio. While the camp was supposed to be temporary, it wound up outliving the war. The Chief Signal Officer authorized the purchase of Camp Vail in 1919, and Signal Schools from around the country consolidated there that year. The installation received permanent status and the name "Fort Monmouth" in August 1925. The designation honored the soldiers of the American Revolution who died in the Battle of Monmouth Court House in 1778. Fort Monmouth would soon be known as the "Home of the Signal Corps." For the next several decades, the base continued to train fighting men—and eventually women—and its technological innovations were many. While supporting operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the base was ordered closed by the Department of Defense Base Realignment and Closure commission. It shuttered in 2011. Operations of the US Army Communications-Electronics Command, the primary agency on base at the time of its closure, moved to Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland.*

