

Sixty years later, Black military officers rare

WASHINGTON (AP) — Blacks have made great strides in the military since it was integrated 60 years ago, but they still struggle to gain a foothold in the higher ranks, where less than 6 percent of U.S. general officers are African-American.

At a ceremony commemorating the day President Truman ordered the desegregation of the armed forces, military officials and Black leaders said the U.S. must not rest on its laurels.

"My hope and expectation is that, in the years ahead, more African-Americans will staff the armed forces at the highest levels," Defense Secretary Robert Gates told a crowd that included many Black former service members. "We must make sure the American military continues to be a great engine of progress and equality."

While Blacks make up about 17 percent of the total force, they are just 9 percent of all officers, according to data obtained and analyzed by The Associated Press.

The rarity of Blacks in the top ranks is apparent in one startling statistic: Only one of the 38 four-star generals or admirals serving as of May was Black. And just 10 Black men have ever gained four-star rank — five in the Army, four in the Air Force and one in the Navy, according to the Pentagon.

As a result, younger African-American soldiers have few mentors of their own race. And as the overall percentage of Blacks in the service falls, particularly in combat careers that lead to top posts, the situation seems unlikely to change.

Still, officials this week can point to some historic gains by Blacks in the services as the Pentagon commemorates Truman's signing of an executive order on July 26, 1948, mandating the end of segregation in the military.

Best known among the four-stars is retired Gen. Colin Powell, who later became the country's first Black secretary of state, under President Bush.

In a stirring salute in the Capitol Rotunda recently, Powell said that as a youngster in 1948, it never occurred to him that he could rise to be chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

But when he joined the military 10 years later, "they no longer cared whether I was Black or White, immigrant kid or not," Powell told

the crowd, which was dotted with the red blazers of Tuskegee Airmen — the first group of Black fighter pilots allowed into the U.S. Army Air Corps that flew in World War II. "The only thing my commanders ever told me from 1958 for the rest of my career, is 'Can you perform?' And that's all we have ever asked for."

Another of the military's few Black four-stars is retired Gen. Johnnie E. Wilson, who in 1961, at age 17, spied an "Uncle Sam Wants You" poster and joined the Army.

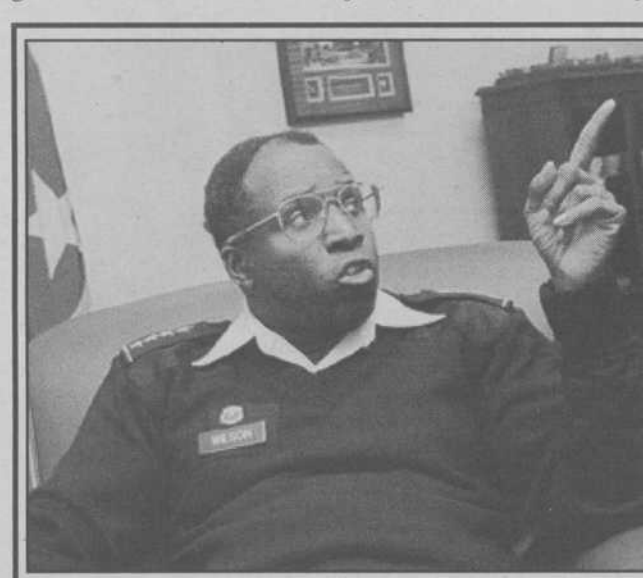
The second of 12 children, Wilson grew up in a housing project outside Cleveland. Enlisting in the Army, he said, was the only way he'd get a college education.

As a young recruit, he found that the older, Black noncommissioned officers were eager to guide him, and they urged him to try for Officer Candidate School. Over the next 38 years, he rose through the ranks to become a four-star general.

Why haven't more done the same? For one thing, Wilson said, "It's hard to tell young people the sky's the limit when they look up and don't see anyone" who looks like them.

According to Pentagon data, as of May:

—5.6 percent of the 923 general officers or admirals



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Gen. Johnnie E. Wilson

were Black.

—Eight Blacks were three-star lieutenant generals or vice admirals.

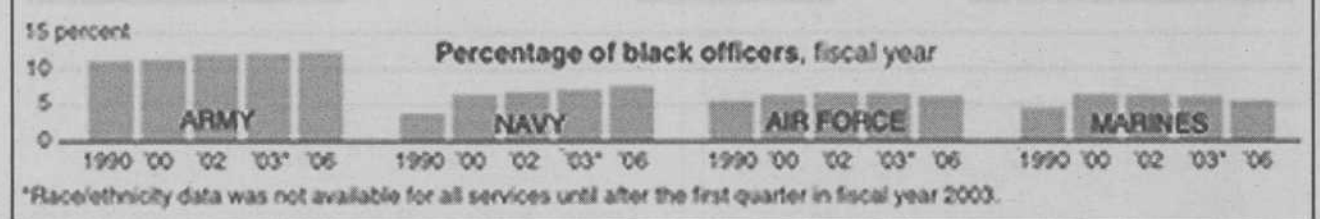
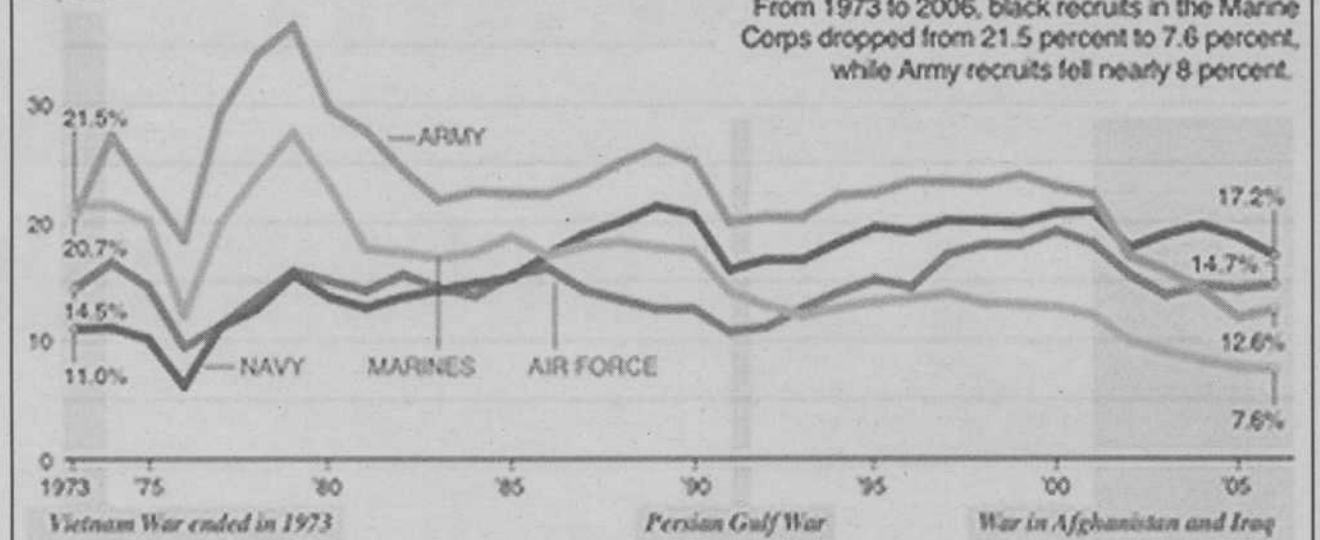
—Seventeen were two-star major generals or rear admirals.

—Twenty-six were one-star brigadier generals or rear admirals.

—Three of the Black one-stars were women.

The Army has led the way with Black officers, with nearly double the percentage at times over the past three

Percentage of Black recruits fiscal year 40 percent



decades as the other services. Blacks represented 11 percent to 12 percent of all Army officers during that time, compared with 4 percent to 8 percent in the Navy, Air Force and Marines.

The reasons for the lack of Blacks in the higher ranks are many and complex, ranging from simple career choices to Congress and family recommendations. Most often mentioned is that Black recruits are showing less interest in pursuing combat jobs, which are more likely

take the combat route — said he does not believe ROTC programs or the military steer Black recruits to the non-combat jobs — although that may have been a problem many years ago.

Instead, he said young Black officers choose other fields because "they want to prepare for a future outside of the military, and they believe that being in communications, being in logistics will provide them a better opportunity to succeed."

In 1998, nearly a quarter

over the years the pipeline for those Blacks going to general officer is not going to be markedly improved above what it is now," Johnson said.

He said he hears recruits say, "I'm joining this ROTC thing, so that when I get out in four years or eight years, whatever time frame it is, I want a skill I can use."

Army Lt. Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, the No. 2 U.S. commander in Iraq, echoes those pipeline concerns.

"It's all about how many people you put in the front end of the pipe," Austin said in an interview from Baghdad. "It's very difficult for anybody to get to be a colonel or general in any branch of the service if you don't have enough young officers coming in."

Austin took the combat path to his three-star rank, starting as an infantryman and tactical officer. Later — as a general officer — he commanded troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The forces he sees now, he said, are far more diverse than when he graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1975. Then, he said, Blacks made up only about 2.5 percent of the Army's general officer corps.

"We treasure diversity because it brings in a lot of different viewpoints and blends in a lot of cultures," he said. "It makes us better."

To achieve that diversity, he said, the military must encourage more Blacks to join, highlight the successes of those who have done well and "talk about the opportunities that are offered and

how those opportunities can help them in their quest to be successful people."

Another stumbling block is getting more members of minority groups into the military academies.

While White cadets often come from families steeped in military history, Black students may not have that long line of ancestral officers.

A review of congressional nominations to the military academies shows that Black and Hispanic lawmakers often recommend fewer students.

The fewest appointments to the academies came from Rep. Nydia Velazquez, D-N.Y., who forwarded just three names for the classes of 2009-2012. Two other members of Congress — Massachusetts Democrat Michael Capuano and New York Democrat Jose Serrano — sent up five names.

According to Pentagon data, the number of lawmakers who failed to nominate at least one candidate to each academy increased from 24 in 2005 to 38 this year. Of the 75 lawmakers overall who did not nominate someone to each academy in all four years, 40 were either Black or Hispanic.

Senior Black officers say they work hard to mentor younger troops, and they can all recall the people who helped shape their careers. And not all of them were Black.

Navy Rear Adm. Sinclair Harris vividly remembers his White commander on the frigate USS Jarrett — a tough

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