

July 3, 2020

The USCG, and Service 75 Years Ago

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, T. Gum, Site Admin.)

Since the birth of United States Coast Guard (USCG), and its prior namesakes and contributing organizations, African-American and white shipmates served alongside one another during times of peace & war dating back to 1790.

Until 1948 the United States Military was officially segregated. However, the USCG was selected for “official action” to desegregate prior to other branches and in 1943 the USCG began admitting African-American officer candidates to the USCG Academy. Two years later, in 1945, the USCG would have three Black ship commanders and five African-American women enlisted in the USCG Women’s Reserve becoming the first women of color to wear the United States Coast Guard uniform.

Photo of Stewart, MM2000.10.10.



It was during this time that Mr. Leon Stewart served.



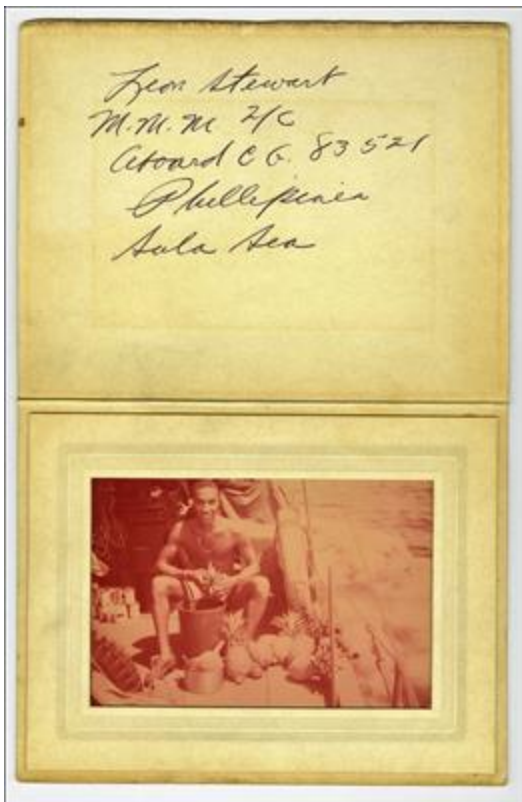
Photo of Stewart, MM2000.10.8.

Stewart was born in Arcadia, Pennsylvania and attended Marietta Grade School, eventually graduating high school of the same name. Though schools were integrated, Stewart was the only person of color in his class. While preparing to graduate high school he was fortunate enough to secure a basketball scholarship to Virginia Union University, in Richmond, Virginia.

However, in 1942 he received his draft papers. By this time World War II had gripped the entire globe. A basketball uniform was not the uniform he would end up wearing. Ordered to report for induction on August 07, 1942 in Philadelphia, he decided to visit each of the military branch recruiting offices.

Mr. Stewart sat for an Oral History to be catalogued at the Pennsylvania Military Museum in January of 2000 about his military service. Speaking about why he ultimately chose the USCG, “I wanted to fight. Went to the Coast Guard and I found there was a Chief Yeoman there, black[,] and also a Yeoman... and they said “this is the outfit son” and I went home and told my wife I enlisted...”

Compared to other branches, Stewart remembered, “I went to all branches. I didn’t like what I seen because I wasn’t going to the Navy and all they wanted me to do was wait on somebody.” Further illustrating this point and the USCG being the right decision, “...because blacks were in the front office. The Chief was in charge of recruitment and he had black and white yeomens working there with him and he said that this is the way it is and you have an opportunity here...”



Stewart trained as a Motor Machinist's Mate and served aboard several Coast Guard cutters performing escort duty in the Pacific Ocean, often times in combat operations. He and his shipmates would be involved in several close calls with enemy air to surface warfare.

His Oral History, and accompanying collection of artifacts, tell an amazing story of service and an extraordinary example of placing the mission and bonds of brotherhood, only known between those that serve, ahead of everything else.