

BLACK HISTORY MONTH INSPIRING CHANGE

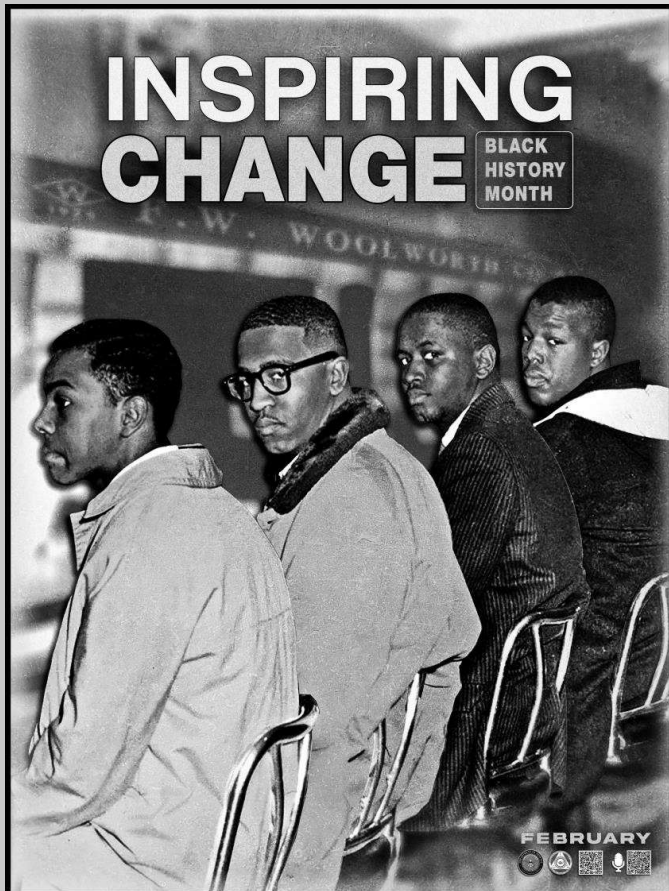


Black History Month

First proposed in the late 1960s and officially recognized in 1978, Black History Month, celebrated during the month of February each year, recognizes the achievements and impact Black individuals have had on the history of the United States.

The Department of Defense (DoD) Chose *Inspiring Change* as the 2023 theme for Black History Month to highlight the continued progress that has been made in the long struggle for racial equity and justice.

A Pivotal Moment in the Struggle



Today's presentation begins with the courageous actions of four students who challenged unfair 1960s segregation practices in Greensboro, North Carolina, and then summarizes the accomplishments of one of those young men, retired Major General Joseph Alfred McNeil, one of the "Greensboro Four."

Civil Rights in the '50s and '60s

During this period of American history, Jim Crow laws in the South typically required Black and White Americans to have separate dining accommodations.

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” schools for Blacks and Whites violated the constitutional rights of African American students.

In 1955, African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama, successfully challenged racial segregation on city buses.

These historic civil rights victories inspired Black people to take action to right other inequalities as well.

At the Lunch Counter

On the afternoon of February 1, 1960, four Black college freshmen from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, (Ezell Blair, Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond) entered a Woolworth's store.

They bought various items and held on to their receipts, so there would be no doubt they were store patrons. When they finished shopping, they sat down at the lunch counter and asked to be served. Although Black people could enter the dining area, they had to use a standing snack bar because the lunch counter was designated for "Whites only."

The Woolworth's Sit-In

The sit-in, a practice of peaceful defiance, wasn't a random act of rebellion, but the result of months of planning. The students had received guidance from mentor activists and collaborated with students from Greensboro's all-women's Bennett College.

One of the students, Joseph McNeil, had committed to integrate lunch counters after a 1959 trip to New York, a city where he hadn't encountered Jim Crow laws. Upon his return to North Carolina, the Greensboro Trailways Bus Terminal Cafe denied him service at its lunch counter, which strengthened his resolve to fight segregation.

The Conflict

On that day in February, the four students politely requested service at the Woolworth's counter, remaining seated when the staff refused to take their orders. The store manager asked them to leave, but the students did not move.

Even when a police officer arrived and slapped his nightstick directly behind them in a threatening manner, the students remained seated. Because the four students were paying customers, the police could only try to scare them.

Media Involvement

Meanwhile, the students had arranged for Ralph Johns, a local White businessman who was sympathetic to their cause, to alert the media.

The "Greensboro Four," soon appeared in local newspapers, helping the protest to get national attention.



A Growing Movement

The following day, the Greensboro Four returned to Woolworth's, and they had 20 other Black university students with them. The staff again refused to serve them.



By February 4th, 100 protesters filled the store and lunch counter. The sit-ins also drew counter-protesters who harassed, insulted, and assaulted the students. The acts of intimidation didn't stop them.

Actions Inspire Others

After nearly a week of protests, approximately 1,400 students met at the Greensboro Woolworth to demonstrate. Media coverage grew, and the story spread throughout the United States.

The actions of the Greensboro Four quickly inspired other students to act. Young people in other North Carolina cities, and eventually in other states, protested racial segregation at lunch counters as news of the event spread.

Consequently, the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro opened to Black patrons in July 1960.

Joseph McNeil (1 of 3)

After the Greensboro sit-ins, McNeil became involved with the Student Executive Committee for Justice, an organization of A&T University students and the women of Bennett College. They focused on picketing segregated downtown Greensboro establishments. McNeil participated in negotiations between student protesters, Woolworth's management, and the Human Relations Commission.

In 1963, McNeil earned a Bachelor of Science degree in engineering physics and was commissioned as a second lieutenant through the university's ROTC program.

Joseph McNeil (2 of 3)

In July 1963, McNeil was assigned to James Connally Air Force Base near Waco, Texas for Training. From 1964 to 1969, he was assigned to Ellsworth Air Force Base, South Dakota where he served as a KC-135 navigator.

McNeil spent extensive time in Southeast Asia flying in operations Arc Lite and Young Tiger. During this period, he was promoted to the ranks of First Lieutenant and Captain.

After leaving active duty in 1969, he continued to serve in the Air Force Reserves.

Joseph McNeil (3 of 3)



After a military career of over thirty-seven years, and over 6,600 flight hours, Major General McNeil received many awards and decorations, including the Air Force Distinguished Service Medal upon retirement.

Conclusion

As the inspiring story of the Greensboro Sit-in and the courageous actions of Joseph McNeil and the Greensboro Four illustrate, the African American impact on U.S. history includes a hard-fought victory over unfair segregation practices. These struggles and triumphs are deeply etched in the social fabric of America.

This month, the DoD pays tribute to these men and women who have made significant contributions to every field of human endeavor. We honor those who in the past and present INSPIRE CHANGE.

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