

SERVICE – Episode 5 – William Walker  
Episode Transcript

**President Roosevelt:** [from his Fireside Chat, Oct 1942] "The major objectives of a sound manpower policy are first, to select and train men of the highest fighting efficiency needed for our armed forces...."

**A. Philip Randolph:** [from White House meeting, 1941] Mr. President, certainly it would mean a great deal to the morale of the Negro people if, ah, you could make something up and allow Negroes to stay in the armed forces of the nation... it would have a tremendous -

**FDR:** (before Randolph is finished) I'm making a, I'm making a national defense speech around the middle of the month, about the draft as a whole, and what it'll be, and so forth, that thing got in.

**Randolph:** I thought I might say on the part of the Negro people, they feel they are not wanted in the armed forces of the country, and they feel they have earned the right to participate in every phase of the government by virtue of their record in past wars since the time of the Revolution. And consequently..."

[theme music comes under]

**Host:** On December 9th, 1941 - one day after President Roosevelt declared war against the Empire of Japan in response to the attack on Pearl Harbor - the NAACP sent a telegram to the U.S. secretary of the Navy requesting that African-Americans be accepted into the branch and positions other than as messmen. The request was refused. A letter to the president one week later was passed along to the Fair Employment Practices Committee. Again, the Navy refused.

**Veteran Lawson Ichiro Sakai:** They told me, "Wait a minute. You're Sakai. You're a Jap. We don't want Japs in the Navy. Get the hell out of here."

**Veteran George Hardy:** My brother and two of his friends joined the Navy. My father is upset - because of Afro-American background, the Navy could only accept them as mess attendants...

**Host:** Welcome to service. Stories of Hunger and War. A production from IHeartRadio and me, your host, Jacqueline Raposo.

[music shifts to slow piano music with record static]

As we're starting to absorb on this show, meeting the demands of World War 2 involved all citizens in one capacity or another. Still, that discussion with African-American civil rights leader A Philip Randolph highlights how African-Americans were not feeling welcome in the military or

in war production departments at this time. Segregation in all branches of the armed forces greatly affected the future path of these young men.

Today, we sit with Dr. William Walker, an African-American man who joined the Navy in 1943. As we heard in our last episode with George Hardy, who joined the Air Corps around the same time, the Navy wasn't the most welcoming branch when the war started. Now, supply positions were vital. But pay grades varied widely in the Navy for enlisted men: an apprentice seaman made \$50 a month, whereas a chief petty officer could make one hundred and thirty eight - the equivalent of a restaurant dishwasher today even having a chance at becoming a line cook or a chef. Fortunately, President Roosevelt responded to the Navy's 1941 refusal to the NAACP with a little pushback:

**President Roosevelt:** [voiced by Ben Rosenblatt] "I think that with all the Navy activities, the Navy Bureau of Navigation might find something that colored enlistees could do in addition to the rating if messmen!"

**Host:** ...Roosevelt said. Slowly but surely, more positions became open to these men, and the Navy started to open ratings to black sailors in 1942.

William's story captures the breadth of this scenario. One of 160,000 black World War Two sailors, we'll hear how William's advancement in the service changed the trajectory of his family line. But that doesn't mean always smooth sailing. And so now, from his home in Cleveland, Ohio, let's slow and sit and spend some time with William Walker.

[music fades and sounds of children playing, a mother humming, dishes being washed, book pages turning, and a heavy man's footsteps underscore the following]

**William Walker:** My name is William Walker, and I was a first class petty officer in the United States Navy. My family came to Cleveland, I was five years old, in 1930.

It was very eventful growing up. I had a brother and a sister. My brother was four years older than I and my sister was born '32. I don't recall my father, but my mother had remarried, and I had a very good relationship with my mother and my stepfather. My mother would always encourage me and talk about education, stay out of trouble and this sort of thing, because there was a lot of vandalism in the neighborhood and in our age group in particular. I loved school because I wanted to graduate. That was my drive, my inspiration. I wanted to graduate. I wanted to get out of the environment that I was in. And I wanted my mother to be proud of me.

[old truck bell, truck motor, metal chopping cart, and sounds of metal and glass underscore]

I had just regular job that I would go down to the market and I would meet the truckers coming in. And I would carry patron's bags and get paid a quarter. I also would pick up glass and different types of debris and take them to the salvage shop and pick up a dollar or two.

[sounds of cooking, chopping, sizzling, and plates setting down underscoring]

My father would work down at the market. He was befriended by a butcher and he would bring some leftover food home, my mother would cook it. And we ate a variety of foods that people nowadays never heard of, like chicken feet. We were never on welfare, but during that period they would give grapefruit and some kind of cereal - the government supplyin' this. And I can recall my friends asking for rations that would in need or wouldn't use. But we survived. My mother, she was a wonderful, wonderful cook. We survived.

[sound of interior pool: water splashing and children playing]

My neighbors were Mexican, Italian and Jewish. And we had a little group. I was probably eight because I was an elementary school. And we went to the YMCA, as a group. They went in... and I was denied permission to enter the YMCA.

[cut sound. Then a child running and sporadic crying and gulps of air]

WAs nothing they could do about it. Was nothing I could do about it. It was very, very hurtful. I sulked. I cried. I told my mother. We discussed it. Was just nothing we could do about it at that time. She told me that this was life, and that we would have to endure these type of incidents, and to buck up and be prepared. And from that day on, I have tried to. That was my first confrontation, was racism. And I never, never will forget it.

[bugle call, radio static]

**President Roosevelt:** [from that same Fireside Chat] "In some communities employers dislike to employ women. In others, they are reluctant to hire Negroes. In still others, older men are not wanted. We can no longer afford to indulge such prejudices and practices..."

[sounds of steel factory, classrooms chairs pushing around, pages turning, and writing on a chalkboard underscore the following]

**William Walker:** My brother couldn't enlist because of a physical disability, and he worked pouring steel down at the steel mill. And he told me stories of how blacks were treated in the steel mill. We had a neighbor on the staff of Case Western Reserve University. I told him I wanted to be in the medical field. I couldn't believe that he wouldn't encourage me or say something encouraging, but he didn't. And when I was at East Technical High School - all boys, 90 percent Caucasian. I took a college prep course and also majored in pattern making. But my instructor told me, frankly, "Bill, you'll never get a job as a pattern maker outside of school."

[Navy Hymn on piano comes in and underscores]

All of these, no positive reinforcement. Everything was negative, everything was cautious. I wanted to better myself. I wanted if progress. And that's why I volunteered for the Navy. It was a way out. It was a way out for me.

[sounds of water, planes, a PT boat engine, etc. underscoring the following]

I went to Chicago in October, '43. I was there about six weeks at Great Lakes. The educational officer took a liking to me. She said, I'm going to send you to Hampton Institute in Virginia. I spent my six months there. When I went in, I was just a seaman. And when I came out of Hampton Institute, I was a third class.

From there, I went to Pensacola, Florida as a diesel engineer. And I was in charge of a group of, of course, Negro sailors. We were all confined in segregated quarters. When we went into town, we went into town segregated. And the USO was the only thing that we could go to, during that period. It was a rough period. But I continued to concentrate on what I had to do.

I was in charge of the P.T. rescue team - had a crew of four or five - and we rescued Navy fighters that were being trained. They would crash into the water and we would get the bodies or rescue them.

I was promoted to second class. That was almost unheard of. I didn't know much about the 99's black pilots, but there were no other second class black sailors at that period other than in the galleys. It was an aberration, really. There was a lot of jealousy and resentment because I was in charge of about 90 black sailors and the majority of them were older than I was.

[sound of cargo boxes moving, and then an explosion]

During that period, there was a horrific incident where they had black sailors unloading ammunition and loading ammunition. And it blew up. And killed over 100 of them.

[TAPS on bugle comes under]

From that day on, black sailors didn't want to do that kind of work. You can't blame them. I was 20 years old and I was there in charge of these people. But I said I was gonna persevere and I was gonna survive and I was gonna reach whatever rating I could get. When I shipped out, they made me first class! First class petty officer in charge of all these people.

**Host:** After the break...

**William Walker:** "You ate what you could get and be thankful for what you were getting..."

**Host:** Stay with us.

**COMMERCIAL**

**Host:** You're listening to Service: Stories of Hunger and War from IHeartRadio. I'm Jacqueline Raposo and we're here with William Walker, now a chief petty officer, first class in the Navy. His role is about to shift as he deploys overseas and starts to manage his ship's supply holds.

[sounds of cooking, chopping, etc.]

In newspapers nationwide, the Navy recruited sailors by boasting of the fabulous food they would find in this branch. In our first episode, Pat D'Ambrosio mentioned that, because his family didn't have a freezer, they canned vegetables for the winter. 85% of American households had refrigerators during this time, but it wasn't until after the war that frozen foods and freezer technology started to become mainstream. Conversely, Navy ships had galley kitchens comparable to a first class hotel kitchen, with the finest of refrigeration capabilities, mechanical dough mixers, bread cutters... and frozen foods poured into the holds. Yet in 1943, Navy stations started to report serious food shortages with beef, poultry and potatoes, especially short in some locations. Butter was a common steal from Navy supplies stateside. The world was short of food because of this war. And so it becomes a common thread this season for our veterans to reflect on food less as enjoyment, and more as an aspect of their survival.

Let's now return with William to late 1944 and move into 1945 as he boards ship and heads to the Pacific Theater.

[sound of water and Navy ship engine]

**William Walker:** I want to Leyte Gulf. That's where they had some of the biggest battles in the Pacific. Where aircraft carrier planes and Japanese kamikazes were all involved. Fortunately, I wasn't involved directly in those battles. We weren't directly attacked, but we were always in environments where we could be.

We would come through and supply whatever ships were left from the battle with food and ammunition. That was our job. If you know anything about how food is distributed in the Navy, all the stuff was in a hold. And you have a crew that works in the hold. You have a crew that lowers the food into the hold. And then you have a crew that takes the food to storage. My job was to supervise all three of these areas.

The food that we got - other than the Spam - we would look at the food and we were told that what we saw were raisins, but they were actually bugs in the flour that came overseas to us. And this is what we had to eat. This is survival!

We would get a shipload coming in of maybe some eggs or whatever. It was a big deal. And, once every other week or so, we were allocated a beer. A bear. Those things were special rations. You ate what you could get and be thankful for what you were getting.

We were basically be on an island unloading, back on the ship, unloading, then on an island. It was a job. I enjoyed doing what I was doing because I got a lot of respect, not only from some of the blacks and some of the whites, but also some of the officers. Of course, if you're supplying food, they're very grateful! [laughs] I don't care if it's a battleship or a canoe! If you have beer that you can fly out to them, you were their ally. But as soon as those conditions are alleviated, they're back into the same old routine of who you are, where you are, and what you can expect.

[waves, birds, chickens, pigs, etc. come in and underscore the following]

The Navy were island hopping: Leyte, Iwo Jima, Okinawa. And all those people were really relying on us to supply them. I was amazed at how humanity how people survived under conditions that they did. Unsanitary conditions, completely unsanitary. They had chickens and pigs running in and out of the house and under the house. Gangrene and foot sores. They paid the supreme price. They were friendly and they were gracious that we were there to serve them. There's nothing wrong with that. We were proud of our contribution to what we were doing.

[sound of mother humming underscores]

I missed my mother's cooking, period. Lima beans and stew. And she could make different meals out of chicken. She was a marvelous cook... She was a marvelous cook... My mother died while I was in service...

[engine roaring]

I was in Leyte Gulf...

[nuclear explosion, soft Japanese string music underscores]

...We were cautiously apprehensive. We didn't know whether we're going to have to go to Japan or not. Of course, didn't want to go there. Truman has said that if we had to invade Japan, a million soldiers would lose their lives. They were prepared to die. They were prepared to not surrender. They had been bombed and fire bombed, an every type of weapon used on them. And they still said no. They still said no. We were on pins and needles. We didn't know what to expect.

**President Truman:** "My fellow Americans, the thoughts and hopes of all Americans, indeed of all the civilized world, are centered tonight on the Battleship Missouri. There, on that small piece of American soil anchored in Tokyo Harbor, The Japanese have just officially laid down their arms. They have signed terms of unconditional surrender..."

**William Walker:** I returned right after they dropped the bomb.

[music shifts to piano music from up top, then restaurant interior sounds, laughter, cooking sounds, writing, etc. underscore]

It was great. I came home. I elected to take the G.I. Bill. I was going to go to college and I was gonna set the world on fire. My stepfather died. We had lost the home we were living in when I went into the service. Even with my mother gone, my brother and I were gonna survive. The two of us were gonna make it in this world. I had accumulated a little of money in the service that I had saved. We had some very good times together. We went to restaurants and so forth - all seafood, always seafood!

When I was in school and I had nowhere to go, my brother found a way for me to have family with him and his wife. They would send me cooked meals to carry me over until the next check came through. My brother was my soul. He was in my corner all the way. He was my mother and my brother.

[dramatic 1940s film music]

I went to Ohio State University in 1945. I went to the movies. And I had to sit in the bleachers. And I couldn't believe, after all I had witnessed in my life, that I had to sit in the bleachers. That really... that really affected me.

[muffled restaurant interior]

And, uh, I joined the, African, uh, Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. We, uh, went to a restaurant. And we went into the restaurant to eat. It was, oh, about 13 of us. And we sat at the counter - were two policemen sitting at the counter, too. We ordered our food. We paid for our food. And we left a tip. And as we walked out, the door opened.

[door opens crassly]

And all the tips that the waitresses had received, they threw him out in the street.

That was how I met, after I got out of the service in Columbus, Ohio, in 1946.

[muffled classroom voices]

I entered dental school. I was in a class of 2 in 120 - 2 blacks.

[woman's heels walking, stopping, walking again]

After two years I was called a doctor. And I had my cubicle. And the patient walked in - Caucasian. She looked at me and she said, "Oh, no." Turned around and walked out.

[paper pages shuffling]

My junior year, I was working 10 hours a night as a mail carrier. When I was being interviewed, the supervisor had my credentials in front of him. He said, "If it was up to me, you wouldn't get this job." Just like that.

[writing on a chalkboard]

I had this instructor. And I was sitting there at the back of the class. He said, "This is what we do, and this is what we expect in a procedure. And if it doesn't work, it's just another nigger in the woodpile."

[voices stop, writing stops]

Now, mind you now, I'm in a class of 120. They looked at me to see what was gonna do, my reaction. I had to respond. I caught him before he went out the door. I told him I didn't appreciate this remark. He looked at me and he says, "Just a colloquialism."

I had friends that were in dental school that committed suicide.

[Navy Hymn comes in through the end]

I thought about all of this later in my life. The only thing that sustained me were my experiences that I got out of the Navy. So many professionals' children were in the service. I had the opportunity to see doctors, lawyers, educators and achievers. I had never seen these people before. They welcomed me and encouraged me to continue my life. I was not a freshman when I entered the freshman class at Ohio State University. I was a mature individual who had commanded a regiment almost of individuals, and so I knew what my potential was. That helped me to survive, and to instill the ability to tell my kids to survive.

I was very fortunate. But for every fortunate experience that I can relate to you, there are a hundred unfortunate experiences.

**Host:** It wasn't until the 1960s that African Americans began commanding ships, submarines, and shore establishments, and not until 1974 that the Navy published any sort of affirmative action plan. But back in 1944, 12 commissioned officers and one warrant officer became known as the Golden 13 - the first African American navy men with rank who would pave the way for many more to come.

[theme music comes in to the end]

William might have become one of these officers. But he turned down a career in the Navy to tough it out in dental school, and he became Dr. William Walker, instead. While there, he met his future wife Janet Bivens – a *Captain* in the Air Force -- and they had two children, Leslie and Bill.

Leslie has called William's time in the service his "great leveler", and you can head to our Facebook and Instagram - we're @servicepodcast - and servicepodcast.org to hear her explain more about that, as well as find photos, article, and transcriptions relating to this episode. But William remained scarred by the racism he received when he returned from his Service, and so didn't speak about his experiences to those outside of his family until recently.

We're going to explore why veterans do our do not share their service stories and what communities are doing to help in an episode called "Dad, I can't talk about it," so stay tuned for that.

But before we go, I want to leave you with one more clip. Because at times, William seemed uninterested in detailing *food* specifically. But there was something young Bill wanted to make sure we knew about his father's legacy when it comes to food in their family now:

**Bill Walker:** Could you explain to them - because I know how you feel about food - as a result of you growing up in the Great Depression, talk about how much food is in this house right now overall.

**William Walker:** Overflowing.

**Bill Walker:** Why is that?

**William Walker:** Because I said I would never have to worry about food together my life. OK? Never again. Never, ever. Never.

**Host:** In our next episode, we go back to Europe with Harold Budd, Long, an engineer in the Air Corps who travelled all over laying airstrips and taking bomb sites out of planes. Always on the move, he ain't nothing but K rations and C rations for almost three years.

Service is a production of IHeartRadio. This episode was produced and edited by me, Jacqueline Raposo. Ben Rosenblatt voiced FDR for us, and you can hear Ben and me on our old Heritage Radio Network podcast, Love Bites. Misty Boettiger assisted with this episode, and Elizabeth Emery was our onsite engineer with William. Our supervising producer is Gabrielle Collins. Our executive producer is Christopher Hassiotis. Thank you for listening. And thank you, those who are serving and those who have served.