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J.B. Mills, on far left, at Beale Street parade ground, Hingham (now Lynch Field).



J.B. Mills at age 17.



J.B. Mills last year.

Ammunition Depot Veteran J.B. Mills Leaves a Rich Legacy

By Jim Rose, FOW News Editor and Historian

As the holiday season approaches with its spirit of giving and thankfulness, it is fitting to remember the gifts of history and culture Navy veteran J.B. Mills bestowed on Wompatuck State Park and Bare Cove Park during his relationship with the former ammunition depot. Mills passed away this year on June 18 at the age of 91.

Mills was born in New Orleans on July 6, 1924. Being the jazz capitol of the world, he got to know many of the great musicians. From Duke Ellington to Count Basie, J.B. rubbed elbows with almost all of them. Mills was a walking encyclopedia on the subject of jazz.

Before Mills first showed up for a 2009 ammunition depot reunion, nobody at the two parks had any idea of the jazz greats that passed through there as sailors during World War II: Al Grey (trombone), "Hamp" Hampton (saxophone), Jimmy Witherspoon (voice), Tommy Ridgley (voice, piano and band leader) and John Coltrane (saxophone and composition).

As an African-American, Mills also recalled the segregation in the military. The following contain some of his quotes in past issues about jazz and race relations.

"It was like oil and water," Mills said.

"Our barracks off Beale Street in Hingham was segregated. On the left side of the building were the whites. On the right side were the blacks.

"When the war first started in 1941 black sailors could only be stewards, cooks and mess attendants.

"However in 1942, President Roosevelt made us equal seamen due to the help of his wife Eleanor (military officially desegregated in 1948).

"But, and this is the big but, we were still not treated equally after that. Except for the USS Mason, which was an all black crew, we weren't allowed on ships and were given demeaning jobs with some dangerous ones like loading ammunition.

"On July 17, 1944 at Port Chicago, California, an explosion killed more than 300 people while loading ammunition. Most were black. Those who refused to go back to work were sent to prison. They were all black.

"That same year, the ammo ship USS YF-415 blew up dumping munitions off Boston Harbor, killing 17 sailors. The Hingham detail was all black. I knew the whole crew. That's why I donated that monument over at Bare Cove Park in

Hingham. It was in memory of them. My best friends Adell Braxton and Jimmy Griffin were killed on that ship. They were great athletes. Adell once played football for Michigan State and Jimmy was a boxing champ.

"Segregation then was a bad memory. I remember during World War II being turned away at a USO Club on Boylston Street in Boston because I was black. The white guard said: 'There is a place for your people at the club in Roxbury.'

"What makes me mad as hell is the German POWs over at Fort McCay in South Boston were treated better than us blacks. The military even gave them sightseeing trips.

"We put our lives on the line for what? The first sailor awarded the Navy Cross in World War II, Dorie Miller, was black. Even though that's our country's third highest medal, he should have received the Medal of Honor. He was put in for it but the Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, shot it down. In World War II, no blacks received the Medal of Honor. It just wasn't done then. (President Clinton eventually rectified the injustice in 1997 with seven Afro-Americans receiving the medal, six posthumously.)

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John Coltrane in the Navy.



Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot Band.

Ammunition Depot Veteran J.B. Mills Leaves a Rich Legacy (cont.)

“During the attack on Pearl Harbor, Miller shot down two enemy planes and he was just a messmate. He was never trained to operate a machine gun. Plus that, he saved several of his crewmates, including the captain of the ship who later died of his wounds.

“Nevertheless, the war brought blacks and whites together for a common good. For example, my black commander, Sam Barnes, entered a mess hall in Okinawa, and all the white officers cleared out after they spotted him. Only one white officer remained. It was Steve Belichick, New England Patriot’s coach Bill Belichick’s father. The two officers had lunch together and the place to themselves. They got along famously and became great friends.

“Barnes talks about this experience in the book, ‘The Golden Thirteen,’ a book about 13 black enlisted men who became the first African-American officers in the U.S. Navy, some rising to the rank of admiral.

“Sam Barnes was also assigned to the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot to study palletizing and ordnance. Besides Barnes, JFK also took the same courses there. Adell Braxton and myself played touch football against him and the other white officers. We called them ‘Ninety-day wonders.’ That’s because they became officers in 90 days after attending Officer Candidate School.

“Musically, the depot couldn’t have fared better because of race. The whole band was black except for the conductor. We had some great performers then.

“Trombonist Al Grey was one of them. After the war, he performed at the White House with Winton Marsalis. His trombone music was featured in the Steven Spielberg film, ‘The Color Purple.’

“There was also trombonist ‘Slide’ Hampton’s brother in the band, ‘Hamp’ Hampton. He played a fine alto sax.

“The depot also had blues singer Jimmy Witherspoon. He made radio broadcasts over the U.S. Armed Forces Radio Service during World War II. When stationed here, Jimmy, would sing at the Protestant churches in Hingham. Later, he recorded with Gerry Mulligan and Count Basie. We called him ‘The Spoon.’

“Band leader Tommy Ridgley was stationed here at the depot. He could also sing and play the piano. I grew up with Tommy on the Jefferson Parish side of New Orleans. We go back a long way.

“Another great musician that came there was saxophonist John Coltrane. He was first assigned to a ship in Rhode Island, but when the Navy found out he was black, they temporarily billeted him at the depot. Remember, no blacks on ships.

“But, even after the war I ran into discrimination attempting to buy a house. I

would inquire about a home for sale and be given the run-around like: ‘Oh, it’s under agreement.’ Then the house would just sit there unsold forever.

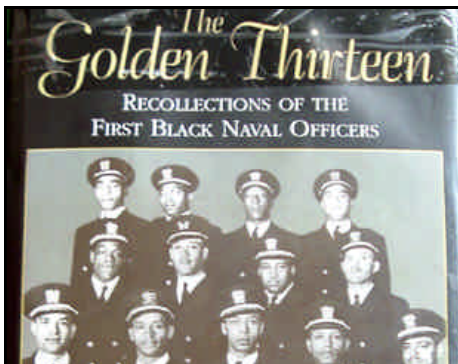
“One realtor in Abington told me, ‘If I show you this house, they would throw bricks at me.’

“Today, as far as the blacks like Brown and Garner being shot by cops, this tragedy has been going on for a long time. Most police are fine officers, but there are a few who shouldn’t be cops. You have to go into their background and find a culture of hate toward blacks. Their dads and their friends hate blacks, so they do too, even though they don’t know any.

“But times are slowly changing for the better. I hope. Finally, we have a black president. I pray for President Obama’s protection every day.

“On the whole, my overall memory of the service and Hingham is a good one. After all, that’s where I discovered the love of my life, Anita Lindsey of the Tuttleville section of Hingham. We met at a dance at the Agricultural Hall on Route 228 in 1943. She was 15 and I was 17. We got married and stayed together for 59 years until she died of cancer in 2007. It was a match made in heaven.”

Now J.B. Mills is united eternally with Anita in heaven. Thanks for the great memory. R.I.P. ■



Sam Barnes, bottom row, second from left.



J.B. Mills (in background) performing funeral duty for USS YF-415 crew.



Memorial donated by J.B. Mills in memory of the USS YF-415 crew.