

[Article B] USS *Kitty Hawk*: A Riot for Equal Rights

Background: U.S. involvement in Vietnam increased under President John F. Kennedy's leadership in the early 1960s. Heavily influenced by the dominant theory that "containment" of communism was critical to United States stability, both President Lyndon B. Johnson and President Richard Nixon committed to continue the fight. By the late 1960s, public opinion shifted against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Peaceful and violent protests in opposition of the war continued over the next few years. In 1970, when Nixon supported expanding the war mission across the border into Cambodia, protests increased. In 1972, the war in Vietnam dragged on and over 57,000 Americans had given their lives to the cause. With popular support for the war at an all-time low in the spring of 1972, USS *Kitty Hawk* deployed to Vietnam for the sixth time.

Deployment, 1972: In October of 1972 USS *Kitty Hawk* had been engaged in operations in South East Asia for 6 months. This deployment was supposed to be coming to a close, and the ship was slated to return to California. In early October, news came through that the ship was staying in Vietnam for additional air missions. Sailors, disappointed and aggravated by the news, were on edge. Underlying the aggravations about a delayed homecoming, racial tensions in the Navy had been simmering for years. Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Elmo Zumwalt had attempted to implement some equal opportunity initiatives; however, African Americans were typically assigned to lower rates and given more menial tasks. Of the 348 officers aboard *Kitty Hawk* only five, or 1.4% of officers, were black.

On the night of October 12th, the powder keg of frustration aboard USS *Kitty Hawk* exploded into a riot. That night at dinner an African American sailor named Terry Avinger attempted to take an extra portion. He had seen the sailor in front of him, who was white, take two grilled cheese sandwiches and desired to do the same. Avinger was thwarted by the mess attendant and the two argued. A few minutes later a white mess attendant accidentally stepped on a black sailor's foot and racial tensions ran high. Around 9:15 that night, a riot broke out around the ship. African American sailors were attacking white sailors almost at random. When the violent group came upon James Radford, the mess attendant who had refused Avinger a second grilled cheese, they attacked him with renewed fury. At the time the fighting broke out, Commander Benjamin Cloud, one of the few black officers, was watching a movie. As an African American, Cloud had experienced racism in the Navy, and as the Executive Officer (XO), he was one of the few blacks who held a job that demanded respect from black and white sailors alike. In an attempt to calm the angry mob, XO Cloud met with the enlisted sailors. The group of nearly 150 men were not immediately receptive to him. According to first-hand reports, when Cloud first engaged the mob they were shouting to kill him or throw him overboard. In an attempt to calm the crowd Cloud held up a clenched fist, honoring the black power movement. When the group quieted, he called on them to remember Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent strategy of resistance. After a tense meeting sailors returned to work. A somber mood hung over the *Kitty Hawk* for the rest of her deployment.

USS *Kitty Hawk* was not the only ship to experience racial protests during the Vietnam War. Navy leadership and civilian newspapers questioned whether or not it was Zumwalt's policies that had incited the protests. In one attempt to curb racial flare-ups, the Navy banned the black power salute while on duty in 1973. Slowly, the Navy began to shift policies in favor of true equal opportunity and implement affirmative action plans. Consult the newspaper article from the *New York Times* on the back for information on how the event was portrayed to the public.

SAILORS DESCRIBE RACIAL BATTLING

Say Fight Lasted 15 Hours
on Kitty Hawk Last Month

PEARL HARBOR, Hawaii, Nov. 23 (UPI)—Crewmen aboard the U.S.S. Kitty Hawk, which left here for San Diego today, said it took club-swinging marines to quell a bloody 15-hour racial battle on the carrier last month.

Newsmen were barred from boarding the huge ship, and the crew was instructed not to discuss the disturbance in which 46 persons were injured, according to the Navy.

However, sailors on shore liberty gave anonymous accounts of a series of all-night brawls during which about 100 black and white sailors "used knives, forks and chains and anything else they could get their hands on" as weapons.

The Navy's terse account of the incident said that 40 whites and six blacks were injured. Four persons had to be flown to shore for medical treatment.

"It was getting too hot to handle," said one sailor. "I heard that the captain ordered that guns be brought out . . . and to shoot if necessary. I heard shouts, screams, swearing and chairs being broken."

The carrier, which docked here yesterday from Vietnam, is scheduled to arrive in its home port, San Diego, next Tuesday.

The trouble began, sailors said, when a drunken white attempted to push a group of blacks in a Philippine night club. "The next night," one said, "the whites hired a bunch of black belts [Karate experts] to beat up blacks."

They said tension had escalated when the ship was abruptly ordered to turn around and head back for Vietnam waters. Sparked by an incident in the mess hall concerning food rationing, full-scale rioting broke out and lasted all night and into the next day, the sailors said.

"Blacks began tearing through compartments and began pulling out whites and began beating them up," one crewman said. "My friend was beaten to a pulp."

Most blacks and whites agreed that tension in the crew, now anxious to get home, has subsided, but they said rioting could erupt again.

The Kitty Hawk incident was the first recently reported riot, and was followed by a similar incident a week later aboard the fleet oiler Hassayampa.

Reports of the riots as well as sabotage and disobedience of orders aboard the Navy ships has prompted a Congressional investigation.

"Sailors Describe Racial Battling,"
New York Times, November 24, 1972