

## *BLACK HISTORY IN A MINUTE: FEBRUARY 1, 2011*

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WEST POINT. What immediately comes to my mind is America's finest cadets, standing straight and narrow, in crisp uniforms with gold buttons and piercing stares. Ever wonder who the first black cadet was? Well, it was James Webster Smith from South Carolina -- admitted to West Point in 1870. He passed all of the preliminary tests -- physical and intellectual -- and started attending classes, but the insults, the demeaning behavior by the other cadets, the fights, and the all-around discrimination was his downfall. He never graduated.

1877, however, was the year that saw the successful graduation of the first African-American cadet -- Henry Ossian Flipper. What he too endured was shameful. Four years of discriminating behavior and CADETS GONE WILD. Then there was the total silence. Not one white cadet ever uttered one word to him during his entire 4 year stay. After graduation, he was appointed 2nd Lt. in the all-black 10th Cavalry. Although Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, you don't believe that slavery immediately stopped, do you? Henry Flipper was born a slave in Thomasville, GA, in 1856, and became the first black commissioned officer in the regular U.S. Army. In 1881, after demonstrating exemplary skills and service to his country, he was accused of embezzling almost \$3,800.00. Those charges were eventually dropped, but he was convicted and courtmartialled for conduct unbecoming an officer. Up until the day he died in 1940, he maintained his innocence and tried to clear his name. Finally the Army exonerated him in 1976 and changed his discharge status to an honorable one. [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured\\_documents/henry\\_o\\_flipper/](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/henry_o_flipper/)

117 years later, in 1999, a White House press release documents President Bill Clinton's presentation and full pardon: [http://www.history.army.mil/html/topics/afam/clinton\\_flipper.html](http://www.history.army.mil/html/topics/afam/clinton_flipper.html) Clinton stated: "It teaches us that, although the wheels of justice turn slowly at times, still they turn."

[WEST POINT NOTES: #1: America's first black U.S.A.F. General, Benjamin O. Davis, graduated from West Point in 1936. Davis was subjected to some of the same discriminating acts and "silent treatment" that Flipper endured. #2: We also honor 2nd Lt. Emily Jazmin Tatum Perez, who was the first minority female killed in West Point's history. Emily was 23, a vibrant black woman, killed the day after 9/11. She was leading a platoon when a roadside bomb exploded on 9/12/01 just south of Baghdad. <http://www.west-point.org/users/usma2005/61938/>]

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