

“Mr. Jim Crow, Meet Lt. Robinson”: The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson

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This presentation focused upon a little-known episode in Jackie Robinson’s life—his court martial in July, 1944 at Camp (now Fort) Hood, Texas. That event was recently the subject of a commercially-made, two-hour-long television docu drama. I compared the video version of the event and the purported facts surrounding it to other sources of information, most notably archival records, oral interviews, and newspapers of the time.

Nearly everyone knows of Robinson’s lonely and courageous battle against deeply-ingrained racial prejudice in becoming the first acknowledged African-American to play big league baseball in the twentieth-Century. It is a story often told, and deserves to be, for it inspires and informs.

Much less familiar is that part of Robinson’s life that precedes and follows his magnificent ten-year baseball career. I hypothesize that, the same factors that made him great on the playing field also characterized his behavior off it—physical and emotional courage, strength of character, and fierce determination to confront and conquer racism.

Therefore, it is necessary to carefully examine archival documentation relating to such matters to understand the Jackie Robinson of 1947, of 1957, and beyond. In that context, it can be seen that the trial and the circumstances leading up to it helped to raise the young officer’s political consciousness and involve him in issues that would be revisited often in later life. It thus stands as a representative and pre-figuring event, and as instructive microcosm for comprehending Robinson’s motivating values and his unique dual status as athlete and activist.

Shortly before his tank unit went overseas, 2nd Lt. Robinson was informed that he was to go on trial for various charges stemming from his refusal to abide by Jim Crow laws. As the young officer underwent what was intended to be a painfully-inflicted object lesson for violating Southern racial etiquette, his behavior indicated that he was not unduly impressed. Relevant documents indicate that he sought to ensure that his trial would receive the attention it deserved from the world outside Camp Hood through contact with the NAACP, the black press, and the Civilian Aide to the Asst. Secretary of War. After acquittal of all charges, he left the service and shortly thereafter began to play in the Negro Major Leagues where he was soon discovered by the Brooklyn Dodger scouts. After that, of course, Jackie Robinson quickly rose to fame, became a household name, and ascended to the status of full-fledged cultural icon.