

The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson: The Baseball Legend's Battle for Civil Rights during World War II

Michael Lee Lanning

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Michael Lanning's *The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson* reveals that, more than ten years before Rosa Parks's refusal to move to the back of the bus, a young black army officer also defied such an order. For taking that stand and for his following protests, Second Lieutenant Jack Roosevelt Robinson was subjected to a General Court-Martial, accused of disrespect to a superior officer and "failure to follow a lawful command." Lanning's book posits that the events and timing of the trial may have helped Robinson to survive WWII and become a baseball icon and an important figure in the Civil Rights Movement.

When Jackie Robinson was born in Georgia in 1919, the Civil War was a mere fifty years in the past; memories of that bloody war and of the difficult Reconstruction years were still very much alive. The book is disturbing in its documentation of how formal laws, the white majority's informal rules, and the Ku Klux Klan's intimidation, violence, and lynching oppressed Southern black people. Although Robinson showed remarkable athletic ability in school, he soon came to the conclusion that "education would not help a black man get ahead in a Jim Crow world," and that neither would baseball—at that time, the nation's most segregated professional sport.

Lanning details how it took wartime devastation to move Americans to ask why black men could fight and die on the battlefield, but couldn't play baseball at home. It shows how the court-martial process proved to Robinson that "if he followed the rules, he could stand up to racism and prevail." And it reveals how it took a man of the moral stature of Jackie Robinson, who fought both foreign enemies and prejudice at home, to break the color barrier and forever change the face of baseball.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March / April 2020)

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