

The Story of Charles Jackson French

By Bruce Wigo

Late one night a few years ago, while Googling information for an article on African American swimmers, I came across a curious footnote to history. Searching the words "Negro" and "Swim" I found a reference to a set of trading cards, one of which was "#129. Negro Swimmer Tows Survivors." It was part of a set of WWII commemorative cards, a sort of patriotic version of baseball cards, printed by a company out of Philadelphia, GUM, Inc. There was no picture of the card, or any other reference. On Ebay I found a number of War Gum cards for sale, but not # 129. So, I contacted a few sellers and card collectors. One was kind enough to send me a scan of the card you see accompanying this article. Now I had other Google clue words: Solomon Islands, U.S.S. Gregory, French, mess attendant for Googling - and the rest of the story can now be told.

French's story first came to light when Robert N. Adrian, a young ensign, told a reporter from the Associated Press about how a powerful 22 year-old Negro mess attendant named French and how he swam through shark infested waters towing to safety a raft load of wounded seamen from the USS Gregory, sunk by Japanese naval gunfire near Guadalcanal. Ensign Adrian was the only one on the bridge to survive and floated over into the water as the ship sank below him. Hearing voices, he found a life raft filled with 24 wounded men. Adrian, though superficially wounded, was able to hang on. "I knew that if we floated ashore we'd be taken as prisoners of war," he said. "Then French volunteered to swim the raft away from shore. He stripped off his clothes and asked for help to tie a rope around his waist and tow them to safety." Adrian told him it was impossible - that he would only be giving himself up to the sharks that surrounded them. "French responded that he was not afraid. He was a powerful swimmer, and swam all night, 6 to 8 hours, until they were eventually saved by a landing craft."

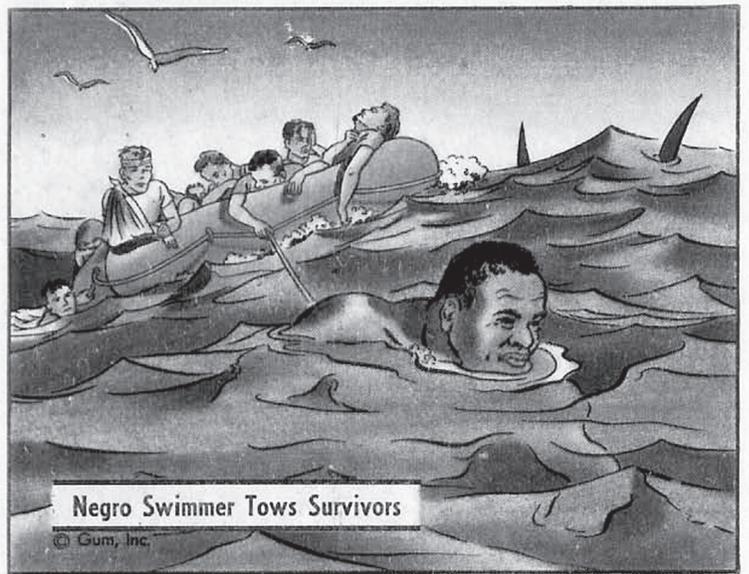
After the story appeared in the papers, Adrian repeated it on a national radio program and Gum, Inc. printed card #129, the world learned more about the heroic swimmer. Charles Jackson French was a 23 year-old orphan from Foreman, Arkansas who had enlisted in the navy in 1937. Described as a "human tugboat," he received a royal welcome from citizens of all races in his sister Viola's hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. He appeared before enthusiastic crowds at bond rallies, and a high decoration seemed assured. However, as in the case of many other African-American war heroes, he would receive a lesser reward than anticipated.

When finally issued in May 1943, it came in the form of a letter of commendation from Adm. William F. Halsey, Jr., then commander, of the Southern Pacific Fleet. It read: "For meritorious conduct in action while serving on board of a destroyer transport which was badly damaged during the engagement with Japanese forces in the British Solomon

Islands on September 5, 1942. After the engagement, a group of about fifteen men were adrift on a raft, which was being deliberately shelled by Japanese naval forces. French tied a line to himself and swam for more than two hours without rest, thus attempting to tow the raft. His conduct was in keeping with the highest traditions of the Naval Service."

The survivors felt that he deserved a higher tribute, possibly the Congressional Medal - or at the least, a Silver Star - but the Gregory episode was complicated by the issuance of a posthumous Silver Star to Lt. Cdr. H. F. Baurer, the ship's CO. Wounded and dying, the skipper ordered two companions to leave him and go to the aid of another crewman who was yelling for help. He was never seen again. By navy standards, it would be nearly unprecedented for a subordinate to receive a higher decoration for an act of heroism comparable to that of a superior.

Later I received an email from the collector who had sent me the scan of the card. There was a mint, #129 for sale. I bought it, had a painting



129. Negro Swimmer Tows Survivors

After the sinking of the Destroyer "Gregory" off the Solomons, in October, 1942, a raft-load of wounded seamen from the stricken ship was towed to safety by a Negro mess attendant, known only as "French." With a young Ensign and weary seamen clinging to the overloaded raft's sides the frail craft started drifting seaward. It was then that the brave colored man stripped off his clothes and tied a tow-line around his waist. He braved shark-filled waters to bring the raft and its occupants to safety. After six hours in the water the powerful swimmer was sighted by a barge as he neared the shore and the seamen were taken off. The young ensign who reported the brave act had to be hospitalized, as a result of injuries sustained, and thus never learned the full name of the heroic swimmer.

This is one of a series of educational cards which come wrapped in packages of War Gum. Save to complete your collection.

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made from the card, which is on display in our museum, and closed the book on Charles Jackson French. But there's always something new on the web and Googling his name again last year led me to the rest of this story.

In 2009, a few chapters of Chester Wright's book, *Black Men and Blue Water*, published by Authorhouse popped up in the web. Wright had been Chief Steward aboard the *USS Princeton* (CV-37) and had met French at a friend's house in San Diego. The following excerpt, re-printed with Wright's permission, recounts their conversation:



French said, "When Gregory was hit by them planes a lot of us got off before she sunk and many of my friends wuz hurt. I was on a raft with some of them and we started drifting towards land. I knowed that if we got close enough them Japs would kill us. They, we had been told, would soon as kill a man already wounded as any body else. So, I being luck enough to not get hurt jes put a line around my middle and started a paddling away from the beach. Then I got the hell scared outta me. I noticed they wuz sharks a circling around that raft a waitin for they dinner. So I thought what's wurse them sharks or them Japs' at least them sharks will be quick. I don't know bout them Japs. They be some mean "mothers." So, I jest keep paddling. I nearly peed on myself when one of them sharks teched my feet. I jes froze and tried to surface and float, git my feet outta the water. They wuz a whole lot of other folks in the water, some of um hurt purty bad." Then French laughed uproariously and said, "I guess them sharks decided to not have "scairt-nigger" for lunch.

Then he changed from laughter to what the author had trouble discerning. It was anger, frustration, then tears. On questioning him, after waiting two minutes or so, he said, in a more subdued, angry voice: "When we wuz picked up and the hurt ones wuz taken to be worked on, we wuz taken to the rest camp with the others. I heard they came up wid some of that "race-shit", that "you a culud boy" mess. I wuz told "you can go over there where the culud boys stay." Then some of the them white boys, what wuz on the raft, and other sailors from the Gregory's crew said "He ain't going no where!" He is a member of the Gregory's crew and he damned well will stay right here with the rest of us. Anybody who tries to take him any where had betta be ready to go to "general quarters (ready to fight) with all of us."

The boy who did all the talking was from either Alabama or Georgia according to French. "So for near on to five minutes there be a standoff, us covered with oil and grime in our hair and all over our clothes, in our eyes, and them clean master at arms folks. We musta looked like wildmen." Anyway one of the master at arms said, "Them fools mean it. Just leave them alone. We got other folk who need help. Them "crackers" retreated, tucked they tails and left!"

This conversation with Charles Jackson French occurred shortly after the Korean War. The author attempted to probe for the cause of such intense emotion concerning an incident that happened years before. French's shoulder shook' tears coursed down his cheeks. And all the author could get from him was,

"Them white boys stood up for me."

French, according to friends residing in San Diego, was claimed by alcoholism, in later years. From close questioning of friends, it would appear that he returned from the Pacific Wars, "stressed out," from seeing too much death and destruction. He was probably discharged with mental problems and left to fend for himself.

The story of Charles Jackson French is all the more significant and remarkable when placed in the contest of American cultural history, naval history and swimming history. For more information about this backstory, see:

http://www.ishof.org/pdf/black_splash.pdf

HERO OF THE YEAR



CHARLES JACKSON FRENCH

Down in history will go the sensational feat of this black sailor, who swam six hours through shark-infested waters in the South Pacific towing the raft-load of wounded sailors to the shores of the Solomons Islands after the destroyer Gregory was sunk by Jap bombs. French today is back on the high seas again.

Photo Credit: Chicago Defender

