**Was Jackie Robinson Court-Martialed?**

by [Henry Louis Gates, Jr.](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/about-the-series/about-hlg/) | Originally posted on [The Root](http://www.theroot.com/views/was-jackie-robinson-court-martialed)

On April 15, 1947, at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn, N.Y., Jack Roosevelt Robinson, at the age of 28, became the first African American to play for a major-league baseball team since the 1884 season, when Moses Fleetwood “Fleet” Walker played for the Toledo Blue Stockings between May 1 and Sept. 4. (William White, a student at Brown, played one game for the Providence Grays of the National League in 1879, hence technically breaking the color barrier.) Before a crowd of 26,623 spectators (of whom approximately 14,000 are thought to have been black), though he got no hits, Robinson scored a run to contribute to the Dodgers’ 5-3 victory over the Boston Braves.

The rest, as they say, is history: During a relatively short career spanning only nine years, Robinson was Rookie of the Year in 1947, Most Valuable Player in 1949, took his team to the World Series six times (including one World Championship in 1955) and made the All-Star Team six times. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1962, and in an unprecedented gesture to his enormous historical significance and prowess as an athlete, Major League Baseball retired his number “42” in 1997, the first time this has been done for any athlete in any sport.

These are the facts of his baseball career, which kids my age knew by heart. But what virtually none of us knew back then, and many people don’t know today, is that Lt. Jack Roosevelt Robinson was actually court-martialed in 1944! Court-martials are military courts, usually consisting of a panel of commissioned officers who conduct a criminal trial. There are three types of courts-martial: Summary Court-Martial, Special Court-Martial and General Court-Martial. Robinson faced a General Court-Martial.

Had he been found guilty, the whole course of black participation in professional baseball and every other professional sport, as well as the modern civil rights movement, most probably would have been profoundly affected adversely. But the circumstances of that court-martial only add to Robinson’s credentials as one of the true pioneers of the civil rights movement.

**Standing his Ground**

As detailed in the masterful Jackie Robinson: A Biography by Arnold Rampersad, on July 6, 1944, Robinson “became entangled in a dispute that threatened to end his military service in disgrace.” While riding on a military bus returning to a hospital from “the colored officers club,” Robinson sat next to Virginia Jones, the wife of one of his fellow officers. Jones looked white — at least the white bus driver thought so. After a few blocks, the driver abruptly ordered Robinson “to move to the back of the bus.” Robinson, justifiably outraged, refused. Among other things, he had read that segregation was no longer allowed on military buses and proceeded to engage in a form of protest prefiguring a similar action by Rosa Parks 11 years later.

Rampersad reprints Robinson’s statement about what happened next: “The bus driver asked me for my identification card. I refused to give it to him. He then went to the Dispatcher and told him something. What he told him I don’t know. He then comes back and tells the people that this nigger is making trouble. I told the driver to stop f—in with me, so he gets the rest of the men around there and starts blowing his top and someone calls the MP’s.” Robinson was placed under “arrest in quarters,” which meant that “he would be considered under arrest at the hospital, although without a guard. Robinson was then taken to the hospital in a police pickup truck.” A white officer would recall that Robinson “was handcuffed, and there were shackles on his legs. Robinson’s face was angry, the muscles on his face tight, his eyes half closed.”

Robinson was transferred to the 758th Tank Battalion on July 24, “where the commander signed orders to prosecute him.” On that day, he was arrested. Rampersad says that “At 1:45 in the afternoon on August 2, the case of The United States v. 2nd Lieutenant Jack R. Robinson, 0-10315861, Cavalry, Company C, 758th Tank Battalion, began.” Robinson’s fate was in the hands of nine men, eight of them white: “One was black; another had been a UCLA student [where Robinson had been an undergraduate]. Six votes were needed for conviction.”

Robinson faced two charges: “The first, a violation of Article of War No. 63, accused him of ‘behaving with disrespect toward Capt. Gerald M. Bear, CMP, his superior officer’ … The second charge was a violation of Article No. 64, in this case ‘willful disobedience of lawful command of Gerald M. Bear, CMP, his superior.’ ” Three other charges were dropped before the trial began. Testimony reveals how bravely Robinson had fought to defend himself on the evening of the incident, including reportedly saying quite heroically, “Look here, you son-of-a-bitch, don’t you call me no nigger!” After a four-hour trial, Robinson was exonerated: “Robinson secured at least the four votes (secret and written) needed for his acquittal. He was found ‘not guilty of all specifications and charges.'”

**Was Jackie Robinson Court-Martialed Questions**

1. What historically important thing did Jackie Robinson do on April 15, 1947?

2. What did Jackie Robinson accomplish in his baseball career?

3. What did major league baseball retire?

4. *Critical Thinking*: Why do you think major league baseball decided to recognize Jackie Robinson?

5. What happened to Jackie Robinson in 1944?

6. Why was Jackie Robinson ordered to sit in the back of the bus? How did Robinson respond?

7. What did it mean to be under “arrest in quarters”?

8. *Critical Thinking*: Why do you think Robinson refused to listen to the bus driver’s instructions? What was he risking?

9. What was the racial composition of the jury?

10. *Critical Thinking*: Do you think a juror’s race makes a difference in how they might view a case? Explain.

11. What two charges did Robinson face?

12. What was the outcome of the trial?

13. *Critical Thinking*: If Robinson had been found guilty why might that have prevented him from becoming a star baseball player even if he didn’t go to jail?