

## **Hanging Our Soldiers**

### **“A Little-Known Mass Hanging of Black Soldiers”**

“After Hurricane Harvey devastated Houston in September, recovery and clean-up workers discovered that vandals had smeared red paint over a historical marker at the one-time location of Camp Logan, recently rededicated to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Houston “riot” of 1917.

The paint covered the segment of the inscription that explained the history of the Third Battalion of the 24th United States Infantry, a predominantly black unit assigned to guard the camp during its construction shortly after the United States entered World War I. Beneath the paint, the words read: “The Black Soldiers’ August 23, 1917, armed revolt in response to Houston’s Jim Crow Laws and police harassment resulted in the camps most publicized incident, the ‘Houston Mutiny and Riot of 1917.’” The Houston riot grew out of a confrontation between the soldiers and Houston city police, at the end of which sixteen white people were dead, including five policemen, with four soldiers also killed. It was one of the only riots in U.S. history in which more white people died than black people.

At the resulting three courts martial, the first of which was the largest one in U.S. military history, a total of 118 enlisted black soldiers were indicted, with 110 found guilty. Nineteen black men were executed by hanging and fifty-three received life sentences.

For a century, families of the executed soldiers have lived with the memories and loss. Relatives alive today grew up hearing their families talk about the soldiers' fates, which served as the catalyst to learn more, and to work for justice to make amends.

"My family was upset when I started looking into it," admits Jason Holt, a relative of Private Hawkins, one of the soldiers hanged.

Holt has a 100-year-old letter written by Private Hawkins to his mother the night before his execution, telling her not to be upset about him taking his "seat in heaven," and of his innocence.

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"They sent those soldiers into the most hostile environment imaginable," Charles Anderson, a relative of Sergeant William Nesbit, one of the hanged soldiers, told me over the the phone. "There was Jim Crow law, racist cops, racist civilians, laws against them being treated fairly in the street cars, while the workers building [Logan] camp hated [the soldiers'] presence."

"The riot was a problem created by community policing in a hostile environment," agrees Paul Matthews, founder of Houston's Buffalo Soldiers National Museum, which examines the role of African-American soldiers during U.S. military history. "It's up to people now to decide whether there are lessons relevant to the present."

A majority of the soldiers posted at Camp Logan were raised in the South and familiar with segregation and Jim Crow laws. But as army servicemen, they expected fair treatment during their service in Houston. The police and public officials in that city viewed the presence of the black soldiers as a threat. Many Houstonians were concerned that if the black soldiers were shown the same respect as white soldiers, black residents might come to expect similar treatment.

Tensions grew between the troops guarding Camp Logan and the Houston police and locals. The sight of black men wearing uniforms and carrying guns incensed white residents. The soldiers themselves were angered by the “Whites Only” signs, being called the n-word by white Houstonians, and streetcar conductors demanding they sit in the rear.

“The men did not have a fair trial,” says a great-granddaughter of one of the policemen killed. “I have no doubt about the likelihood the men executed had nothing to do with the deaths.”

Then, in August, the police arrested a black soldier for interfering with the arrest of a black woman. When one of the battalion’s military police went to inquire about the arrested soldier, an argument ensued, resulting in the military policeman fleeing the police station amid shots, before being arrested himself.

Rumours—which turned out to be false—reached Camp Logan that the military man had been killed and that a white mob was

approaching the camp. There was no mob, but the black soldiers had good reason to be fearful. The country was rife with racial tensions. Just two years later cities would erupt in unrest during the "Red Summer," and in 1921 a white mob in Tulsa, Oklahoma, murdered hundreds of innocent black people.

More than 100 soldiers grabbed rifles and headed into downtown Houston. During a two-hour rampage, the soldiers killed sixteen white residents, including five policemen. The next day martial law was declared in Houston, and the following day the unit was dispatched back to its base in New Mexico. The court martial soon followed.

"It was a dark, rainy night during the riot," Anderson says. "At the trial the civilian witnesses couldn't identify one soldier firing shots that killed people."

William Nesbit as a young man. According to court testimony from a 24th Infantry captain, Nesbit was "an excellent soldier; especially as to his loyalty to his officers."

Seven mutineers agreed to testify against the others in exchange for clemency.

Only one lawyer represented the sixty-three soldiers during the first court martial. The thirteen sentenced to death on November 28 were not given right to appeal. On December 11, they were taken by truck to the scaffold where thirteen ropes dangled from a crossbeam.

"The men did not have a fair trial," says Sandra Hajtman, great-granddaughter of one of the policemen killed. "I have no doubt about the likelihood the men executed had nothing to do with the deaths."

Only two white officers faced courts-martial, and they were released. Not a single white civilian was brought to trial.

In Houston, a rapidly growing city, knowledge of the event is mixed. Most newcomers know nothing about it. But that is changing.

"There was no public acknowledgment of it for a long time," Lila Rakoczy, program coordinator of military sites and oral history programs at the Texas Historical Commission, said in a phone interview. "The centennial of the American entry into World War I has probably helped heighten awareness and encouraged people to talk about it."

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-Paul Matthews, founder of Houston's Buffalo Soldiers National Museum

Earlier this year, Angela Holder, a history professor at Houston Community College and the great niece of Corporal Jesse Moore, one of the soldiers hanged, helped lobby for gravestones from the Veterans Association for unmarked graves in a Houston cemetery of

two soldiers killed during the riot. But more still remains to be done for the soldiers, the relatives say.

“We tried during the Obama presidency for a posthumous pardon and were on the list but missed out,” says Holder. “Perhaps we can approach a Texas politician or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to help.”

Earlier this year petitions for the pardons were sent to the Trump White House. The relatives are still awaiting a response as the 100th anniversary of the day of execution approaches.

According to a written account by one of the soldiers overseeing the execution, the thirteen men executed on December 11, 1917, showed great bravery that moved all those watching. None made any attempt to resist or even speak as they were taken from the trucks to the scaffold.

“Not a word out of any of you men now!” Sergeant William Nesbit proclaimed to his men in his final living moment.

Source: Progressive

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