

We Help Them, They Kill Us

“Meet the only Black South African soldier in Canada’s WWI army who was stabbed to death by allies”

“Charlie Some, the only black South African to serve in the Canadian army, was noted for breaking military rules and going absent without leave (AWOL). So when he went missing on Sunday, September 22, 1918, nothing unusual was expected.

It would take about two days for authorities to find his body left on Road 45, a narrow road not far from the French-Swiss border.

Then the unusual occurred. When his body was returned to the Canadian camp, a postmortem showed that he had been “stabbed in the face, back and neck, and throat slit with such force it severed his windpipe”, reports New Frame.

Meet the black soldiers who brought jazz to Europe in the 1910s
This was unlike many of his colleagues who had served in World War I, where people were largely killed by explosives or machine-gun fire. In effect, it remains unknown who was behind his mysterious murder, but sources believe that his death might have been racially motivated.

What was also unusual about Some for historians was how, as a black South African, he landed in Canada. Canadian historian and associate professor Kirrily Freeman of Saint Mary’s University in Halifax, Canada,

who has been researching on the life of Some, said the black South African was born in the then colony of Natal in 1886.

Since no records of when he left South Africa and entered Canada exist, Freeman believes that Some entered Canada around 1911 when blacks entering the country were deemed as doing so illegally.

Some had escaped the harsh conditions faced by many black South Africans at the time, and by January 1917, settled in Africville, a black community north of Halifax in Canada. There, he married a white woman, listed his occupation as labourer, and “kept under the radar,” according to Freeman.

That same period, Some enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, specifically, the No. 2 Construction Battalion, a predominantly black unit of the Force. Varying accounts state that soldiers in the No. 2 unit were not allowed to hold arms; they were only placed behind the lines, where they performed various tasks such as cutting down trees for timber or unloading ships.

Soon after joining the army, Some started getting into trouble with his superiors, including being drunk, the result of which he had to forfeit his two day’s pay, and being confined to barracks after going AWOL.

When he travelled with his unit to Seaford in the United Kingdom for training in March 2017, his unit went ahead to France by boat, but

Some was absent on that trip because he had to be treated over a medical condition.

By May 1918, he had joined his No. 2 colleagues at their camp in Jura, France. Days after arriving at the camp, Some continued to break rules while going AWOL on several occasions. Then on Sunday, September 22, the unfortunate happened – he was murdered under unknown circumstances.

When the postmortem was performed, French officials arrested a colonial officer – Algerian Touhami Ben Mohammed Burkat – who was absent without leave at the same time as Some. Burkat was subsequently sentenced to five years of hard labour, but Freeman believes that the Algerian was innocent due to the rise in racially motivated murders in France at the time.

French soldiers targeted black colonial workers who they felt had safe jobs away from the front lines and were also sleeping with their women.

“So it is men who are attacked at night, stabbed and left. And Charlies death fits this broader pattern,” Freeman was quoted by New Frame.

Believed that he was killed because he was black, Some, however, received some of the best recognition when he died as a soldier. A day after his postmortem, he was buried with full military honours in the village of Supt in eastern France and received a tombstone bearing his name.

Freeman said Some's life narrates the often forgotten story of the black volunteers who were motivated by patriotism and pride to enlist in the Western army despite racism.

She said she would continue to investigate Some's death, and is hopeful that the latter's home country would have some answers, as sources in Canada and France have already been exhausted."

Source: Face 2 Face Africa

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