

## Camp Claiborne and Segregation: The Mystery or Not of the Lee Street Riots

By Melinda West

Segregation was the rule, not the exception during World War II. During this time period Camp Claiborne was the site of racial unrest. This unrest spread to the city of Alexandria. Did soldiers die during the Lee Street Riots? No one is sure, or will officially say if deaths did occur. The fact that a major riot occurred involving the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion is recorded. Camp Claiborne continued to be a boiling cauldron when it came to race relations and the U.S. Army.

“Military Training does not develop a spirit of cheerful acceptance of Jim Crow Laws and Customs.” – General Benjamin O. Davis

Getting ready for war is not an easy business. Americans, glued to their radios listening to news of the war in Europe, found it increasingly difficult to remain neutral. As war became imminent, the need for planning and training became even more necessary. Solutions to problems that occurred in the last war overseas were developed, but one key issue to the African American community continued to remain unanswered – would they serve as combat troops? America’s military establishment felt that the role of the African American should remain in a service capacity, not as a combat soldier. This policy and the desires of the African American community would become issues even before the United States entered into the hostilities. Racial issues, like an untreated boil, would fester and cause trouble for the Army during World War II, and specifically at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana.

In 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt defeated his pro civil rights opponent, Wendell L. Willkie, even after suffering a loss of the African American vote. President Roosevelt moved to regain some of his standing with African American voters by appointments and promotions, commonly referred to as the Black Congress. The Black Congress presented the President a policy concerning the treatment and usage of African American soldiers. Oscar Doward restates these points as:

1. Negro personnel in the Army will be in proportion to that in the general population. (10 percent)
2. Negroes will be maintained in each major branch.
3. Negro reserve officers will be eligible for active duty.
4. Negroes will be allowed to compete for Officer Candidate Schools.
5. Negroes will be trained as pilots and aviation mechanics and technical specialists.
6. Negro civilians will be offered equal opportunity for employment at arsenals and Army posts.
7. Racial segregation will be maintained.<sup>1</sup>

Voters and politicians alike believed the Black Congress to be largely just for show and waited to see the results of their recommendations. After reviewing the recommendations, President Roosevelt did agree to take action on some of the points in the statement, but steadfastly remained in favor of segregation. Not satisfied with the reaction of the President to the proposed policy, plans for a large demonstration in Washington began. The purpose of the March on Washington was to bring to the attention of the public the issue of discrimination not only in the military but in the

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<sup>1</sup> Doward, Oscar W. Jr. "Determining if the Actions of African American Combat Forces During World War I Positively Affected the Employment of African American Combat Soldiers During World War II" (*Master's Thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2007*)3-4.

defense industry as well. At the last minute, President Roosevelt was able to stop the march on Washington D.C. by placating the Black Congress. Daniel Kryder argues that:

While the Roosevelt Administration responded to the potential racial crisis with policies that appear progressive on the surface, over arching imperatives associated with the full mobilization of industrial production, as well as political consideration that underpinned the Roosevelt coalition, clearly outweighed goals of interracial reform.<sup>2</sup>

The placating actions taken by the President resulted in the march being cancelled, but did not end the feelings of resentment within the African American community. The African American community carefully watched for the concessions that President Roosevelt offered to become reality.

The African American community's outlook turned eager and even hopeful when the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 became law. This act encouraged the African American community that finally an opportunity had arrived for them to become first class citizens. African Americans hoped that this would allow them to fight as combat troops as they had in the American Revolution. Proudly they had served on the front line, but now policy restricted them to service areas such as truck drivers or cooks. The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 established the first peacetime draft and included all males regardless of race. It stated that "all eligible men", but later the military would interpret the wording still allowed for segregated

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<sup>2</sup> Kryder, Daniel, "The American State and the Management of Race Conflict in the Workplace and in the Army, 1941-1945." *Polity* 1994:601-634.

units. Frank Weil quotes an Army memo from the Adjutant General for Commanding Generals that expresses the feelings of the military:

It is maintained that the primary mission of an Army and Navy is to fight, not to try and reform or improve the social customs of the country which it serves; ignoring the custom of segregation on the part of the Army or the Navy would have decreased its fighting potentialities because of the presence in the ranks of a large number of individuals who would strenuously object to being made to live, work, eat, and fight with colored "brothers-in-arms."<sup>3</sup>

The Army did not like the idea of changing a policy that had become a part of their culture. Change was in the air, but they remained resistant to ending racial segregation.

In 1925, after World War I, the Army War College commissioned a special report on African American soldiers and their effectiveness as soldiers. It was this document, titled *The Use of Negro Manpower in War*, that served as the basis for policies affecting African American soldiers in the Armed Forces. This "factual, scientific" report supported the policies of segregation and assigning African Americans to only positions of service support. Covered in this report were psychological, physical, social, and educational reasons for the usage of African American in all roles except combat. This report, issued by the Army War College, stated that "The Negro's racial experience as a slave has bred him in a peculiar form of mind. He has become [by] nature subservient. He instinctively regards the white man as his superior."<sup>4</sup> From the results of this study, the Army established policies that affected unit assignments, segregation,

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<sup>3</sup> Weil, Frank E.G. "The Negro in the Armed Forces." *Social Forces*, 1947: 95-98.

<sup>4</sup> (The Army War College 1925)

and general treatment of African American Soldiers. A poor performance in World War I by African Americans had initiated this report, but the combat records of African American units in previous military actions did not come under scrutiny.

The War Department recognized that there were special issues dealing with the African American community. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson selected a prominent African American to serve as a special advisor on African American affairs. On 1 November 1940, Judge William Hastie assumed his duties as Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War. Judge Hastie was earnest in his duties to end segregation and its Jim Crow policies in the Armed Forces. On his first day in office, he issued this statement.

I have always been constantly opposed to any policy of discrimination and segregation in the Armed Forces of this country. I am assuming this post in the hope that I will be able to work effectively toward the integration of the Negro into the Army and to facilitate his placement, training, and promotion.<sup>5</sup>

This statement would open Judge Hastie's crusade to bring equality to the Army and end the policy of relegating African American troops to service and supply operations.

For two years, Judge Hastie tirelessly fought against segregation and discrimination in the Armed Forces but to no avail. He investigated racial incidents, made reports to Secretary Stimson concerning African American affairs, and issued statements to the press and the cabinet. His efforts yielded no results. On 31 January 1943, Judge Hastie resigned this post. He felt that the legitimate concerns and overt

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<sup>5</sup> McGuire, Phillip "Judge William H. Hastie and Army Recruitment, 1940-1942". *Military Affairs* 1978: 75-70.

problems that he investigated and reported were coming to a giant head and problems would arise if policies continued on the current path.

Not all of the powers- that- be felt that segregation should remain the rule, not the exception. The Commander of Ground Forces Lieutenant General Leslie McNair championed the cause of desegregation of the military for a practical reason, manpower shortages. He foresaw that African American troops in combat units would be necessary to win the war. General McNair opposed segregation on the basis that mathematically they were going to run out of trained troops if African Americans did not receive training for combat.

Many African Americans as well as prominent white citizens (the most prominent being First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt) saw a double standard in the Army. African American troops were being asked to fight against Nazism (with its racial superiority theory), but only in a segregated unit and usually in subordinate roles. Across the nation another campaign was launched, "The Double V Campaign". The Double V campaign brought to the forefront the issue of African American troops serving only in segregated units, fighting against Nazism. Civil rights activists believed that the army policy of racially segregated units maintained that African American troops were inferior, similar to the Nazi's treatment of the Jews. The Nazi's and the Japanese used this to encourage African American troops to lay down arms and

not fight. Even the American Red Cross practiced segregation by making sure that blood plasma supplies remained segregated. (The inventor of modern plasma storage that saved many a soldier's life was African American.) Most of the training bases for the newly mobilized Army were in the Jim Crow South. General Benjamin Davis, the first African American brigadier general, perhaps summed up the attitude of African American soldiers: "Military training does not develop a spirit of cheerful acceptance of Jim Crow Laws and Customs."<sup>6</sup> Despite his position as the highest-ranking African American in the Army, he did not champion the cause of desegregation. African American soldiers perceived General Davis as being more interested in keeping his rank than using it to improving their situation within the army.

The African American press played a large role in pushing the military into changing its segregation policies. Letters from troops describing discriminations were editorialized and published to keep the public aware of the problem as more and more African Americans entered the service. They were not shy about reporting the plight of the African American soldiers who were suffering under Jim Crow Laws both on and off post. Readership went up as more and more African American soldiers were taught to read or were given access to the African American press for the first time. Some posts even banned African American newspapers from their libraries, but with no success. The Army and other government agencies kept close tabs to make sure they

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<sup>6</sup> Kryder, Daniel. *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State During World War II*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

did not cross the line into sedition. "Special" and "Secret" investigations began against "Black" newspapers to assure that they did not print information that did not serve the war effort.

As the prospect of war loomed on the horizon, training slammed into high gear. Training of troops and commanders began in earnest in 1939 when the first Louisiana Maneuvers started in Central Louisiana. The wide-open spaces and climate soon found Central Louisiana host to a cluster of air bases and camps. Camp Claiborne was located 17 miles below Alexandria and over 500,000 soldiers were trained there before and during World War II. In addition to Camp Claiborne Alexandria was the home of Camp Beauregard, Camp Livingston, and two airfields. Camp Polk was constructed further west and possessed large amounts of maneuver areas for armor. A direct military rail line to Camp Polk linked it with Camp Claiborne.<sup>7</sup> Camps Polk, Claiborne, and Livingston were home to segregated units and Alexandria was not ashamed of its Jim Crow Laws. The belief in Jim Crow was statewide, and even the United States Supreme Court upheld Jim Crow in *Plessey vs Ferguson*, establishing separate but equal accommodations on public transportation. (It was the equal part that usually fell far short.) The LOUISiana Digital Library contains an interdepartmental memo from the Office of War Information. In this memo, Senator Overton Brooks had protested in the *Shreveport Times* about the distribution of a pamphlet distributed by the office.

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<sup>7</sup> Gable, Christopher. The 1940 Maneuvers: Prelude to Mobilization. [www.crt.state.la.us/tourism/lawwii/maneuvers/1940\\_Maneuvers.htm](http://www.crt.state.la.us/tourism/lawwii/maneuvers/1940_Maneuvers.htm) (accessed May 15, 2007).

Overton and his colleagues deemed this pamphlet, "The Negro and the War" as racist literature. This pamphlet encouraged African American troops to accept the Army as it was and perform their patriotic duty. The intention, to counteract the growing unrest throughout the training areas among segregated troops, in fact, sought improvement of growing racial unrest. He protested the distribution of this pamphlet to African American troops, but "In the end, Camp Harahan (located in New Orleans) wants 3,000 copies. They will get their pamphlets."<sup>8</sup>

The largest of the training camps located in Central Louisiana was Camp Claiborne. For the six years it existed Camp Claiborne was the model of Army Segregation Policies. Throughout the camp, separate facilities accommodated African American troops to include libraries, Post Exchanges, and other recreation facilities. At times, these facilities would become overcrowded. Special events hosted by the USO and other organizations were often segregated. An exception to segregation policies occurred when SGT Joe Lewis fought; he would not fight unless it was open seating. An African American USO show was quite popular, but never came to Camp Claiborne. Facilities were limited for all troops, but especially African Americans because Camp Claiborne was a major training site for Engineers and Military Railway

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<sup>8</sup> Memo, Dave McGuire to L.L. Sisk, from the LOUISIANA Digital Archives Collection, Tulane Special Collections, <http://LouisianaDigitalArchives.org>

Service. Only 5% of the troops stationed at Camp Claiborne were African American,<sup>9</sup> which limited the amount of facilities needed compared to posts that hosted large African American populations such as Fort Huachuca. The Louisiana Maneuvers drew a large population of temporary troops that when the maneuvers were over received local leave. Camp Claiborne was home to about 75,000 troops at one time, of which 16,000 were African Americans.<sup>10</sup>

African American Engineer General Service Companies (colored) worked endlessly to repair Louisiana roads that were not in the best of shape. Residents in the maneuver areas made sure that their roads remained usable. New bridges and culverts appeared on dirt roads to allow tracked vehicles improved movement to training areas. These troops lived in camps in the maneuver areas and traveled to where the next area needed work. The conditions that African American troops lived in were basic when compared to life at West Camp Claiborne where the white engineers lived and trained. The basic equipment issued to an African American engineer included a shovel, rake, and an axe. They dug, smoothed, and made repairs without the benefit of machinery. African American dump truck companies delivered needed materials to work sites. In contrast, white engineer units received training in explosive operations and Bailey

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<sup>9</sup> Vincent, Charles, ed. *The African American Experience in Louisiana Part C From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*. Vol. c. 3 vols. Lafayette: The Center for Louisiana Studies, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Burran, James Albert III. "Racial Violence in the South During World War II." PhD Dissertation, University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, Dissertation Information Service, December 1977.

bridge operations. African American troops sometimes had the use of a bulldozer, but not very often. White troops lived in hutments and were able to participate in daily post activities. Major Trice recalls that this was in stark contrast to conditions the African American engineer troops suffered and lived in.

....discovered the black section of the base was not only located near the sewage treatment plant, but was filthy, smelly, and.... Infested with roaches. Camp Claiborne was the end of the world: Johnnie Stevens remembered. It was hot, swampy, full of mosquitoes, snakes, and anything else you can name. Sergeant Eddie Donald recalled that the black soldiers were quartered in the most undesirable area of the whole camp. White soldiers were at the other end of the camp, on good ground with the highways nearby and bus facilities to take them to town. We were strictly and completely segregated. <sup>11</sup>

African Americans from the South were accustomed to these conditions, but their northern cousins were not. Lenora Ivy gives excerpts of letters that give a description of the conditions at Camp Claiborne by troops that arrived at the *Cleveland Call and Post*:

conditions for a Negro soldier down here are unbearable the morale of the boys is very low. Now right at this moment the woods surrounding the camp are swarming with Louisiana hoagies armed with rifles and shot guns even the little kids have 22 cal. Rifles and BB guns filled with anxiety to shoot a Negro Soldier ....This camp isn't run by government regulations it controlled by the state of Louisiana and white civilians.....I see things brewing down and I am The South was still an agrarian society and the north was more industrial. The African Americans from the north were not accustomed to Jim Crow and segregation. They were more highly educated and enjoyed more personal freedom. When thrown in the field with bad attitudes and bad climate you had a pot ready to boil over. Afraid that we colored soldiers are going to be the goats or victims of a one-side affair.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Trice, Craig, MAJ. "The Men that served with distinction: The 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion." U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Ivy, Lenora A. "A Study in Leadership: The 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion and the 92d Division." U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995.

Accounts such as these appeared all over the nation in the African American press.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt also received letters from soldiers who felt that her influence would help change the conditions that existed at Camp Claiborne.

Camp Claiborne was also a major training area for the Military Railway Service (MRS). Upon arrival at Camp Claiborne, the first MRS (military railway service) unit began construction of the Claiborne and Polk Military Railroad. There was a delay of construction of the bridges for the Claiborne and Polk Military Railroad because the Engineer General Service (colored) troops were still in the field repairing damage from the maneuvers. These troops by then were very familiar with the operation of shovels and rakes for road building, but knew nothing about building bridges, much less railroad bridges. They constructed 20 bridges including the 2700 ft long and 20 ft high Calcasieu Bridge. The rest of the railroad kept falling apart, but the bridges were solid. A steam pile driver drove the bridge pilings, but for the remainder of the bridge hand tools assisted the troops in completing the construction of the bridges. The 711<sup>th</sup> Railway Operating Battalion traveled daily to Camp Claiborne over the rails that they had laid. The Engineer General Service Battalion (colored) living quarters consisted of field quarters complete with the local hogs that came to enjoy chow when the dinner bell rang.

Rest and Relaxation would lead to many of the problems associated with race conflicts at Camp Claiborne. It was a busy post with many visitors. Separate guesthouses, theatres, churches, clubs, and mess halls accommodated segregation on post. This extended into the local communities as well. Advertisements in the post newspaper advertised “colored” cafes, bars, and guesthouses. Before 1941 the total population of Alexandria was 26,000 with 11,000 of these being African American. At the end of 1941, the population had swelled to 67,000 total with 26,000 of these being African American.<sup>13</sup> With a post and the surrounding communities that practiced Jim Crow, overcrowding of facilities caused friction. Limited facilities were available for African American troops to enjoy their leave time off post. The African American soldier was restricted to the Lee Street District in Alexandria. One Theatre, one nightclub, and few small cafés were what was available to African American soldiers stationed at the posts in this small section of Alexandria.

If an African American soldier could get a bus or taxi into already crowded Alexandria, he met with “white only” signs in restaurants and bars. Lee Street, known as Little Harlem, in Alexandria was a destination for many African American troops if they could actually get a pass. Frequently African American troops could not get rides into Alexandria on local busses or taxis to the “Lee Street Area” which was and still is predominately an African American section of Alexandria.

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<sup>13</sup> Sartain, Lee. *Invisible Activists: Women of the Louisiana NAACP and the Struggle of Civil Rights, 1915-1945*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007.

There was a great deal more personal freedom in the North for African Americans than in the Jim Crow South. When sent to train in the South they rebelled, as anyone would when free, then caged up. They voiced their indignations in many ways, but after a bit violence would erupt. This was especially true in local communities where Jim Crow was treated more as a religion than law. Southern troops were even more affected than their Northern counterparts were because their world was changing. They had money and education that had been unavailable before. Local communities greatly contributed to the violence and riots that occurred. The African American Press was not shy about telling what was going on and openly battled with the administration to change policies. From the beginning of the war racial tension existed. The army launched investigations, both public and secretly to determine the right and wrongs. Sometimes "official" accounts issued by the army did not match up with other accounts that were published in the Black press. This did not change policy and kept the issue of segregation simmering below the surface waiting for a spark to ignite it. Camp Claiborne on more than one occasion was the site of unrest.

Jim Crow Laws were a source of constant agitation to Northern African Americans who did not understand what was going on. There was little restriction of personal freedom in the north for African Americans, but the South proved to be a step back in time. Black MP's from Camp Beauregard patrolled sections of town that were African

American sections. Trouble was always stewing under the surface and came to a head more than a few times. Ivy summed up the conditions in Alexandria as:

To be a black soldier in the South in those days was one of the worst things that could happen to you. If you go to town, you would have to get off the sidewalk if a white person came by. If you went into the wrong neighborhood wearing your uniform, you got beat up. If you stumbled over a brick, you was drunk and go beat up. If off –post you was hungry and couldn't find a black restaurant or a black home you know, you know what? You would starve. And you were a soldier.....out there wearing the uniform of your country, and you're getting treated like a dog! That happened all over the South.<sup>14</sup>

Race was a factor in life in the South and wearing a uniform and preparing to go to war did not interrupt it. Both on and off post there were increased racial tensions.

The first incident of racial unrest occurred on post when a white soldier assaulted a black female civilian who worked at the Post Exchange (PX). "A riotous crowd developed around the PX and plans were announced to burn it down. They were calmed down, but disgruntled, returned to their barracks."<sup>15</sup> This incident brought racism to a head on post. Soldiers proud of the uniforms they wore were having a hard time accepting that they were going to be treated differently than a white man that wore the same uniform. The mindset of a soldier at that time was charged and ready for battle. The "Double V Campaign" was determined to win on both fronts and African American troops in uniform agreed. Violence was avoided with this incident, but it would not be long before it erupted again.

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<sup>14</sup> (Ivy 1995)

<sup>15</sup> Rosenblum, Lou Potter ed. *Liberators: Fighting on Two Fronts in World War II*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,1992.

One day, 10 January 1942, violence did erupt, but this time it was not confined to Camp Claiborne. African American soldiers in large numbers not only from Camp Claiborne but from surrounding camps as well were enjoying some time off in "Little Harlem". Numerous versions of the story of the "Lee Street Riots" begin to emerge. Some basic facts are established. It was payday and the men were enjoying their freedom. Everyone was having a good time, but under the surface seethed a boiler ready to burst. James Burran gives one of a variety of versions about what happened during the Lee Street Riots:

A white woman drove along Lee Street and at one point honked her horn and yelled for a black soldier to get out of the way. He responded with "Would you run over a soldier?" She got the attention of a local white policeman and the soldier was arrested. A riot was begun when others joined in to rescue him. The state police were called. By the end of two hours 500 soldiers were involved and 30 soldiers were wounded, three critically. 3000 African American troops were rounded up and transported to either Camp Claiborne or Camp Livingston. Alexandria was declared off limits to all African American troops until 10 March, 1942.<sup>16</sup>

Thomas Hietala gives another version of the riot as:

because an African American troop disobeyed a bus driver in Alexandria and didn't move to the back of an already crowded bus. When the bus driver reached to pull out a gun then the fight was on between the town and the soldiers. They tore up the town and soldiers were shot.<sup>17</sup>

The *Mobile Register* reported the incident on 12 January 1942 with headlines that read;

"30 Persons Hurt During Riot of Negro Soldiers". This account is obviously a press

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<sup>16</sup> (Burran 1977)

<sup>17</sup> Hietala, Thomas R. *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johns and Joe Louis and the Struggle for Racial Equality*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2002.

release from the Army. This article mentions that the Military Policeman who arrested the soldier was white. A description of the riot is included in this account. "Bullets, bricks, sticks, and rocks flew fast during the riot; windows were broken and between 25-30 tear-gas bombs, the city's entire supply, were used. The negro troops were ordered to the bus station, loaded into buses, and sent back to their camp." By far the best account of the story is this one, which tells what was going on at Camp Claiborne when the news of the riots in Alexandria was starting and the cause reached the camp.

Camp Claiborne, meantime, was in utter turmoil as the tankers continued to declare their intention of waging war on the white citizenry of Louisiana. Floodlights blazed on the tanks and their battle-suited crews. White troops, armed with light weaponry that would have been useless against an armored assault, surrounded the area. Other soldiers hastily erected log barriers across the camp's gates.<sup>18</sup>

Another source names this brave soldier as CPT Wingo, a white officer with the 761<sup>st</sup> Battalion. He calmed the upset soldiers by promising no stockade.<sup>19</sup>

The account from the 12 January 1942 *Alexandria Daily Town Talk* was pretty much the same with the following: "On the streets, in buses, at churches, and in homes Alexandrians yesterday discussed various rumors, some of them to the effect that as many as 18 had been killed and 26 wounded."<sup>20</sup> The accounts vary, but still give the basic fact that African American soldiers started and / or participated in a riot in Alexandria and the root cause was racial segregation.

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<sup>18</sup> (Rosenblum 1992)

<sup>19</sup> (Ivy 1995)

<sup>20</sup> (Vincent 2002)

An investigation by Georgia Johnson, Chair of the Legal Redress Committee of the Alexandria NAACP, led to pretty much the same conclusion about the Lee Street Riots. Miss Johnson owned a café in Little Harlem. Her investigations led back to the official Army position issued on 12 January 1942. She worked tirelessly to uncover the truth about deaths, but only alienated herself with the local authorities and her state NAACP officers. Her account did give some more information that a machine gun was installed on the roof of city hall. (The existence of the machine gun is disputed.) Fear was rampant within the white community that more trouble was to come. Ms. Johnson wrote to Judge Hastie about the need for a secret investigation and her mistrust of General Davis who had traveled to investigate the incident.<sup>21</sup>

The Boys of the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalions did not help discount these fears by their comments. “They expect to drive their tanks down the streets of Alexandria before they drive to the front”.<sup>22</sup> This proved to be false because not long afterwards they moved to Camp Hood, Texas, then on to combat the Nazi regime in France. This African American unit, which was once the assigned unit of the famous ballplayer Jackie Robinson, went on to win a Presidential Unit Citation, the highest award that a combat unit can earn.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> (Vincent 2002)

<sup>22</sup> (Sartain 2007)

<sup>23</sup> (Kryder 2000)

The Army issued the official conclusion to the event to the Associated Press service. It concluded that the fault lay not with the African American soldiers who were involved with the event, but with the handling of the event by the civilian forces. This did not go over very well with local law enforcement officials or the State Police. Rumors have surrounded this event since it occurred. Paperwork that could prove or disprove if deaths did occur are nonexistent. A veil of secrecy was dropped over this event and has surrounded it ever since. A young First Lieutenant assigned to Camp Livingston in 1945 said that he heard that the bodies were thrown into the Red River.<sup>24</sup>

In July 1943, a report before the Army General's Counsel enclosed a special report addressing the concerns of the army about racism and segregation. This report summarizes and recognizes that discrimination did exist, but was not as bad as the media described it. Riots did occur at Camp Claiborne, but most involved the Engineer Troops (Official Reports). The official reports list the problems as:

1. Relatively low average intelligence of negro enlisted men
2. Mixture of northern and southern enlisted men
3. Development and increase in race consciousness, due primarily to the influence of negro newspapers
4. Lack of adequate recreational facilities and programs
5. Inexperienced, untrained, and indifferent non-commissioned officers
6. Assignment of officers to command positions who lacked the necessary qualifications and experience to train and handle African American troops
7. Timidity in command functions and reluctance of some officers to accept command responsibilities

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<sup>24</sup> Conversation with officer at his home in September 2009.

8. Constant changes in assignments of officers and enlisted men and the disturbing and disrupting reactions in the displacement of all white lieutenants in some units by insufficiently trained and undisciplined African American lieutenants.<sup>25</sup>

Most of the problems were reported as having occurred due to lack of discipline and education. This report did not resolve any issues of deaths that did occur, but it did shift thinking towards solutions to the growing racial unrest that was occurring at the training areas and the communities surrounding them. The Army began looking at solutions to some of the root causes of their problem, but was still reluctant to end segregation.

A period of calm set into Camp Claiborne with few incidents of racial unrest occurring. Most probably, this was due to the relocation of a large number of African American troops from Camp Claiborne. When Cary Grant toured Camp Claiborne, African American troops were not on his agenda. The Army did recognize that there needed to be a change in attitude. Film was the media of choice and the Army chose Francis Capra to make this film. Capra assigned a director who was sympathetic to African Americans. The filming occurred throughout the United States where African American troops were in training. Camp Claiborne was included in this list. This short propaganda film for the Army titled *The Negro Soldier* showed the public that the Armed Forces did recognize the role of African American soldiers. "At the same time,

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<sup>25</sup> Row, Lathe, COL, Minutes, Meeting of the General Council, Conditions of the Army with Special addendum about Camp Claiborne, Washington D.C.: Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, 1943.

the movie served the Army as propaganda for both black and white troops and as a teacher of comradely regard across racial lines without explicitly violating Army policy toward racial segregation."<sup>26</sup> What the film did not show was the successful integration of African American troops during the war.

One concern addressing segregation was legitimate. White soldiers were especially concerned with venereal disease (VD). The VD rate at Camp Claiborne for White troops was 8.4%. The rate for African American troops was 98.2%.<sup>27</sup> The Army blamed this on the availability of women of commerce in Alexandria and the local authorities participated in trying to lower the rate by shutting down the shantytowns and "business" districts that sprang up along the highways off post. The African American community placed the blame on the Jim Crow Laws that restricted African American soldiers from better establishments.

Recreation, recreation, recreation was the Army's solution to everything. If you kept the troops busy then they would have less opportunity to leave post and open the opportunity for trouble. Included in unit equipment were baseballs, footballs, and reading materials. This equipment was of no use if the facilities were not available or were restricted due to segregation. The Army recognized this and requested expansion

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<sup>26</sup> Cripps, Thomas and Culbert, David. "The Negro Soldier (1944): Film Propaganda in Black and White." *American Quarterly*, 31, no. 5, Special Issue: Film and American Studies ( Winter, 1979) 616-640.

<sup>27</sup> (Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, U.S. Army 1943)

of facilities at Camp Claiborne. They also wanted the facilities utilized in a more efficient manner.

Another cause of disagreement that upset African American soldiers was the treatment of German Prisoners of War that were housed at Camp Claiborne. The Prisoners had better conditions and more freedom than the soldiers who were training to fight them.<sup>28</sup> This did not help the feelings of resentment and discontent from the African American troops. Mary Motley recounts that at Camp Claiborne:

While there (Camp Claiborne), I noticed that a number of German prisoners were in the camp in a special area, not swampland. They were given freedom of movement and had access to facilities denied black American soldiers. They were given passes to town when black soldiers were confined to the area and did not have their privileges. This was one of the most repugnant things I can recall of the many things that happened to Negro servicemen.<sup>29</sup>

This occurred on more than one base that housed both prisoners of war and African Americans. In Louisiana there seemed to be a special mystique surrounding the Afrika Korps troops that arrived first at Camps Claiborne and Livingston. The Negro soldiers did not like the fact that prisoners of war were treated with more dignity and respect than the soldier in uniform who was fighting to rid the world of the beliefs of that enemy.

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<sup>28</sup> (Hietala 2002)

<sup>29</sup> Motley, Mary P. *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II*. Wayne State University Press, 1975.

The actions taken for the desegregation of the Army during WWII laid a firm foundation for the Civil Rights Movement. Jim Crow was confronted in the military, not defeated, but was slowly being pushed aside. It is easier to enforce rules in an organization based on rules than on society. This proved to be true, for during the Battle of the Bulge, African American troops sent to the front lines added much needed strength to depleted companies as fifth platoons. Fellow soldiers welcomed the relief and did not question their skin color. They had bullets and guns and were there to defeat the enemy. When the battle was over some men who had left safe jobs to volunteer for combat quickly found themselves reassigned back to their original units. This was the cause of a great deal of hard feelings for the men of the fifth platoons who could not share the victory with their fellow soldiers.

In conclusion, some basic statements about segregation and Camp Claiborne are facts. Segregation was a very real issue and affected the lives of the soldiers stationed at Camp Claiborne and the community in general. The Army did acknowledge that a problem existed and tried to alleviate some of the results. Desegregation of the military would not begin until Truman became President and World War II ended. As for the deaths that could have resulted from the "Lee Street Riots" as more and more of that generation leave this earth the only clues we will have will be the records they have left behind.

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