Backing the Attack: Black Arkansans' Fight Against Germany, Japan and Jim Crow

By
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During World War II, African-Americans found themselves embroiled in two wars: one they fought abroad against Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and fascism; and the second they battled on the home front against white supremacy, Jim Crow laws and discrimination.[1] Cassell Lewis was one of the first blacks in Little Rock to enlist. A floor cave-in at the Little Rock Furniture Company where he worked convinced young Cassell that Army life would be an improvement. A Dunbar High School graduate, Mr. Lewis volunteered for service one day after his twentieth birthday. He recalls that day:

> I volunteered and . . . I went to Camp Robinson. I got a uniform but, I got World War I stuff. (laugh) I had sort-of what you call riding pants and legging. I was there [Camp] about four or five days. There were three of us [blacks] from Little Rock and another feller (sic) from another place. When we got through, we were sent to Cheyenne, Wyoming. [5]

Lewis became a corporal and a squad leader in his quartermaster trucking battalion. At home and abroad, he supervised men in the care and maintenance of the Army's trucks. He inspected equipment, drove a two-and-a-half-ton truck, and hauled supplies and personnel over all kinds of terrain under combat conditions. During his tour in Australia and New Guinea, Lewis was one among "only a handful of blacks." Colonel Don Morrow, historian of the Air National Guard at Camp Robinson in North Little Rock, explained that "there were only a small number of black soldiers compared to whites." He went on to state that black soldiers were segregated with black units "officered" by white officers. "Most [black] units were restricted to combat service, support units — transportation, supply. Lots of black soldiers were truck drivers. But there was always the exception." [6]

The effect of Jim Crowism on the morale of black soldiers was devastating. The armed forces' mission to "inoculate pride, dignity and aggressiveness in the black soldier" was in complete opposition to the Army's policy of segregation. For many Negro soldiers this caused widespread discontent. Lewis remembers:

> We couldn't dock the *Queen Elizabeth* in Sydney. They had to transport us in. It came over the public address system that there were no black peoples (sic) over there. I guess they just didn't want us talking to a white. So we hollered, "why don't you just take us back to the States?" We knew that wasn't going to happen. [7]

When payday rolled around for Corporal Lewis, the Army did not "pay us — the blacks; they

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paid the whites." With fifty-eight dollars private pay or sixty-four dollars corporal pay, the Army was afraid that the black soldiers would go to town and raise a ruckus with the Australians. "That's when our trouble began. They [Army] told the people that we were not civilized." [8]

According to the United States Army publication, *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965*, serious racial tension was developing by the end of the first year of the war. One contributing factor was the Army's practice of using racially separated facilities for military troops. Also, commanders of black units stationed in the South (where the majority of training centers were located) insisted on applying local laws and customs inside the camps. At Camp Joseph T. Robinson in North Little Rock, a reception and training facility, black military were given separate living quarters, mess halls, chapel, dayrooms, guest houses, theater, swimming pool, service club, camp newspaper and buses. The barber shops, tailor shops and PX (Post Exchange) where soldiers purchased cigarettes, beverages, sandwiches, clothing and supplies, were also segregated.[9]

The Army parroted a social separateness that stripped a race of certain unalienable rights while encouraging them to excel as Americans. Black United States soldiers were told it was their duty to do "what it takes to beat the Axis." A February 1943 edition of *The Buffalo*, a newspaper for the 371st Combat Troop at Camp Robinson, stated that blacks received special training so they might become "war conscious" and instilled with "the determination to win and carry the fight to the enemy." [10]

In exchange for the valuable defense of their country, the armed forces offered many African-Americans better economic and social opportunities than they had as civilians during the war era. The service provided the soldiers with food, clothing and a salary that was higher than they could earn in most occupations available to them. The Army tried to facilitate the social needs of the soldiers as well by promoting activities on the post including dances, boxing, a dramatic club, swing bands, basketball, glee clubs and movies. At Camp Robinson, on one occasion, soldiers were entertained by a special lecture delivered by the movie

actor, Cary Grant. Though camp life tried to provide all the comforts of home and then some, soldiers still craved those three-day passes to freedom and "chicks." Black soldiers sought a place where they could relax, intermingle with their own race, and be given courtesy and accommodation along with service. The Line — Little Rock's Ninth Street — stood ready to welcome them with open arms.[11]

On October 16, 1942, the *Arkansas State Press* reported that Little Rock citizenry were presenting a patriotic "welcome" program for the 393rd Engineers Battalion, 599th Field Artillery and 371st Infantry, which had recently arrived at Camp Robinson. The program was the result of the combined efforts of thirty-eight organizations and clubs from Little Rock and North Little Rock. The highlight of the program, a solo of patriotic songs, was a special tribute "to the boys in the armed service." Club sponsors and participants included the Chamber of Commerce, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Urban League, Dining Car Porters Local No. 354, and numerous sororities and fraternities. The outpouring of support for the "boys" and "America" was continually exhibited by Arkansas's black community. The majority of citizens expressed that, regardless of color, they were Americans first with American patriotism and pride.[12]

Black soldiers found West Ninth Street to their liking, bringing themselves and their paychecks down on the Line. Described as "Little Rock's Harlem," the street offered ". . . laughter, drawling conversation and dance music." Soldiers came for the "gaiety," and businesses saw huge increases in their profits. The Line stayed open day and night serving up meals, liquor, nightclub entertainment and back alley craps to the black soldiers stationed at Camp Robinson. The Dreamland Ballroom located on the top floor of the Taborian Hall building at Ninth and State reopened in 1941 and catered to the military — black and white. The club drew crowds with such "hot" shows as Irwin Miller's Brown Skin Models, Sahji, "Queen of the Shake," Ike Barlett's Vamping Babes, and Madeline Greene, "the lovely little chirper" with Father Hines and his "ork." The "chittlin circuit" brought many musical greats who performed down on the Line and on occasion at the Robinson Auditorium. John LeMay, whose family had operated businesses along Ninth Street for years, recalls the time Lena Horne visited:

> They [Army] wouldn't let her sing for the [black] soldiers. They wanted her to sing for the German prisoners, and she refused . . . that time she was staying with Harold Banks' mother out there on Pulaski Street. [13]

Soldiers were never at a loss for entertainment, the street offered: Club Aristocrat, where "One Punch" Brown demonstrated his boxing "fistimania;" pocket billiards and snooker at Red's Pool Hall; and such popular movie fare as "Santa Fe Trail" and "White Savage" at the Negro Gem Theatre. During the 1940s, restaurants, cafes and tea rooms like The Victory Chicken Shack, DeLuxe Grill, and the Chatterbox, sprang up and dished out barbecue, chicken plates, hot fish, sizzling steaks, draught beer and cat-head biscuits to hungry soldiers and residents alike. Service-oriented businesses like barber shops, tailor shops, shoe shine parlors and cleaners, also reaped the wartime windfall.[14]

Amidst the neon lights of the Line, stood the United Service Organization or USO Club located on the corner of Ninth and State streets. Although there were four USOs in Little Rock, this was the only USO in Little Rock that provided social services to black military through its club and USO camp shows. The organization was founded by the following: YMCA, YWCA, Salvation Army, Traveler's Aid, Jewish Welfare and Catholic Community Services. John LeMay worked at the USO as a young boy. He remembers:

> Now the black police didn't come in until the second World War. That's when the USO came in on Ninth Street. That's the only place that the soldiers could go. The building . . . USO bought it and turned it into a center from the first floor all the way up to the top floor. [15]

The USO hosted "socials" for the boys from Camp Robinson and the Stuttgart Air Base. *The Buffalo* and the *Arkansas State Press* reported on a dance "a group of local girls organized" at the USO for the 92nd Engineers from Camp Robin-

West Ninth Street, The Line

For the time preceding, during, and after the second World War, West Ninth Street in Little Rock was the heart of the black community. Locals called the street the "Line" because it served as a boundary between Little Rock's black and white societies.

The West Ninth Street community grew out of a log shanty town that was erected by the Federal Army to house emancipated slaves. Prior to World War I, the vicinity from 5th Street to 12th Street east of Broadway, was a mixed neighborhood with Blakeleys and Robinsons living side-by-side with Lewandoskis and Kerseys. Cassell Lewis, a long-time Little Rock resident, grew up in the area and fondly remembers that his childhood neighborhood was "mixed in."

> We were all together black and white. We were like this." (Hands with fingers interlocked)[2]

In the 1920s, the area changed: many of its early Irish, German and Italian settlers moved out and mainstreamed with the larger white society. During this same period, Ninth Street gained a reputation as a prosperous enclave for black entrepreneurs and businesses. This positive image was soon overshadowed by the brutal shooting and hanging of John Carter in 1927. John LeMay's grandfather owned a barbecue place and shoe shine parlor at 905 W. Ninth Street. LeMay was a young boy, but he recalls:

> That was the time they lynched that black man on Ninth and Broadway. The Ku Klux Klan must have known my grandfather because they called him Coleman. "Coleman, you better get off the street because we are going to have a rough time."[3]

According to LeMay, that night the Klansmen rode their horses up and down Ninth Street's sidewalks, threatening every black face that dared come out on the street. For years after, racial tensions and fears ran high in Little Rock and all over the state. The Great Depression that followed this tragedy caused an even more stringent enforcement of the "policy" that separated blacks from whites and relegated coloreds to second-class citizenship. During this turbulent time, the Line became a safe haven — a city within a city. There, blacks found services, spiritual enlightenment and Saturday night excitement. In the rough years to come, Ninth Street nurtured its own, while battling southern tradition and racial prejudice.[4]

son. A cheerful picture of damsels in the arms of admiring soldiers affirmed the *State Press*'s caption, "No War Worries For The Moment." The club afforded soldiers an opportunity for clean fun, and perhaps helped them forget, if only momentarily, that their next stop was probably overseas. John LeMay recalls setting up for many military socials:

> I worked there myself. I was in charge of the top floor. Anytime they had a dance or floorshow . . . Old Man Butler, who was the director of the USO, would tell me, "Listen, we are going to have a dance and it will start at nine o'clock and last until about two or three o'clock in the morning. Would you set up the tables . . . cold drinks and popcorn?" So I did. They were not allowed to bring no sack of whiskey into the USO. And there was never no police there at the dances. [16]

In addition to its dances, the second floor of the USO Club provided the military and the community with a much-used basketball court. Dunbar, a local high school, Philander Smith College, and Arkansas Baptist College practiced and played ball there along with camp soldiers. Locals and military mixed-it-up on the court, though in some cases this led to disappointment as reported by *The Buffalo:*

> Saturday night at the U.S.O. in Little Rock, 3rd Battalion Headquarters lost a very tough game of basketball to Baptist College by the score of 48 to 47. . . . This was one of the best games seen this season at the U.S.O. although the loss was a heart-breaker for the many soldiers in attendance. [17]

In September of 1942, the USO-Camp show, "Keep Shufflin," visited Camp Robinson. The musical featured a bevy of beauties that were well received by all who attended. The camp show was just another branch of the service that the USO offered.[18]

The most important USO services were actually performed by loved ones on the home front. Organizations like The Service Men's Wives Club, the Army Mother's Club and the Volunteer Service Organization, contributed thousands of volunteer hours toward activities that boosted the morale of African-American soldiers at home and abroad. After Negroes encountered discrimination from the Red Cross, they formed their own service agencies. These clubs and others like the MacArthur Knitting Club of Pulaski County supplied colored troops with bandages and surgical dressings, coffee and donuts, knitted sweaters and socks, reading and writing materials, and Christmas "care parcels."

Josephine Pankey, better known as "Mother Josephine," was a major financial contributor and tireless volunteer at the Ninth Street USO. An *Arkansas State Press* article dated October 9, 1942, stated that:

> Several times each week, Mother Josephine climbs the steps to the USO office, her arms filled with bright flowers and maybe a book or two, perhaps a magazine tucked beneath her arm and always a warm smile on her face . . . doing her big bit to "Keep 'em Smiling." [19]

Mother Josephine exemplified the patriotism which was so often demonstrated by Little Rock's Negro women. Investing their time and donating what they could reflected their love and concern

for husbands, brothers, cousins, lovers and friends, in the fight against Hitler and Tojo.

Many black Arkansans felt it was their patriotic duty to support a war effort that promoted a democracy that they could not fully share. Fighting stateside against unfair poll taxes and voting irregularities, discriminatory wages based on race and color instead of qualifications, and white supremacy, should have left little time, heart or pocketbook for financially supporting the war. But, each time African-Americans were called on to "Back The Attack," they did. Blacks, the majority of whom were in the lowest wage-earning bracket, were repeatedly asked to contribute money for the war effort by volunteering a portion of their income to the regular purchase of Defense Bonds and Stamps. An ad supported by Manufacturers Furniture Company in Little Rock called for blacks to "Get behind the invasion drive! Invest more than ever before."[20]

The Negro Division of the War Loan Drive staged many War Bond rallies in which they called upon the black community to "do our part in helping our country toward victory." The Nighthawks, a fraternal organization of prominent black leaders, staged the Negro Division's Fourth War Bond Drive. After three years of war, they challenged citizens to once again dig a little deeper with the realization that:

> The Negroes of the city have played their part in cooperation with the war effort 100 per cent and some of us feel we have done all we can do, but now is the time for us to make one of the greatest sacrifices of the war that we can hurry victory and bring back home the boys who were fortunate enough to survive this struggle and convince them that the home front was backing them up all the way through. [21]

As black Arkansans "backed the attack," they combated an age-old enemy — white supremacy. Underneath Ninth Street's "gaiety" ran an undercurrent of interracial friction caused in part by the constant presence of white policemen and MPs. Black soldiers clashed with white authorities because it appeared that the police wanted ". . . to make the black soldiers realize that their uniforms did not mean that they had achieved racial equality." Hostilities came to a head on March 26, 1942, when Sergeant Thomas P. Foster was shot five times by white Patrolman A. J. Hays while lying on a Ninth Street sidewalk. John LeMay witnessed the shooting:

> They had another riot on Ninth Street during those years and how that came about, there was a sergeant in the Army supposed to did something, and they got this soldier and one of the MPs called the truck to come down and pick this soldier up. And they had this soldier stand against the wall beside the church. I was standing on the church stairs, looking at everything and this cop came up and called this soldier "a black nigger." So this soldier broke loose and hit this cop and spit in his face. The cop jumped back and pulled his gun and shot the soldier . . . Dubissons . . . moved his ambulance around and in the meantime all hell broke loose. When they found out that this white cop had shot this soldier, all hell broke loose on Ninth Street. [22]

An outraged Negro populace demanded an investigation of the shooting of Sergeant Foster, and the NAACP and Little Rock's black leaders

formed their own probe committee. While the largest Negro crowd ever assembled gathered to protest the murder, the *Arkansas State Press* headlines reflected other home front battles:

> America is at War, This is not a RACE War, This is Everybody's War
>
> Red Cross Inability To Accept Negro Plasma Donations
>
> Negro Is Playing His Part Despite All The Injustices [23]

Seven months after the Foster incident, the demands of the Negro public were acknowledged, and on October 10, 1942, "Negro uniformed police officers were seen patrolling the streets . . . The appointment of these Negro officers in the Negro area marks one of the best gestures toward demonstrating that democracy is what we are all intent upon preserving. . . ." This was an epoch making event for it had been two decades since Negro officers had patrolled in Little Rock.[24]

In August 1942, two months prior to the hiring of black city policemen, the Army at Camp Robinson activated a colored Military Police Detachment. The military authorities advocated the use of Negro MPs and police as a means of keeping down whatever racial disturbances might arise from the presence of white officers in the "restricted district for Negroes." The idea was for the Negro military police to work with the Negro civilian police to take care of the multitude of soldiers who found diversion on the Line. Intentions were good, but one year later it was reported that:

> What the daily press labeled a riot painted a different picture Saturday night than accustomed, for this time it was the Military Police who displayed no powers of reason. . . . The M.P. became incensed over the soldier's questioning and struck him over the head, which was resented by the other soldiers present and it was anybody's battle then. [25]

In the zero hour of war, black and white Americans united in their desire for a speedy victory for their country. Even though the objective was the same, African-American war activities ran a separate course that paralleled, but did not run hand-in-hand with white efforts. Separately, African-Americans contributed much to the war effort: manpower for the defense of their country in the battlefield and in industry; volunteers who established and donated their time to services for colored military; money to finance the war; patriotism and an abiding belief in democracy; and a safe haven for lonely soldiers. These things in and of themselves were not more worthy than what white Americans gave. But, the truth is that blacks demonstrated that they were first-class Americans while walking a color line that separated them from their constitutional rights. Although "World War II resulted in little change in the status of Arkansas blacks," their patriotism and fighting spirit strengthened their resolve for personal freedom, and helped them make strategic gains in education, politics, government and employment in the post-war years.[26]

NOTES

[1] *Langston Hughes. Selected Poems of Langston Hughes.* New York: Random House, 1990, p. 285; *Arkansas Gazette,* February 11, 1990; *Arkansas Democrat,* July 22, 1979; *Arkansas Gazette,* February 18, 1983; Berry, Fred and John Novak. *The History of Arkansas.* Little Rock: Rose Publishing Co., 1987, p. 222.

[2] Adolphine Fletcher Terry. *Charlotte Stephens.* (Little Rock: Academic Press, 1973), p. 45; Arkansas Democrat Co.'s Little Rock City Directory, 1899; Polk's Southern Directory Co.'s Little Rock City Directory, 1910; Southern Directory Co.'s Little Rock and North Little Rock City Directory, 1920; Polk's Little Rock and North Little Rock, 1925; Cassell Lewis, Personal Interview, November 18, 1993.

[3] James Reed Eison. "Dead, But She Was In A Good Place, A Church." *Pulaski County Historical Review,* (Summer 1982), p. 34-36; John LeMay, Personal Interview, June 17, 1992.

[4] John LeMay, Personal Interview, June 17, 1992.

[5] Cassell Lewis, WWII Soldier from Little Rock, Interview, November 18, 1993.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Morris J. MacGregor, Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965,* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1981) p. 19; Cassell Lewis interview.

[8] Cassell Lewis interview.

[9] *Integration of the Armed Forces,* p. 35; Col. Don Morrow, Interview, November 13, 1993; *History of Camp Joseph T. Robinson* (brochure) (North Little Rock: Camp J. T. Robinson, 1942).

[10] *The Buffalo,* April 3, 1943, February 1943.

[11] Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma,* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1944) p. 419; *The Buffalo,* February 1943 (date blurred) 1943.

[12] *Arkansas State Press,* October 16, 1942.

[13] Work Progress Administration, *Arkansas: Guide To The State, 1940,* p. 171; *Arkansas Gazette,* October 9, 1977, February 18, 1983, February 11, 1990; *Arkansas Democrat,* July 22, 1979; *Arkansas State Press,* 1940-1945; John LeMay, Personal Interview, June 4, 1992.

[14] *Arkansas State Press,* 1940-1945.

[15] Sue Brown, World USO Public Relations, Washington, D.C., Personal Interview, October 29, 1993; John LeMay interview, June 4, 1992.

[16] *Arkansas State Press,* March 13, 1942; *The Buffalo,* (date blurred), 1943; John LeMay interview, June 17, 1992.

[17] John LeMay, Interview, June 17, 1992; *The Buffalo,* February 13, 1943.

[18] *Arkansas State Press,* September 25, 1942.

[19] *Arkansas State Press,* October 9, 1942.

[20] *Arkansas State Press,* February 10, 1944, May 19, 1944; *Arkansas Gazette,* April 26, 1942, October 13, 1940; *Arkansas State Press,* May 19, 1944.

[21] *Arkansas State Press,* September 24, 1943, January 28, 1944.

[22] C. Calvin Smith, *War and Wartime Changes,* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1986), p. 81; *Arkansas State Press,* March 27, 1942; John LeMay interview, June 4, 1992.

[23] *Arkansas State Press,* April 3, 1942, March 20, 1942, January 16, 1942.

[24] *Arkansas State Press,* October 9, 1942.

[25] *Arkansas State Press,* August 28, 1942, November 27, 1942, October 8, 1943, August 21, 1942.

[26] *War and Wartime Changes,* p. 130.

Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.
I live here, too.
I want freedom
Just as you.

From *Democracy,* a poem by Langston Hughes[1]

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HISTORY

11/10/97

Sgt. Leanna Higginbotham
Attn: History
Box 001
Camp Robinson
North Little Rock, AR 72199-9600

Dear Sgt. Higginbotham,

I looked through my files briefly and did not find that article, and then I realized that it was probably published in a magazine associated with the Water Dept.. Col. Don Morrow was responsible for that article (water). Tell Sgt. Nathan Barlow that you may use any part of my article, but I request credit and a copy of the article for my files. Good luck with your article. I always enjoy doing projects with Camp Robinson.

Regards,

Berna Love
Curator of Anthropology & Director of Programming

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