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THE LAST FULL MEASURE OF DEVOTION

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

Eight inches of snow fell on Mt. Charleston on New Years Eve in 1943. New Years Day the valley experienced a clear, sunny day. Shoppers were buying sugar in cloth bags with their stamps and pet milk was selling for 9 cents per can. Duz soap was the number one detergent and children of all ages were anxious to discover, in the "Boots" comic strip, which of America's women would be selected to be the Buffington Blond — "the prettiest blond as chosen by the fliers all over the world."

By the end of the mon-

th, Ernest Green has made the news. He was a seventeen year old Black youngster who had been turned down by the Western Pacific Railroad. Fortunately, he got on as a section worker with the Southern Pacific at Winnemucca. He felt that he had been discriminated against and he wanted revenge. His efforts, through uncoupling cars on the Western line, landed him in jail and he was held on a \$10,000 bond as set by U.S. Commissioner Elna T. Eddy. Assistant U.S. Attorney Bruce Thompson was busy trying to deter-

mine if the suspect should be treated as a juvenile or if he should be bound over to the Grand Jury. The thirty-one days of January, of 1944, were really something. While snow was in the higher elevations and prices were at their lowest and Green was anticipating a bout with the high court, others were making preparations to go to war. There were thousands of soldiers already overseas and thousands of others who were in transit and thousands of others who

were in training. Such activity would continue through the next four decades on an almost uninterrupted basis through the Korean conflict and the undeclared holocaust of Southeast Asia commonly called the Viet Nam War. Blacks would serve in all of them and a portion would be trained in and around Las Vegas.

The anxieties involved in preparing for the battlefield increased the stresses of all soldiers. Those who were not thoroughly convinced of their positions in the country or what rewards they might receive for taking the ultimate risk, had even greater needs for escape from the realities of their circumstances. A night on the town, which would invariably end by being in a drunken stupor, was one way of dulling one's senses to the day to day apprehensions of the impending storm of war.

Black soldiers were generally apprehensive about coming into Las Vegas. More often than not, their overnight passes or weekend leaves found them in jail, sleeping in the gutters or bleeding in the streets. One such event had occurred in August of 1943. Joe Calloway, of the 370th Squadron at the Las Vegas Air Field, was shot in the leg by police officer Willie

Scott. The incident was precipitated by a fight between Calloway and another soldier at a bar on the westside. Chief of Police Harry Miller issued an order closing all liquor dispensing establishments on the westside as a result. Everyone was punished for the activities of two soldiers. Things have not changed much in thirty-six years.

It did not require brawling to bring about closure by the sheriff. A month earlier, in June, he had ordered the Star Bar, on the westside, closed. According to him, "the bar had been playing to a mixed trade, with negroes and whites encouraged to congregate in the establishment promiscuously." There had been protests and he had recommended that the proprietor change the practice. Remember, integration in Las Vegas was a no in spite of the fact that there was no law against it but only a

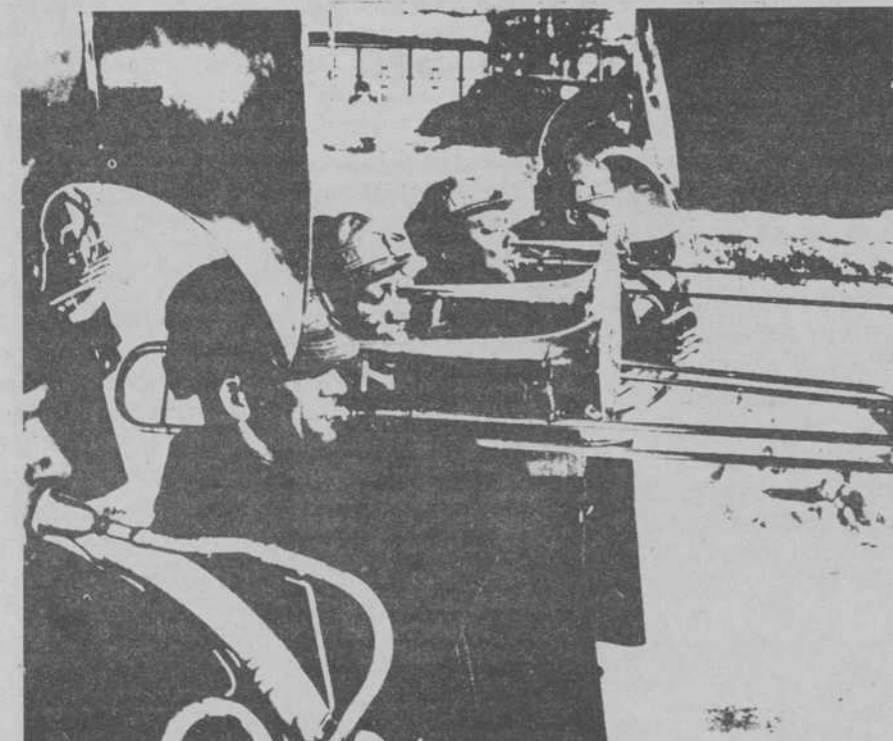
growing four year old tradition. The month of January was a turning point, in the wrong direction, for race relations in Las Vegas. Deprivations moved to yet another level. Perhaps it was a carryover of the holiday spirit but, on January 9, 1944, 250 Black soldiers from Camp Clipper, California arrived in Las Vegas. They had been on desert maneuvers for several weeks and they needed to wet their whistles. The unit was called the "Wildcats" and they lived up to their names. They landed on the Brown Derby as though it was "D Day." They brought cases and cases of whiskey and beer. By 3:00 p.m., they had had their fill of the grape and was in need of more action — they were restless and tempers were on edge. Down town was off limits and they were psychologically prepared not to take no for an answer. What started off as friendly jostling, tur-

ned into a full scale battle. The police were called and found the place in a shambles. Tear gas was used to clear everybody out and, once outside, a rock and bottle throwing spree ensued. Numerous shots were fired by the officers and at least one soldier was wounded. It is reported that it required the combined efforts of the local police, the military police and security guards to restore order. Chief Miller not only closed the Brown Derby, but he also declared Las Vegas "off limits" to the soldiers from Camp Clipper. Because of that, Black men were all always harassed by the local constabulary and M.P.'s — after all, they

would be welcomed with open arms. For the remainder of the war years, Black soldiers in Las Vegas were very low keyed. There were occasional dances sponsored by the USO club but Bob Hope never came by. Those who were a bit shy, spent their time engaged in more solitary activities. Movie going was more their cup of tea. They sat in the back of the theaters and watched, attentively, while Dooley Wilson played "As Time Goes By" in the film, Casablanca. While a portion of the defenders of America were taking it on the chin, elements of the "mob" were making preparations to leave California and come to Las Vegas where they

would be welcomed with open arms. The decade of the 1940s reached its climax with the detonation of the atomic bomb over Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Japan. The war ended on that bombing note. Las Vegas witnessed the second wave of hotel construction. The El Rancho, which had opened on the north end of the Strip in 1941, and the Last Frontier which opened on the southern end in 1942, were joined by the Flamingo and the Golden Nugget in 1946. Within the next ten years, nine additional hotels opened. Black soldiers who came here during the 1940s, found themselves being really put to the

test. They were among those who benefitted the least and who received the smallest share of democracy. They redefined what patriotism was all about. They truly asked "not what their country could do for them, but what they could do for their country." One day, hopefully, the country will acknowledge their "last full measure of devotion," and extend to them the long overdue "thanks, for a job well done."



GEORGE STROCK/369TH INFANTRY BAND, 1943 COURTESY OF LIFE MAGAZINE & TIME, INC.

GEORGE STROCK/369TH IN TRAINING, 1943/COURTESY OF LIFE MAGAZINE & TIME, INC.



NEGRO PILOTS. Taking time out between missions in Italy in 1944, these five pilots of the all-Negro Mustang Group of the Fifteenth Air Force were among the first Negroes to be admitted to the pilot training program in the air force. Office of War Information photo no. 208-NP-6XXX-1, National Archives.



NEGRO WOMEN SERVE. Lt. Stella G. Garvin of the Women's Army Corps interviews a job applicant at the rapidly expanding Jersey City Quartermaster Repair Sub-Depot. U. S. Signal Corps Photo.

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The Black population of the United States, during the 1940s, was just over 9 percent while Blacks comprised close to 12 percent of the military. More than any other group, their Americanism came constantly under fire on all fronts. The events which had taken place at Spartanburg were not unique. "These are the times that try men's souls." They were also the times that tried soul men. There were over a million Black men who actively participated in World War II. There would have been more but the Selective Service was not too anxious for them to join. Most were volunteers. They fought for the elusive prize of democracy. Many would return from overseas duty to report that they had been better treated abroad and in war than they were treated at home.

Black people yet fight for the Four Freedoms for themselves. When such becomes a reality, then and only then, America will become a true Democracy.



GEORGE STROCK/369TH ANTI-AIRCRAFT BATTERY, 1943 COURTESY OF LIFE MAGAZINE & TIME, INC.

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Residential Income & Land Commercial

Brenda Dumas

Brenda Dumas moved to Las Vegas from Pomona, California, in 1975. Brenda has been serving her real estate clients and customers for over two years. She and her husband, Joe, are members of Saint James Catholic Church. Brenda's hobbies include reading, bowling and her recently born daughter, Ebonee.

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