

# Black paratroopers vehemently fought racism

MODESTO, Calif. (AP) — White soldiers literally bet against them, wagering that the newly trained black paratroopers would refuse to jump out of airplanes.

The all-black, all-volunteer 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion proved them wrong, growing into a fighting force that kept its uniforms more starched and spit-shined than those of their white counterparts, for fear of soiling the battalion's hard-won dignity.

Next weekend, surviving members will gather in Redding to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the first smokejumpers. It's also the 55th anniversary of the summer of 1945, when the battalion was sent on a secret mission to fight a feared Japanese bombing barrage of the Pacific Northwest.

The 555th took as its nickname "the Triple Nickles," choosing the odd spelling as one more sign its members were unique. Its symbol was three buffalo-head nickels, signifying the "buffalo soldiers" — blacks who served in the U.S. Cavalry after the Civil War.

Members of the 555th soon learned that though they were ready to go into combat overseas, the military wasn't

ready to send them there.

Instead of fighting German or Japanese soldiers side by side with white Americans, the black paratroopers found themselves battling bears, rattlesnakes and forest fires on U.S. soil.

The racism they experienced in training continued in the field.

Members recall getting kicked out of whites-only post exchange stores and theaters, roused by white military police and restricted to certain off-base stores.

"Here I am with the uniform on, I'm protecting the country, and here I am being treated like less than dirt. It makes you feel bad," said Richard Green, a former battalion member.

The battalion overcompensated by barring its paratroopers from public drinking, cursing, smoking — even dating certain women — because "it would upset the dignity of the Triple Nickles," Green said.

The military's segregation reflected the split society, said retired Army Col. William A. DeShields, president and founder of the Black Military History Institute of America at Fort Meade, Md.

"We had a society that was less than equal, and this car-



ried over in the military from the Civil War right up to, I would say, the Vietnam War," DeShields said.

The idea that blacks were inferior soldiers was formalized in a 1920s study by the Army's War College that concluded blacks were incapable of training and fighting at the same level as whites, DeShields said.

"In every war they've been fighting two battles: the enemy abroad and discrimination at home," DeShields said of black troops.

By World War II, civil-rights leaders were pushing for a heightened role for blacks with the creation of a series of experimental units such as the 555th.

At about the same time, 1st Sgt. Walter Morris was searching for a way to motivate his dispirited all-black

service unit, assigned to guard the white paratroopers at Fort Bragg, N.C. He started his men on the same regimen of calisthenics as the paratroopers.

"They were servants prior to that. Now they were imitating paratroopers," said Morris, now 79, of Palm Coast, Fla., one of six surviving original members. "It showed in their uniforms, in their attitudes, in how they addressed you."

The parachute school's commander, in charge of forming a new 20-member black test unit called "the colored test platoon," took notice and made Morris its first sergeant. That unit grew into the Triple Nickles.

"We had our own separate table where we ate, we had separate barracks where we slept, we had enlisted men

and officers betting — actually betting — that we could not stand the rigid four-week training course and that we would not jump out of airplanes," Morris said.

Once the initial test platoon proved its mettle, the floodgates opened to other volunteers. The War Department put the battalion on a troop train bound for the West Coast.

"When we were on our way to Camp Pendleton, Oregon, we assumed we were going to join General MacArthur in the Pacific theater," Morris said.

That was until the train stopped and Morris ducked into a rural store to buy cigarettes.

"There was this group of loggers sitting around this big potbellied stove and they said, 'Oh, you're here — we've been waiting for you a long time. We read in the paper that you were coming out here to be smokejumpers,'" Morris said.

After two weeks' training, the battalion was ready.

The Japanese had launched the first of an estimated 9,300 balloons carrying loads of incendiary bombs. The balloons rode the high air currents as far as Michigan, with many landing in Alaska, Canada and as far south as Mexico.

None of the approximately 90 balloons known to have reached the continental United States is thought to have caused a forest fire.

But the Triple Nickles were kept busy all summer fighting 36 naturally occurring fires, recording more than 1,200 individual jumps from its bases at Camp Pendleton and Chico, Calif.

For the Triple Nickles, the first step toward acceptance came in January 1946 as they marched with the 82nd Airborne Division in a victory parade down New York City's Fifth Avenue.

"We didn't win any wars, but we did contribute," Morris said.

"What we proved was that the color of a man had nothing to do with his ability."

## Population

(Continued from Page 12) said. "But as far as global totals go, India is the country to watch out for," he said.

India surpassed the 1 billion mark in population in May, and 114 million of them are under age 4 — a group that if counted on its own would amount to the 11th largest country in the world.

The Indian government has made slow, but steady progress in boosting literacy across the country, but educational levels vary widely by region, said Sunita Kishor, of the Calverton, Md.-based research group ORC Macro, which is conducting a family health survey in India.

In general, fertility and illiteracy rates have gone down in the southern states of India, but there has been more difficulty in the north, Haub said. For instance in one of the northern states, Uttar Pradesh, the illiteracy rate for females over age 6 is about 68 percent; the national rate is 57 percent.

If it were its own country, Uttar Pradesh's 170 million people would amount to the fifth largest in the world.

"It's not just a population issue, but it's also the attitudes toward girls," Kishor said. "The culture doesn't promote the view that girls

can go out and earn a living for themselves. If a parent has a daughter, they are really viewed as if you have to marry them off as quickly as possible." Joseph Chamie, director of the UN's Population Division, agreed with the forecasts, which are partly based on UN statistics.

"Most of the growth is overwhelmingly in the less developed world — about 95 percent," Chamie said. "But it's not a uniform process globally. Some countries are going to decline unless they have more migration. That's why the picture is so complex."

Population projections in Africa could be affected by how the AIDS epidemic is treated in sub-Saharan countries, where approximately 23 million carry the HIV virus.

"That whole area has tremendous growth potential

even with the AIDS cases. We will have population growth slow down there, but for the wrong reasons — rising mortality," Haub said.

Population growth in Africa is predicted in spite of the AIDS epidemic because the fertility rate of 38 births per 1,000 people is still much higher than the mortality rate of 14 deaths per 1,000. Also, 43 percent of the continent's population is under age 15; by comparison, only 14 percent of Europe's population is under age 15.

"That's still very powerful momentum for population growth," Haub said. "In Europe there are fewer younger people, and in Africa it's the opposite. You can see the difference."

The projections assume that, by 2050, fertility rates and the number of deaths due to the AIDS virus in Africa

will both decline, he added.

The projected decline in Europe has a lot to do with the economy, "such as the cost of living in Western Europe and the breakup of Soviet Union," he added. "It shows that people don't have confidence in the future."

## Monitoring

(Continued from Page 12)

were possible in Zimbabwe because of the ruling party militants occupying 1,400 white-owned farms, and because of a "state-sponsored terror" campaign that has left at least 30 people dead, most of them opposition supporters. "The problems there do not really look as though they are conducive to free and fair elections," Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon told the British Broadcasting Corp.

"Far too many people have been killed. It is not a good omen," McKinnon said Sunday in London.

The election poses the biggest challenge to Mugabe since he led the nation to independence from Britain in 1980. Opponents have said he supported the illegal farm occupations to increase his vote in the poll.

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