

The Black Messiah

Background

In the 1940s there was still much discrimination against the Black African population of the United States, particularly in the Southern States. There were “White only” schools, cinemas, eating places and waiting rooms as at this bus station below.

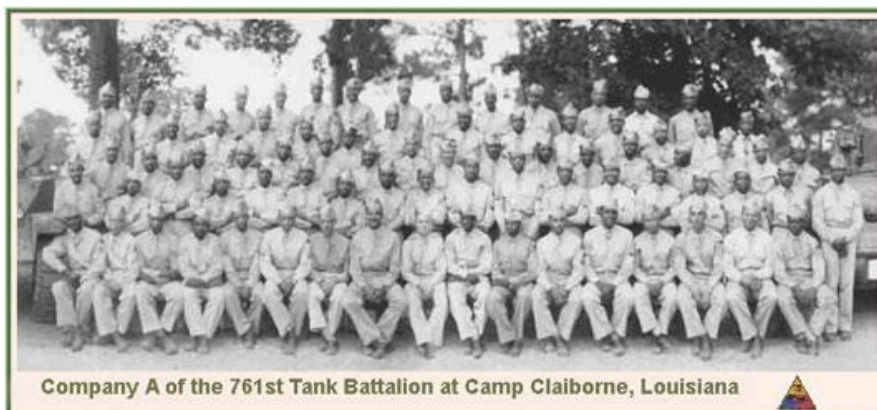


This segregation extended to the military service in World War II and there were “Black only” units. It was thought at some senior levels in the US Military that Black soldiers were inferior due to their race.

The 761st was the first Black tank unit to be sent into a war zone. They were formed in April 1942 and had trained for two years before being sent overseas. These troops were conscious of the fact that white units were being sent overseas after as little as two or three months. But in 1944 there was a pressing need for reinforcements and after a brief deployment to England, the 761st landed in France (Omaha Beach) on 10 October 1944. The unit arrived (with six white officers, thirty black officers, and 676 black enlisted men) and was assigned to support General George Patton’s US Third Army.



The unit's logo was a black panther



The 761st had a distinguished record as they fought their way across France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany, eventually reaching into Austria. As they approached Austria they were supporting the 71st Infantry of the US Army. Their objective was to join up with Soviet forces fighting their way across Eastern Europe through Poland and Czechoslovakia.



Route of 761st

Mauthausen concentration camp

Mauthausen was a small Austrian village between Munich in Germany and Vienna in Austria. It became the administrative headquarters for the imprisonment and deployment of foreign workers to assist the German war effort. Mauthausen controlled more than 40 different camps, the majority of which were involved in construction work and armaments production. In December 1944 there were 72,825 registered inmates in Mauthausen, more than 62,000 of whom were in the satellite camps.

Some 55 km from Mauthausen at Gunskirchen was an overflow camp set up in March 1945 to house up to 15,000 Jewish prisoners transferred from other camps in the Mauthausen complex.

In May 1945 the 761st tank regiment came upon the Gunskirchen camp by accident whilst accompanying the 71st Infantry Division.

Memories of a soldier of the 761st



Floyd Dade Jr

“General Patton, if it wasn't for him, we wouldn't have been there. General Patton loved his tanksThat's when Patton had already put a request in for us. He said, "Get us there. Send the best damn tank battalion you have over there. I mean now." Next thing you know, we were packing up and on our way.

Then Patton—we saw him once or twice. He came and spoke to us. He said, "I don't give a damn what color you are." He says, "You wonder why you're here. I sent for you." He said, "Your people are watching you, and by golly, don't you let them down, and damn you, don't you let me down." He talked to us that day with that speech. Then we went into battle when he left. A couple of days later, that's when we started fighting.”

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“Gunskirchen? The concentration camp? That was a terrible experience, a horrible experience and surprising. After we left the Rhineland we were going to meet the Russians in Steyr, Austria. We were on our way to Steyr, Austria and we ran up on this camp. It seemed to me that it was a German—at the beginning, by seeing these buildings, we thought it was housing German soldiers—their barracks. But as we buttoned down and got battle ready, the closer we got we saw people—heads clean, and in striped suits, and some hanging out of the windows—so we didn't know what the hell it was. So we opened the hatches to get a closer look. Then you saw people that looked like ghosts—skeletons with skin wrapped around it—just walking, wandering around, a couple of them were, on the outside. Then all around the barracks there were bodies that looked like skin and bones. That's all there was.”

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“It was a shock at first—not a shock, but strange. We thought it was a German army barrack. We kept getting closer to get a better view. We had ammunition and came up with the guns loaded, ready for another battle, everything ready for action. And then as we got closer, you could see these people with their heads shaved—it was early in the morning—with striped suits, hanging out of windows, and laying all over the yard. "What the hell is this?" Then you'd see a lot of them wandering around, looking like ghosts. We just had to keep rolling on, there was no battle there. The infantry was in there taking care of everything, surprised like we were. We hadn't seen these concentration camps before.

Then we went on the outskirts of town there—of the camp—to set up a front—a barrier—just in case of a counter attack from the Germans. We stayed there for a short while. Then we went on to Steyr, Austria where we were going to meet the Russians. Then we ran up on another camp which we didn't stop at, we just looked over and saw it. That was Mauthausen where they were working down in the quarry there, they were clearing out the marble and stuff, up 200 stairs they had to walk to bring it up. If they couldn't bring it or fall, they would shoot them, the skinny men. We went and that's where we met the Russians at the Steyr River.”

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Did you think that people in America would believe you when you came back and tell them about this?

No I didn't even think about it. Sure I thought they were going to believe, I mean the Americans, that after we told them about it, yeah.

So, you knew relatively nothing about this?

No

You didn't know that they existed?

No

Once you were there how did you understand what was there?

I didn't understand it. I still don't.

Did you know who they were?

No

They were Germans?

No

When did you learn what was going on?

When they told us what they were, that this was a concentration camp, when they were, I guess about a week later.

Who told you?

Our company commander, about that's what they were doing to the Jewish people. And that it had been happening all over and that was just a series of camps, you know, they had them all over and that just happens to be the one that we came by. It was one of the smaller ones.

So therefore it wasn't your responsibility?

Yeah. Right.

Where does your experience of the camp fall in your mind in terms of the impact of the whole experience on you?

Sometimes when I sleep I would think about it, the way those people were looking and the condition that they were in. I don't see how another human being could do that to another human. That was very touching and upsetting to me.

Did it take you a long time to talk about it?

About 50 years.

Memories of Sonia Schreiber Weitz

Sonia Schreiber Weitz was 15 years old when she arrived at Mauthausen. She had already survived the ghetto in Cracow, Poland and then various death camps, including Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Over 80 of her close family did not survive.

"We finally got to Mauthausen, the same camp where my father and Norbert were taken; the camp where Norbert survived, but my father was killed just weeks before the end. I remember very little except being very sick. We were six on a bunk like sardines. I remember one day I looked up and there was a black American soldier.

The Allies of course knew what was happening to us by 1942, but unfortunately we were not a priority. In fact they refused to bomb the railroad tracks which took the victims to Auschwitz. Although the leadership of the Allies knew what was happening, the soldiers did not.

This particular black soldier that I remember was standing there totally devastated by what he saw. The horror on his face is something that even in my state, I cannot ever forget. I was unable to really distinguish between nightmare and reality. I weighed about sixty pounds and was really more dead than alive. I will conclude my presentation with this poem which I call:"

My Black Messiah

*A black GI stood by the door
(I never saw a black before)
He will set me free before I die
I thought he must be the messiah.*

*A black messiah came for me.
He stared with eyes that didn't see.*

*He never heard a single word
which hung absurd upon my tongue.*

*And then he simply froze in place
the shock the horror on his face.*

*He didn't weep, he didn't cry
but deep within his gentle eyes
a flood of devastating pain,
his innocence forever slain.*

*For me with yet another dawn
I found my black messiah gone.*

*And on we went our separate ways
for many years without a trace
but there's a special bond we share
which has grown strong because we dare
to live, to hope, to smile, and yet
we vow not ever to forget.*

**For this and other poems of Sonia Schreiber Weitz please see the website of the
Boston Holocaust Center, Boston North Inc**

The 761st – the fight for recognition

The 761st were disbanded in May 1945 and most of the forces returned to the United States. There they returned to a country which was still not treating its Black African population equally. Those within the 761st received little recognition of their war contribution due to discrimination.

It was not until the 1978 that this recognition was to become a reality. It was then that President Jimmy Carter gave the 761st a Presidential Unit Citation for Extraordinary Heroism.

It took a further 19 years for Reuben Rivers to receive posthumously the Congressional Medal of Honor which was accepted by his sister from President Clinton.



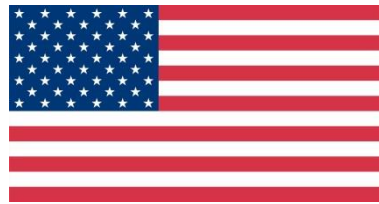
**Staff Sergeant Ruben Rivers
of the 761st Tank Battalion
was killed on November 19,
1944, while directing a
concentrated barrage on
German anti-tank guns,
allowing his trapped
comrades to escape alive.
Rivers was posthumously
awarded the Congressional
Medal of Honor.**



photo left: Anese Rivers-Woodfork ©

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International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

A teacher's guide from **Tikvah**

www.tikvah.ro