



"The Triple Nickels"

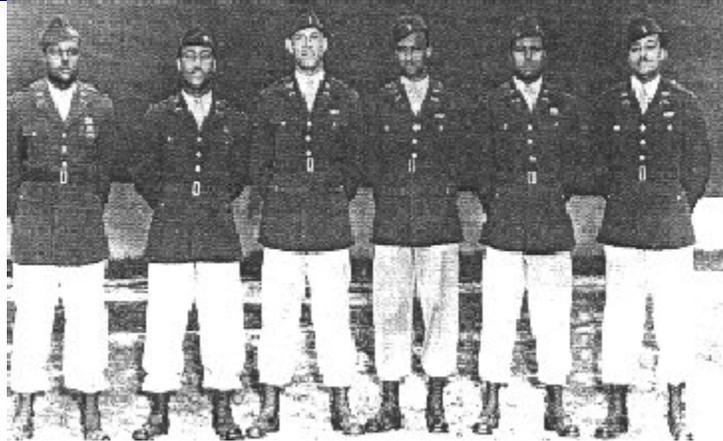
The 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion

1944 - 1947



Test Platoon - First 16 qualified black paratroopers (1944) Enlisted men of the Test Platoon.
Front Row from L-R: First Sgt. Walter Morris, first black enlisted man accepted for airborne duty
• Sgt. Jack D. Tillis • Sgt. Leo D. Reed • Sgt Daniel Weil *S. Sgt. Hubert Bridges • Tech. Grade
IV Alvin L. Moon • Sgt. Ned D. Bess • Sgt. Roger S. Walden Back Row from L-R • Cpl. McKinley
Godfrey, Jr. • Sgt. Elijah Wesby • Sgt. Samuel W. Robinson • S. Sgt. Calvin R. Beal • S. Sgt
Robert F. Greene • S. Sgt. Lonnie M. Duke • Sgt. Clarence H. Beavers and Sgt. James E. Kornegay.
Not Shown Carstell O. Stewart, the seventeenth, who was on emergency leave and earned his wings a
week later.

Many years before "black pride" became a popular slogan, a small group of black American soldiers gave life and meaning to those words. This is their story. Born within an army that had traditionally relegated blacks to menial jobs and programmed them for failure, the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion, or "Triple Nickles," succeeded in becoming the nation's first all-black parachute infantry test platoon, company, and battalion.



The Officers of the test platoon (1944) Left to Right • First Lt. Jasper E. Ross, Chicago, IL • Second Lt. Clifford Allen, Chicago, IL • Second Lt. Bradley Biggs, Newark, NJ • Second Lt. Edwin H. Wills, Washington, DC • Second Lt. Warren C. Cornelius, Atlantic City, NJ • Second Lt. Edward Baker, Chicago, IL

In the frosty Georgia winter of 1943-44, soldiers and officer candidates traveling to and from Fort Benning often saw the sky filled with white parachutes. Most of them assumed that the faces beneath the chutes were also white. The black soldiers they knew drove their trucks, waited on them in mess halls, or hauled their ammunition; they rode in the back of the bus to and from Columbus; they gathered at their own separate clubs on the fort.

Some of the faces beneath those chutes, however, were black. As such they were also pioneers, blazing new trails for countless black soldiers to follow. It wasn't easy. A proud black lieutenant, sergeant, or private, with polished boots and paratrooper wings, still had to use the "colored" toilets and drinking fountains in the railroad stations, sit in segregated sections of theaters, and go out of his way to avoid confrontations with racist police. Black officers continued to find post officers' club closed to them. But they endured, and

proved themselves as airborne troopers--"as fine a group of soldiers as I have ever seen," in the words of the notoriously fussy General Ben Lear.

True, these black pioneers were exceptional men, specially selected for the task. They were former university students and professional athletes, top-notch and veteran noncoms. A major element in their success was that, unlike other black infantry units officered by whites, they were entirely black, from commanding officer down to the newest private.

In fathering the 3rd Battalion, 505th Airborne Infantry Regiment, the 80th Airborne Anti-aircraft Battalion, the 503rd Airborne Artillery Battalion, and the 2nd Airborne Ranger Company, and serving in the 82nd, 101st, 11th and 13th Airborne Divisions, the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team, the 188th and 511th Airborne Infantry Regiments, the Airborne Center and Special Forces, the Triple Nicklers served in more airborne units, in peace and war, than any other parachute group in history.

Though combat-ready and alerted for European duty in late 1944, the changing tides of the war resulted in a different assignment--jumping over the blazing forests of the American northwest searching for Japanese balloon bombs, a job requiring exact skills and special courage. In this unusual role, the 555th also confronted a new dimension in warfare involving the use of biological agents that could destroy woodlands and crops, but not humans.



Smoke Jumpers -- Army paratroopers of the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion stand at ease during inspection. The men were issued the usual "let-down" ropes and football helmets with wire face masks, but wore sheepskin outer garments rather than canvas smokejumper suits.

*Historical Note...Private First Class **Malvin L. Brown**, a medic and member of Headquarters Company, **555th Parachute Infantry Battalion** was the first smokejumper to perish on a fire jump. PFC Brown, a native of Narberth in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania died on August 6, 1945. His death occurred during a fire jump in the Siskiyou National Forest near Roseberg, Oregon.*

The population of the west coast would have been seriously alarmed by the knowledge that these weapons, launched in Japan, were landing on their shores. Consequently, the 555th approached Operation Fire Fly committed to absolute secrecy. We realized that any slip on our part, any breach of security, could bring chaos to the west coast and damage the nation's morale.

Only recently fear, hatred, and prejudice had been vented on Japanese-American citizens in the western states by stripping them of their rights and property and placing them in concentration camps. That Americans of German and Italian descent were spared this treatment did not escape our attention.

In this mission, and in many others, the 555th was successful. We became a superb organization because of our belief in ourselves and each other. We worked together. We were not greedy for promotion and publicity, nor did we engage in the army's political games. Our game was soldiering. It took a total effort and a collective frame of mind that recognized that everything we did was for a special purpose. As black men in competition with whites, we knew that if we failed it might be a long time before we were given another chance.

For us, integration meant survival and advancement in the white man's army.

But would it remain a white man's army? By the turn of the century there could well be all-black units again--not by design but rather because of the economics of the job market for young blacks, and the appeal of the military as a new and permanent way of life.

I wish that it were possible to name and write about every trooper who has ever enjoyed the prestige and spirit of being a Triple Nickler. But that cannot be done here. I hope that those who are unnamed in the pages that follow will recognize that in the history of each of us lies at least some of the history of all of us.

Because of my personal and professional involvement in the 555th from its inception, through integration and beyond, it has been difficult to avoid personal intrusions into this group portrait. I trust that my colleagues will understand, if not appreciate, this fact.

Bradley Biggs, Lt. Col. USA (Ret.)