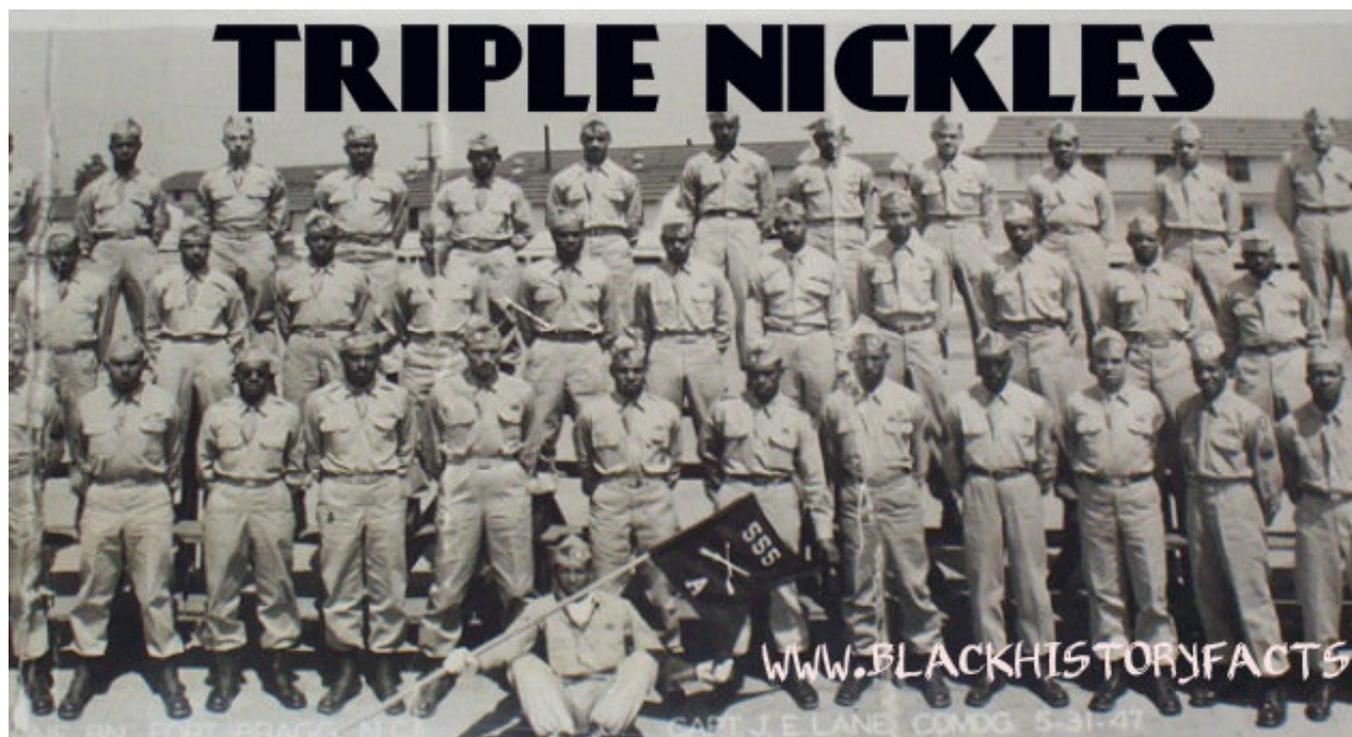


555th Parachute Infantry Battalion|Courage and Valour

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THE AMAZING TRIPLE NICKELS

The 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was the first black unit in the Army to be integrated.



Trained as smoke jumpers to carry out secret missions during World War II, the "Triple Nickel" was assigned to Fort Benning, Ga.; Fort Bragg, N.C.; Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif.; and Chico Army Airfield, Calif., before they were absorbed by the 82nd Airborne Division under the direction of Gen. James Gavin.

"It was a thing to be the first integrated unit, before President (Harry S.) Truman signed the proclamation to end segregation in the Army," said Joseph L. Murchison, president of the 555th Parachute Infantry Association Inc.

Murchison joined the Triple Nickel in 1947 and said he remembers jumping at Fort Wainwright in 1958 as a member of the 505th Artillery Division during Operation Caribou Creek.

The Triple Nickel's missions protected the country against threats many Americans were unaware of.

"The Japanese, unbeknownst to American citizens, sent balloons into the jet stream to start forest fires," said former 2nd Lt. Walter Morris, who was the first black enlisted Soldier accepted for airborne duty and to receive his airborne wings. He later went on to become an officer.

The 555th was the Army's elite black airborne unit and was called upon to protect America's people, lands and interests from Japanese incendiary balloon bombs, a mission referred to as Operation Firefly.

"During WWII, the Japanese launched more than 9,000 balloon bombs to the United States and Canada," said Robert C. Mikesh of the Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press in his 1973 article "Japan's WWII Balloon Bomb Attacks on North America."

Mikesh said, "Approximately 1,000 balloon bombs made it to the U.S. Balloon remnants have been found from Alaska to Mexico and as far inland as Iowa."

The balloons created a need for a unit capable of combating the threat to the country.

"The (United States) Department of Agriculture asked if some paratroopers could become smoke jumpers because of the wildfires caused by firebomb balloons," Morris said.

The U.S. Forest Service smoke jumpers had not been trained in bomb detection or explosives and were not prepared to deal with the balloon bombs.

"Seventeen of us qualified, and we had six officers, the first all-black paratrooper unit in the Army, the first Army smoke jumpers and the first unit to be integrated into the 'regular' Army," Morris said.

Meeting such milestones has secured a place in history for the paratroopers.

"The Triple Nickels are a foundation of the smoke jumper history. There used to be a paratrooper unit here on post," said Doug Carroll, who has been a crew unit coordinator and Alaska smoke jumper with the Alaska Bureau of Land Management since 1994.

"Since we only jump in the light of the summer, they would come in and use our jump tower and facilities for training," he continued. "They jumped at night and in winter conditions also. We knew each other and shared a bond. It's that way with the Triple Nickels. Like jobs, with like training, in like conditions."

During World War II, the 555th paratroopers were eager to get to the Battle of the Bulge, but an all-black paratrooper unit had not been used yet, so they waited for an assignment.

"When we became a battalion in 1945 in Fort Bragg, N.C., 400 black men (were) ready for combat, but no one wanted to integrate Soldiers. The 555th had no place to be placed," Morris said.

When the 555th received orders for Operation Firefly, they relocated to Oregon and went through U.S. Forest Service smoke jumper training, making them the first and only Army airborne unit to jump as smoke jumpers on wildfires.

"We arrived in Camp Pendleton for smoke jumper training in the spring of 1945, learning how to remove fuel and stopping fire progression. Some of us went to Chico for California fires," Morris said.

The Triple Nickel paratroopers were instrumental in preventing wildfires from destroying the nation's forests and lands.

"Thirty-one fires we jumped on, so many balloons did not reach the coast. The Army had the difference shot down over the pacific. Twelve hundred jumps, and we had one death, (one) let down rope mishap and a 50-foot fall in Oregon," Morris said.

Alaska smoke jumpers currently serve with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management at Fort Wainwright. In 1959, the state's smoke jumpers were established with 16 jumpers. In 2008, they had 76 smoke jumpers.

According to *North Carolina's Statesville Record & Landmark's* Jan. 1, 1955, article, "Balloon bomb

located in northeast Alaska," a balloon bomb was located near the Sheenjek River north of Fort Yukon.

The bomb was spotted by Don Hulshizer, chief bush pilot for Alaska Airlines, who thought it might be a parachute or part of a downed aircraft, the article said. He advised air intelligence officers at Ladd Air Force Base, on what is now Fort Wainwright.

A reconnaissance team was dispatched to the site.

"Lt. Harold L. Hale of Pueblo, Colo., in intelligence technician with the 5004th Air Intelligence Squadron at Ladd, where it was identified, disarmed and sent it to the Air Force Technical Museum of Dayton, Ohio," the article said.



photo courtesy of Joseph L. Murchison/555th Parachute Infantry Association Inc. Pictured at Fort Benning, Ga., March 4, 1944, the Soldiers of the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion were the first black Army paratroopers to receive their airborne wings.

According to the article, the balloon bomb was still highly explosive and was constructed of rice paper so durable it could not be torn apart by two men. The balloon is now located at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base's National Museum of the United States Air Force.

During WWII, pilots stationed at the Aleutian Islands reported shooting down as many as eight to 10 balloons a day

"The balloon bombs were 32 feet in diameter, made of three to four layers of tissue paper cemented together to be a gas proof sphere. They were inflated with hydrogen to capacity near 19,000 cubic feet," Mikesh said. "The balloon envelope was encircled by a scalloped cloth band to which numerous shroud lines were attached, and these were tied together below in two large knots. From these knots, the bombs and ballast release mechanisms were suspended."

Gavin's support and push for integration of the 555th into the 82nd Airborne Division was the first integration of black troops.

"Recalling my own experience with black troops, I knew time had come for change," Gavin wrote in the forward of B Company, [555th Parachute Infantry Battalion's](#) retired Lt. Col. Bradley Biggs' book "The Triple Nickels."

"The Triple Nickels, the 555th, had to be integrated into the 82nd. This was a serious problem, and one not to be taken lightly, for our Army had been (a) two-colored Army for a long time, just as was our society. I was concerned," he wrote.

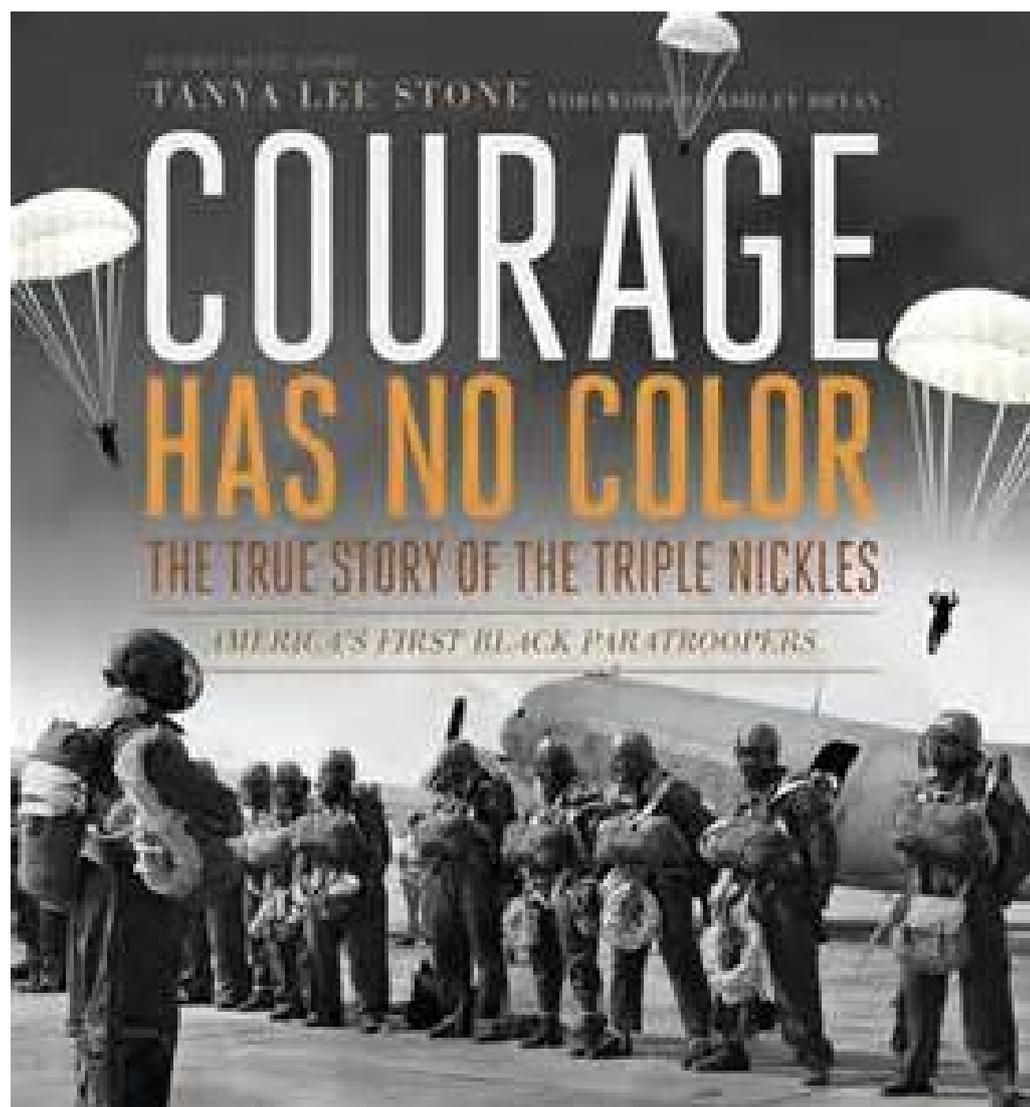
It took several years after the completion of Operation Firefly and the return to Fort Bragg before Gavin was successful integrating the 555th.

Today's Alaska smoke jumpers hold the Triple Nickel in high regard.

"We hold a great deal of respect for them. They were pioneers, and part of the smoke jumper family," Carroll said. "In any gathering of smoke jumpers I have ever been a part of, stories of the Triple Nickels have been something we share."

Finding bombs in wildfire areas is not just a story from the past. Some of Alaska's wild lands used by the Department of Defense for training purposes can bring current smoke jumpers face to face with live ammunition and other explosive devices.

"When we jump in the Delta area, sometimes the fire burns off unspent ammunition, and, on occasion, we have discovered live mortar rounds and other live munitions. We call the Explosives Ordinance Disposal team and follow unexploded ordinance procedures when we encounter such a device," Carroll said. "Somehow on days like that over dinner the Triple Nickels seem to come up and remind us of who we are and our history."



"I like to think we were a different kind of men, facing what we did and doing what we did, at a time when most black men couldn't," Murchison said.

Morris said he doesn't think he's special, though – just smart enough to take advantage of the opportunities life offers him.

"I was just at the right place at the right time over and over," Morris said. "It is important when you're the first, that you know your first and do a good job. We had a sense of pride."

source:<http://www.usarak.army.mil/>