

Army: Black soldiers wronged in POW case

Decision says blacks were denied justice

BY RORY MARSHALL
Associated Press

SEATTLE—The U.S. Army has overturned the convictions of black soldiers who were court-martialed in 1944 after a riot that resulted in the death of an Italian prisoner of war at Seattle’s Fort Lawton.

The decision, released Friday, said the trial was “fundamentally unfair” to the soldiers, who were denied access to their attorneys and investigative records.

The ruling was made by the Army’s Board for Corrections of Military Records, which had been asked by U.S. Reps. Jim McDermott, D—Wash., and Duncan Hunter, R—Calif., to investigate the matter.

The decision also grants the soldiers honorable discharges, back pay and benefits.

The formal decision affects the cases of four soldiers who petitioned for review, but would also be applied to another 24 who were convicted, if their families petition, said Jack Hamann. He is a Seattle journalist who wrote a book on the case, “On American Soil: How Justice Became a Casualty of World War II.”

About a week ago, the Army sent Snow the check for \$725 — the amount he would have been paid between the time he was convicted and the time he was released from prison and dishonorably discharged about 15 months later.

“I’m absolutely overwhelmed with joy. You don’t often get a chance to pursue justice on behalf of something that happened (63) years ago,” McDermott said.

Only two of the 28 soldiers are believed to be still alive, Hamann said.

On Aug. 14, 1944, a riot broke out on the post in what is now Seattle’s Discovery Park. Black soldiers in segregated barracks were accused of sparking the violence due to resentment over treatment of Italian prisoners of war they believed had better living conditions than their own. POW Guglielmo Olivotto was later found hanging on wires in a post obstacle course.

Forty—three black soldiers were tried in one of the largest court-martials of World War II. Of those, 28 were found guilty of rioting and sentenced to as many as 25 years in prison.

Two were also convicted of manslaughter. Those two — Luther L. Larkin, of Searcy, Ark., and William G. Jones, of Decatur, Ill., both deceased — were among the four petitioners, and those convictions were also thrown out in the ruling, Hamann said.

The other petitioners were Samuel Snow, 84 and living in Leesburg, Fla., and Booker W. Townsell, of Milwaukee, also deceased.

Hamann said the ruling also will give the deceased soldiers marble headstones for their graves, and their families will be entitled to American flags.

The lawyer in charge of the case for the board, John Taitt, did not immediately return a phone call Friday night.

Snow said he was “elated” by the decision. “It just knocked me off my feet.”

“My first thought is, what a shame it is that the folks who this injustice was done to are not around to see this,” Hamann said. “And yet I’m so elated that their families will finally know that these men did not commit these crimes.”

Snow said he was “elated” by the decision.

“It just knocked me off of my feet,” Snow said from his Florida home.

He said the extent of the ruling surprised him.

“I didn’t expect to get that much,” he said, adding, “I think I totally should.”

Snow spent a year in prison, and did janitorial work after his release. He said he was not bitter.

“No, I don’t have no resentment over it,” he said. “I’ve just kept myself clean up to this present moment.”