

# Black World War II veteran receives posthumous honors after military overturns court-martial

BY EMILY FREDRIX  
*Associated Press*

MILWAUKEE—Booker Townsell rarely spoke about his time in the Army or his wrongful conviction in one of the largest courts-martial of World War II.

But his past took center stage on Saturday, when the late Townsell received military honors at his grave site and a salute. His family also accepted the U.S. flag that was denied at his burial almost 25 years ago.

The ceremony and reception that followed attracted hundreds of people, including local and state dignitaries, a representative from the Army and a lawmaker who helped restore Townsell's name.

Townsell was one of 43 black soldiers court-martialed after an Italian prisoner was found lynched following a night of rioting at Fort Lawton in Seattle in 1944. The military court found 28 soldiers guilty of rioting over alleged resentment of Italian prisoners' living conditions on the post.

Some soldiers were sentenced to as many as 25 years in prison. Townsell served two.

"It was just an incident that happened to him and he desperately wanted to move on with his life," said Lashell Drake, Townsell's granddaughter.

Townsell came home to Milwaukee after serving his sentence, worked in a factory for 25 years, ran a lounge with his brother and raised four children. He loved his family, worked hard, was patriotic and active in the community, especially in getting people to vote, Drake said. He said Townsell, who died in 1984 at the age of 69, rarely discussed his military past.

"He was truly a man of honor and so when we found out about what happened to his name it was something that we wanted to do," Drake said. "We wanted to restore his name because we always knew him as honorable. So this dishonorable discharge had to be changed to honorable as far as we were concerned."

The family searched for Townsell's name online and found a reference to him in a 2005 book about the incident, "On American Soil: How Justice Became a Casualty of World War II." The family then contacted the author, Jack Hamann, a former television news reporter.

With the help of Hamann and two congressmen, the Townsells petitioned military investigators to reopen the case. Two other families and a surviving soldier, Samuel Snow of Florida, joined the petition.

In October, the Army's Board of Corrections of Military Records ruled that the soldiers were unfairly denied access to their attorneys and investigative records. The panel set aside their convictions.

Drake said that ruling redeemed Townsell's name and honor, as it did for the other soldiers. All but two of the 28 convicted men are deceased.

"The main thing that a man has is his name and his honor," Drake said. "We knew him to be such a man of honor and that's why we were so distraught to know that he had this tarnish somewhere on his record."

Townsell's oldest daughter, Marion, received the flag in the ceremony at Graceland Cemetery on Milwaukee's north side.

Drake said the Army apologized to the family and

that left them in tears.

"It was better than anything we would have imagined," Drake said Saturday. "I'm just lost for words."

Drake said the Army also promised a bronze military headstone for his grave.

Townsell's widow, 88-year-old Delores, is quite ill and was not able to attend, Drake said.

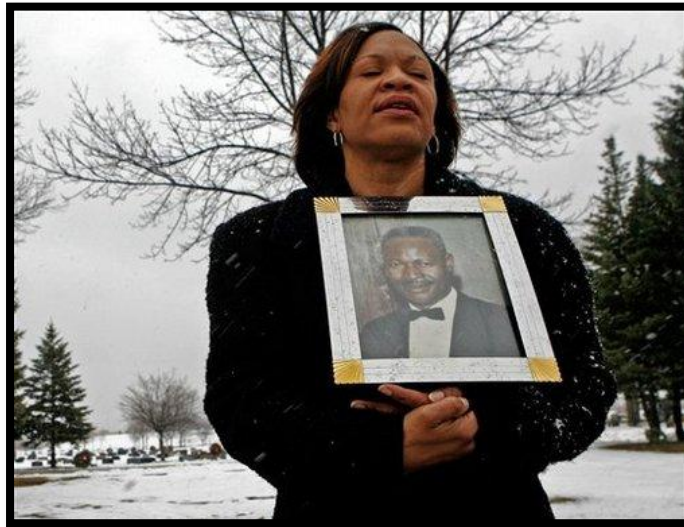
Rep. Jim McDermott, D-Wash., who requested the review with Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., attended the flag ceremony and the reception, which was at the city's War Memorial Center.



Lashell Drake at Milwaukee's Graceland cemetery

“Every family has pride and this is a way to give them an opportunity to be proud. They should be,” McDermott said.

McDermott said he is looking into getting compensation for the families of the other men, including lost pay and benefits. Snow received a check for \$725, which McDermott said isn’t enough.



Lashell Drake holds a picture of her grandfather, Booker Townsell, at his grave in Milwaukee

Hamann, who attended Saturday’s service, said Townsell’s family was instrumental in pushing the case.

“This family legitimately loved Booker Townsell and he just sounds like an amazing guy. They knew he carried this burden with him his entire life,” he said.