

Injustice Undone

Soldier honored more than 20 years after death

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MILWAUKEE— Carol Blalock closed her eyes and smiled as the sound of gunshots rang through the bitter cold morning air on Saturday.

At long last, justice had been served.

Her father, Booker Townsell, who died in 1984, had finally been granted full military honors, a proper military burial at Graceland Cemetery on Milwaukee's northwest side. An Army contingent, including Ronald James, assistant secretary of the Army, traveled to Milwaukee to correct an injustice begun more than 63 years ago.

In August 1944, Townsell and 42 other African-American soldiers were blamed for the lynching death of an Italian prisoner of war at Fort Lawton, an Army base outside Seattle. Many of them, including Townsell, were convicted of rioting. Two others were convicted of manslaughter.

The story might have ended there, had it not been for curiosity of a television reporter named Jack Hamann, who, along with his wife, Leslie, spent 20 years uncovering the facts of the case. Their account, in the book "On American



Journalist Jack Hamann congratulates Booker Townsell's daughters during military services in Milwaukee

Soil: How Justice Became a Casualty of World War II," prompted a bipartisan call for the convictions to be overturned and full military honors to be restored. In October, the Army reversed the conviction of Townsell and the others.

Hamann stood at the front of the chapel at Graceland on Saturday, fighting back tears as the Army color guard played taps.

"Reporters are trained to check out emotionally," he said. "But this one is tough."

Also standing in the crowd was Ronald Hayes, a retired master sergeant and Townsell family friend, who likewise swallowed hard when Wisconsin Army National Guard Brig.

Gen. Roger Lalich presented the U.S. flag to Townsell's oldest daughter, Marion Williamson.

"This is good," Hayes said.

Later in the day, nearly 200 people gathered at the Milwaukee County War Memorial Center to pay tribute to Townsell and to celebrate his ultimate exoneration.

"He wouldn't have wanted this attention," Williamson told the crowd. "But he deserves it. I hope my father's soul can finally rest in peace."

Speakers included Jim McDermott, Democratic congressman from the state of Washington who pushed to have the Army reverse the convictions.

"Too often the color of skin defined fate and denied due process," McDermott said.

Quoting the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., McDermott talked of why this decision is so important and the need to celebrate it so urgent.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," he said. McDermott complimented the Army for admitting a grave mistake. He recalled the images of Townsell as a dedicated family man and factory worker, who danced with his children and cheered his granddaughter at her track meet.



An Army honor guard from Fort Leonard Wood, MO holds an American flag over the grave of Booker Townsell

It would have been easy for Townsell to wallow in the bitterness of this dark chapter of his life, McDermott said. Instead, he chose to persevere. Again invoking King's words, McDermott said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

As far as Blalock and the other members of Townsell's family were concerned, Saturday's ceremony was no less precious because of the time it took to make things right.

"I loved my father's laugh," Blalock said. "When they had that 21-gun salute and played taps, it was like I could hear him laugh again."