

Robert L. Jamieson
**Lesson of
Fort Lawton
mustn't be
lost**



THE APOLOGY was a long time coming.

It arrives just in time.

Sam Snow, now in his 80s and in the twilight of life, lived long enough to see something special today -- Saturday, July 26, 2008.

The U.S. government, at a ceremony in Seattle, will tell him one word he has been waiting a lifetime to hear: sorry.

Sorry for railroading him and 42 other black soldiers who wrongly were court-martialed for rioting and lynching an Italian POW at Seattle's Fort Lawton in 1944.

Sorry for smearing their names.

Sorry for dealing soul-shattering blows.

Amazingly, this morning's ceremony comes exactly on the 60th anniversary of President Truman's issuing Executive Order 9981 -- the order that ended segregation in the military.

One of the things that influenced Truman?

The debacle at Fort Lawton in the Magnolia neighborhood.

That sordid chapter in American history offers lingering lessons for our country, beginning with how injustice, when confronted by goodness, persistence and faith, falls.

The soldiers' plight received fresh, urgent attention when Seattle journalist Jack Hamann, and his wife, Leslie, investigated the story for a 2005 book.

They discovered that a top Army prosecutor -- Leon Jaworski -- sat on information that could have cleared the men. They found signs that pointed to the real murderer -- a white soldier who disliked Italians and blacks.

But there is another history lesson -- a broader but equally important one -- stemming from the 64-year-old case.

And we ignore it today at our peril.

After the slaying of Italian Pvt. Guglielmo Olivotto, the Army bent over backward to ensure an investigation -- however rushed and flawed. The tragic slaying demanded a responsible inquiry, but military officials engaged in a shoddy investigation, followed by overzealous prosecution.

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Their haste likely was fueled by a provision of the Geneva Conventions that ensures humane treatment of prisoners of war. Had the Army shrugged off Olivotto's death, the United States would have confronted an international PR debacle.

The world was watching.

Would we follow through? Or be hypocrites about justice for war prisoners?

"America led the charge" with the Geneva Conventions, Hamann told me this week.

He says the military mindset at the time of the courtmartial was: "We better get justice."

Even railroaded justice.

The accused soldiers, Hamann learned, weren't even near where Olivotto was lynched. An Army appeals court ruled last year the court-martial -- the largest and longest of World War II -- was fundamentally unfair. The court reversed convictions of the 28 men who were found guilty.

Looking back, it is remarkable how far the government went -- motivated more by politics and posturing than morality and fairness -- to pursue the case of the slain POW. During that era, Italian and German war prisoners were treated so well many of them chose to live in America after the war -- and did.

Imagine that.

"Back then," Hamann said, "people mattered -- even war prisoners."

Today, POWs in the reign of the Bush administration have found justice and humane treatment elusive. They've been tossed into dark cells at Gitmo, held without being charged or sent to clandestine torture dens. Remember waterboarding?

They've been stripped of basic legal protections to ensure that innocent people are not persecuted. They've lacked due process. And if they suffer or perish in custody, the American public is the last to hear about it -- if it ever does. The military, meanwhile, shrugs.

We've lost our way.

There was a time when a dead Italian soldier in Seattle grabbed international headlines. Now the outrageous fates of war prisoners in Iraq or Afghanistan are lucky to hit the front page.

"There doesn't seem to be a great call to get justice," Hamann said. "When did we lose this sense as Americans?"

We can regain this sense if forces of truth shed light on wrongdoing and apply pressure,

demanding that people in power do the right thing.

Perhaps the atrocities of Iraq and Afghanistan will one day get a full hearing. Maybe those who've been abused in our government's zeal to fight the war on terror will get a belated apology.

It can happen. It could take a while.

Sam Snow knows.

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