

# APOLOGY 64 YEARS IN THE MAKING

Black soldiers wrongly convicted in 1944 riot, lynching at Fort Lawton

BY CASEY MCNERHNEY

*P-I Reporter*

The lodging the Army provided for black soldiers on trial for the 1944 riot and lynching of an Italian POW at Magnolia's Fort Lawton was far from luxurious.

Samuel Snow was one of the 43 who were stuck in tents or shacks that winter at a camp near the Duwamish River, surrounded by barbed wire. Across town, Leon Jaworski -- the Army's prosecutor in the case who would later make headlines as a special prosecutor in the Watergate scandal -- was treated to the comforts of the Olympic Hotel in downtown Seattle.

Jaworski had evidence that likely would have cleared Snow and the others. Instead, he sat on it, and the case was nearly forgotten until a book by Seattle author Jack Hamann proved that the black soldiers didn't lynch the Italian soldier -- something Army investigators knew during the largest and longest court-martial of World War II.

This week, Snow and 32 family members of some of the men wrongly convicted will get a measure of justice and an apology.

The assistant secretary of the Army is coming to Discovery Park, the site of what was an enormous Army base where the lynching happened. As part of a series of tributes that run Thursday through Sunday, he is expected to apologize for the court-martial, which last year an Army appeals court ruled as fundamentally unfair.

In October, the appeals court reversed the convictions of the 28 men found guilty. And that planted the seed that culminates in the tributes.

"We're a little nervous to see where it all began, and we're all wondering what kind of emotions will be elicited by coming to see where it all happened," said Lashell Drake, a Milwaukee, Wis., woman whose late grandfather, Booker Townsell, was wrongly convicted.

Mayor Greg Nickels, King County Executive Ron Sims and U.S. Rep. Jim McDermott asked to help with the tribute after hearing the soldiers' stories. So did officials at the Northwest African American Museum and Seattle University, where a Mass to honor the lynched POW is scheduled Thursday.

Ezell's Famous Chicken is sponsoring a free community picnic Saturday on the former Fort Lawton parade grounds, and Metro is providing increased bus service to get people there.

"This really is Seattle coming together," Hamann said before listing dozens of people and organizations who helped raise nearly \$20,000 for the four-day tribute. "We just told the story and people said, 'How can we help?'"

For Howard Cohen, that moment came at a Rotary meeting earlier this year.

He heard Hamann tell how the court-martial at Fort Lawton was the only time in American history that a group of black men had gone on trial for lynching a white man. He showed how the trial played a role in the eventual decision to desegregate the armed services and revise the Military

Code of Justice.

And for decades, those wrongly convicted were overlooked.

"I was really taken by what he talked about," Cohen said. "I'd lived here for 25 years and never heard the story before. ... I wanted to help out however I could."

White soldiers at Fort Lawton resented the Italian POWs who were allowed to go out on dates with adoring high school girls. False allegations by white military policemen led to an August 1944 riot. One shy Italian, Pvt. Guglielmo Olivotto, was the victim of hatred that Jaworski later blamed on black men who weren't there when he was



PAUL JOSEPH BROWN /P-I

Seattle-based documentary journalist Jack Hamann, photographed at Fort Lawton, investigated the lynching of an Italian prisoner of war at Fort Lawton during WWII, and the subsequent trial.

lynched.

Cohen, the manager of the Best Western Executive Inn and two other Seattle hotels, donated 14 room nights to visiting families of those wrongly convicted. And as a board member of the Seattle Hotel Association, he pitched the idea to his friends.

In all, Cohen helped secure 60 room nights at some of the city's best hotels during the year's busiest season -- a savings to the families of at least \$13,000.

Snow -- one of two of the 28 convicted men still alive and the only one able to travel for this week's tribute -- said Tuesday that he is thankful for Cohen's efforts.

"For years, they mistreated me and did me wrong," he said of the Army. "I was just 19 years old."

When he was here as a soldier waiting for the trial, Snow said he spent his days picking up trash and, on the weekend, cleaned Army bathrooms. When he left Seattle after

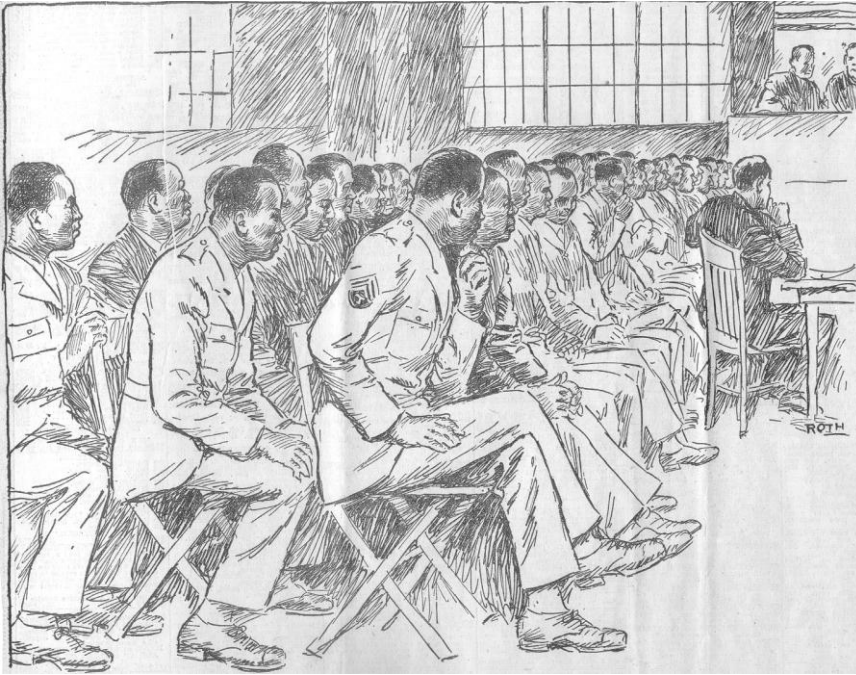
the trial, he did so in handcuffs.

Jaworski left what's now the Fairmont Olympic Hotel, destined for fame and fortune.

This week, Snow and his family will stay as complimentary guests of that same hotel.

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This sketch shows the soldiers on trial—the only time in U.S. history a group of black men were tried for lynching a white man.