

Bittersweet tribute to ex-soldiers

UNJUST CONVICTIONS AT FORT LAWTON | Army will award honorable discharges

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The last time Samuel Snow and his fellow African-American soldiers were at Seattle's Fort Lawton, they were in handcuffs and on the way to the brig after being convicted in an unjust and racially tinged trial.

Sixty-three years later, Snow and the relatives of six now-deceased comrades will return to Fort Lawton under far better circumstances.

The Army will give them long-overdue honorable discharges and King County will fete them in the Seafair parade during a three-day public tribute at Discovery Park July 24-26.

"To be able to come to the city to see where all of this occurred ... it's something that's really necessary," said Lashell Drake, granddaughter of the late Booker Townsell. Drake, of Milwaukee, Wis., will attend the tribute with four of Townsell's children.

In 1944, 28 members of an all-black Army unit stationed at Fort Lawton were convicted and sentenced to a combined 200 years in prison in connection with a riot that followed the mysterious lynching of an Italian POW also held at the base.

The convictions stood until last October, when an Army review of the case requested by U.S. Rep. Jim McDermott found that the trial had been "fundamentally unfair" because the soldiers' attorneys had been denied key evidence.

The Army ordered the men exonerated and given back pay.

Jack Hamann, a Seattle author whose book on the case, "On American Soil," sparked McDermott's interest, said more than 30 family members — and Snow, one of two surviving soldiers — have pledged to attend the tribute.

"For these individuals and families, this will be the first opportunity to receive the honorable discharges," he said. "For them to come back under these circumstances is remarkable."

The tribute will include a symposium at Seattle University on Thursday and the military-award ceremony and a free, catered public picnic on Saturday.

There will also be a memorial Mass for Pvt. Guglielmo Olivotto, the POW who was lynched.



JACK HARDMAN
Samuel Snow at his home in Leesburg, Fla. Snow, one of 28 black Fort Lawton soldiers convicted in an unjust trial, will return to Seattle for a public tribute and an honorable discharge.

Hamann, who did extensive reporting on the case, believes Olivotto was most likely lynched by a white

Army soldier jealous of the Italian POWs because they were allowed to drink alcohol and date local girls.

Deborah Ford, 62, daughter of William Jones, who died in 1992, said the honor is bittersweet.

“I’m appreciative that they are hosting an event,” said Ford, who will fly out from Decatur, Ill., with at least three other family members. “But I am sorry that my father is not here to witness the process of clarifying the injustice.”



Jack Hamann wrote a book and did extensive reporting on the case.

King County Executive Ron Sims, whose staffers helped organize the tribute, said he is looking forward to meeting Snow and the soldiers’ families.

“When they left, they left bitter and angry and feeling they weren’t treated fairly. We’re going to welcome them back and celebrate their service to the country,” said Sims. “I think people are just going to say thank you.”

Staff reporter Sonia Krishnan contributed to this report.

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