

## Nicole Brodeur Old wrong in need of healing



Slowly but surely, a 64-year-old wrong is being righted.

Last fall, the U.S. Army overturned the convictions of 28 black soldiers charged in the August 1944 lynching of an Italian soldier, a prisoner of war, in a riot at Seattle's Fort Lawton. The Army agreed to compensate the soldiers for the back pay they were denied while they spent 15 months in prison.

Last December, Samuel Snow, one of the two surviving soldiers, got his check: \$725.

Another injustice for a person who missed out on the GI Bill that could have sent him to college, and on veterans' benefits that would have helped him buy a house and get medical care.

Last week, Congressman Jim McDermott got legislation tucked into the Department of Defense authorization bill that would pay Snow and the families of the other soldiers interest on that back pay — an average of \$80,000 each.

The bill is expected to be approved this week.

And yet, what the soldiers and their families want more than money in their pockets is a load off their souls, a cleared name and an apology.

"The money matters, but none of them asked for it," said Jack Hamann, the Seattle author of "On American Soil," the 2005 book that chronicled the events of that violent August night, as well as the crooked court-martial.

The Army did its part; now Seattle will get a chance to say it's sorry.

King County Executive Ron Sims is behind a series of July events that will honor the two former soldiers and their late comrades.

Tentative plans include a Catholic Mass in honor of the lynching victim, Pvt. Guglielmo Olivotto, at Seattle University; a formal ceremony in Discovery Park followed by a public picnic; and a spot in the annual Seafair Parade.

McDermott hopes the events have the same effect as a ceremony held January in Milwaukee, where military honors were carried out at the late soldier Booker Townsell's grave.

"It was a heart-stopping moment," said McDermott, who attended. "Because for 40 or 50 years, we had a blot on this family. And if you think about what these soldiers lost. ... In spite of that handicap, they went back and were much bigger people than we were. Much bigger."

Lashell Drake, Townsell's granddaughter, called such ceremonies "an imperative part of the healing process."

"This is needed," she said, "especially where it happened."

Sims compared it to the restitution given to Japanese Americans sent to internment camps during World War II. On Sunday, the UW awarded degrees to a group of former students who had been imprisoned.

"To live knowing you were dishonorably discharged for something you did not do ... These people did not desert the Army, but the Army deserted them," Sims said.

Sims imagines Snow, his comrade Roy Montgomery and the families of the late soldiers riding in the Seafair Parade to applause and salutes.

"It will be this community saying, 'That's not us, and you are honorable people.'

"In the Baptist tradition, we want to heal a wounded soul."

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