

Nicole Brodeur
**Renewing a
 mother's plea**



In 1944, a Chicago woman named Sadie Hughes wrote a letter to President Roosevelt on behalf of her son, Robert Sanders.

Earlier that year, Robert had been convicted of rioting while stationed at the Army barracks at Fort Lawton here in Seattle. During the riot, an Italian soldier named Guglielmo Olivotto was lynched. When it ended, 43 American soldiers — all of them black — faced life in prison for rioting; three faced the gallows for murder.

Robert Sanders told his mother he was innocent.

"My boy hasn't never told me a lie," Hughes wrote. "I have always taught him that there isn't anything too bad to tell me. For when he is in trouble, I am, too, and he must always let me know the truth about everything.

"For it is only he and I; I am all he have to stand by him."

President Roosevelt never responded.

It was that mother's plea for help that moved another mother to write to a man in power on behalf of her son.

Last January, Julianna M. Hamann, 75, wrote to U.S. Rep. Duncan Hunter, a Republican from San Diego, asking him to sponsor a bill that would re-examine the convictions of Robert Sanders and his fellow soldiers.

Hamann included a copy of "On American Soil: How Justice Became a Casualty of World War II," a book that chronicled the Fort Lawton incident. It was written by Hamann's son, Jack, a former CNN correspondent who lives in Queen Anne.

"It was a mother aching for another mother who was no longer alive," she told me. "Sadie Hughes was never able to get any satisfaction from the president."

Hamann got something, though, from Hunter.

Last week, Hunter — urged by Rep. Jim McDermott, D-Seattle — agreed to review the 1944 case, in which all of the accused soldiers were court-martialed and dishonorably discharged.

"Justice delayed is no longer denied," McDermott said.

The bill, which McDermott introduced last year, asks that the Secretary of the Army review the Fort Lawton verdicts and correct individual military records as necessary. Back pay and benefits might also be possible, but only if surviving soldiers or their families appeal.

So how did Julianna Hamann jump-start the bill? She wrote to Hunter as a constituent; she has lived in the 52nd District of California for more than 52 years and knew Hunter is chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, where the bill was languishing.

Sponsor the bill, Hamann chided Hunter. And if you can make time to read Sadie Hughes' letter to Roosevelt, she wrote, "You will weep unashamedly."

Initially, Hamann didn't tell her son that she was lobbying her local congressman on his behalf. "I felt later that I might be interfering. He's over 50; he's not a child."

When Jack learned of his mother's actions, he was grateful. As a Democrat living in Seattle, he doesn't have her kind of access to Hunter, or a mother's way with words.

"If I can't help Sadie Hughes," she said, "at least I am helping my son."

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Her mom would do the very same.