

Justice delivered, 64 years later

By GUY TRIDGELL
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MATTESON — Given every reason to harbor anger and contempt, Roy Montgomery instead accepted an apology from the U.S. Army with a smile Thursday.

In his daughter's Matteson living room, Montgomery also received his military back pay, plus interest, in two checks totaling \$42,254.

Both the checks and the heartfelt expression of remorse were delivered in person by Assistant Army Secretary Ronald James, who flew in from Washington, D.C.

"This is the Army's honor," said James, handing the checks and extending his hand to Montgomery. "It is really important for the Army to do the right thing."

But for Montgomery, 87, of Park Forest, the gesture was more about money and an admission the Army mistreated him. It meant that 64 years after he was wrongfully convicted in the largest court martial of World War II, the old soldier could put the episode behind him.

"This is a great satisfaction," Montgomery said. "Now I can forget about the whole thing. That's all I ever wanted to do."

He will have a lot to forget.

A native of the South, Montgomery was stationed in Fort Lawton in Seattle during the war's final days in 1944. On Montgomery's last night in camp, a riot broke out, resulting in the death of an Italian prisoner of war.

Of the 43 men charged in connection with the death, 28 were convicted following a monthlong trial in which they were defended by just two lawyers. All of the soldiers found guilty were black, fueling suspicions of a racist cover-up.

Montgomery served a year in jail before eventually moving to the Chicago area.

Today, he is the last known survivor of the Fort Lawton 28.

The case against him and the other soldiers began to crack in recent years with new allegations of suppressed evidence that pinned the murder on a white military police officer who has since died. The Army Board of Review overturned the convictions last year.

James said the men were denied justice by the country they were assigned to serve and protect.



Assistant Army Secretary Ronald James presents a check to World War II veteran Roy Montgomery as compensation for a wrongful conviction in connection with the 1944 death of an Italian POW in Fort Lawton, Wash.

(Joseph P. Meier/SouthtownStar)

"They were fighting for fundamental concepts, like fair trials and due process. They didn't receive any of that," he said. "It is a black mark on our history."

The Army is in the process of awarding compensation to the families of the soldiers found guilty.

"We'll be lucky if we can find half of them," James said. "I hope I am wrong, but I don't think we will ever be able to say, 'Mission accomplished.'"

Montgomery, who was profiled Aug. 17 in the SouthtownStar, initially was denied his application for his share. The red tape started to unravel after his story appeared.

"I never thought this day would happen," Montgomery's daughter, Lynda Gill, said as she snapped photos, beaming at her father. "You can only imagine all of the other stories that are out there."

James said providing the Fort Lawton families some peace is gratifying. But he also acknowledged the duty comes with much sadness.

"The Army has provided incredible opportunities for African-Americans, but we dropped the ball," he said. "We ignored our own values."

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