

Park Forest veteran vindicated 60 years later

By GUY TRIDGELL
Southtown Star Staff Writer

PARK FOREST — Roy Montgomery was taking down his laundry from a clothesline when he first heard the commotion.

He was just 23, fresh from Army basic training and stationed at Fort Lawton in Seattle. The next day, he would be sent to New Guinea as part of a crew loading and unloading ships.

Dusk had set in when a soldier rushed into Montgomery's barracks with the news that an Italian prisoner of war punched out a black serviceman. Reinforcements were needed. A fight was brewing.

Montgomery ran from his quarters and into chaos.

Hundreds of men were throwing punches and swinging sticks. Others were running for cover or trying to keep the peace.

"It was a free-for-all," Montgomery recalled recently from his Park Forest home at the Victory Centre for senior citizens. "It was out of control."

The rioting lasted for almost an hour. When it was over, one of the POWs, Guglielmo Olivotto, was found hanged.

The date was Aug. 14, 1944.

What followed in the weeks afterwards is regarded as one of the greatest injustices in American military history.

Forty-three men were charged in connection with Olivotto's death. Twenty-eight of them were convicted.

All of them were black.

Stories of a coverup and a racist judicial system that framed the black soldiers long hovered around the Fort Lawton case.

But only in the last year have apologies been made and convictions overturned.

For the men charged in the incident, the attempts at righting the wrongs are coming too late. All of them are dead - except for one.

That soldier is Roy Montgomery.

'They locked us up the next day'

Tension at Fort Lawton had been building for weeks.



Roy Montgomery, of Park Forest, is the sole survivor from a group of soldiers wrongly convicted in the death of an Italian prisoner of war in Seattle more than 60 years ago. (Joseph P. Meier/SouthtownStar)

During the last months of World War II, the base served as a POW camp for 200 Italians who had surrendered in North Africa. Many of them were Nazi sympathizers.

The Americans at the camp hated them.

But the Army, with war crimes trials against the Germans looming, was sensitive to the treatment of POWs, strictly following the rules of the Geneva Convention. At Fort Lawton, the Army went to great lengths to accommodate the Italians.

Montgomery said the POWs could go off base to the beach and to dances, where they could woo lonely American girls, infuriating the white soldiers. The Italians also were allowed to frequent the canteen as much as they wanted, angering the black soldiers who had no such sweeping privileges.

"It was jealousy," Montgomery said. "They could go to town and have a picnic. We had to be soldiers."

The flashpoint occurred when a gang of drunken Italians bumped into a black soldier who also was drinking that night. Words were exchanged. Fists flew.

The black soldier was beaten to a pulp. The rest of the blacks at the camp jumped in, seeking revenge.

Montgomery, conditioned to protect his fellow soldiers against the enemy, joined the fight without hesitation.

“It was already on in full force by the time I got there,” he said. “It was a riot.”

Military police let the melee rage for 40 minutes without breaking it up.

The following morning, hours after calm was restored, the roundup of dozens of black soldiers began.

“They locked us up the next day,” Montgomery said. “I didn’t know what had happened.”



Roy Montgomery, of Park Forest, talks about the Army exonerating him and a group of soldiers convicted in the death of an Italian prisoner of war in Seattle more than 60 years ago.
(Joseph P. Meier/SouthtownStar)

He later learned that while the POWs and the blacks scuffled, Olivotto, the smallest in his group, was driven to the camp’s obstacle course. His head was slid into a noose, his body left swinging on a guide wire attached to a tree.

The scales of justice were beginning to tilt.

Swift and severe punishment

Of the 43 men charged with rioting, three also were accused of murder. The collection represented the largest court-martial proceeding of the war.

According to “On American Soil,” a book examining the Fort Lawton case by Seattle author Jack Hamann, the trial was flawed from the beginning.

Army investigators never collected fingerprints or made plaster casts of the footprints below Olivotto’s body.

The murder weapon, a rope, was lost.

Two lawyers were appointed to represent all of the men. They were given 10 days to prepare a defense.

Five of the men turned state’s evidence, providing testimony in exchange for immunity. Some of the men they fingered as participants would later be shown to be in a different part of the camp when the riot took place.

On Dec. 17, four weeks after the trial began, 28 men were convicted.

The punishments were swift and severe. Most of the men served hard time. Nearly all of them were dishonorably discharged.

Convicted of first-degree rioting, Montgomery was sent to Turlock, Calif., to an Army prison that once served as a Japanese-American internment camp.

He was released in 1947.

A productive life despite it all

Montgomery returned to his native Mississippi, learned to make cabinets and moved to the South Side, where he enjoyed a productive life building caskets. He settled in the south suburbs about 15 years ago.

A grandson, Kendall Gill, went on to fame playing basketball with the University of Illinois and the NBA.

Montgomery was an exception.

Many of the convicted men, out of prison with a smudge on their records, struggled. Several of them died young.

Montgomery’s daughter, Lynda Gill, of Matteson, said she grew up with a vague understanding that her dad was involved in something bad.

“I knew something happened, but I didn’t know everything,” she said. “I knew he was in jail for a riot. I didn’t realize there was a murder.”

Some old records she found in an attic as a girl made her even more curious.

“One thing about the older black experience, they don’t tell you a whole lot,” Gill said. “There were still a lot of gaps in the story.”

Hamann’s book, released in 2005, retraced the investigation and the missteps taken by Army prosecutors, filling in the gaps for the families of the “Fort Lawton 28.”

“There was no constituency for them,” Hamann said. “It was the same thing that was going on in America during that era. People were willing to sweep up black people without any kind of evidence.”

In previously classified documents from the trial, Hamann found that the lead prosecutor, Lt. Col. Leon Jaworski, a sharp, young lawyer who later gained fame as a Watergate prosecutor, sat on a separate report prepared by another investigator at the request of the White House and the Pentagon.

The report pinned Olivotto’s death on Clyde Lomax, a white military police officer from Louisiana with a checkered service history and a deep hatred for blacks. He died in 1999.

“He was the only one with the means, the motive and the opportunity to do this,” Hamann said.

‘I’m sick of it’

Under pressure from Congress after the release of Hamann’s book, the Army overturned the convictions on Oct. 26.

Apologies were issued to the families at a July 27 ceremony in Seattle.

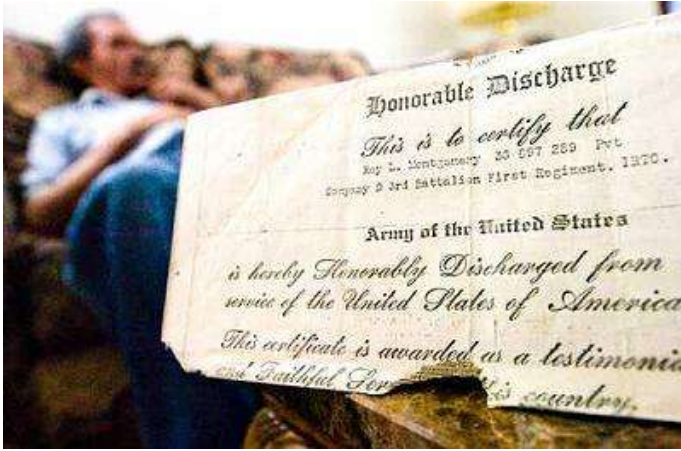
Montgomery chose not attend.

“I’m sick of it,” he said.

In January, he applied for back pay due from the Army - a check that would have totaled about \$700. The application was

rejected, with the Army contending it did not have Montgomery's complete service records. He is appealing the decision.

Meanwhile, a Seattle congressman is pushing for the families of the Fort Lawton men to receive back pay, plus interest and cost-of-living increases. The individual payments could run into the tens of thousands of dollars.



Roy Montgomery's papers showing his honorable discharge from the Army. The Park Forest man is the sole survivor of a group of soldiers recently exonerated in the death more than 60 years ago of an Italian prisoner of war in Seattle.

(Joseph P. Meier/SouthtownStar)

"I think some acknowledgment of what happened is warranted," Montgomery's daughter said. "It is a very valuable part of American history. People should know about this. But my thing is, I just want him to be happy."

Whatever happens in Congress, Montgomery has put Fort Lawton behind him. He emerged from one of the darkest chapters of World War II bruised, but he refuses to let the incident define him.

At the time of the riot, he was tending to his laundry, just another young black man ready for his turn to get screwed over by the establishment.

"I was from the old Jim Crow stuff," he said. "I was used to it."

The Roy Montgomery of today, an 87-year-old man with a lifetime of experience behind him, looks at Fort Lawton in a different light these days.

Was he treated fairly?

His answer is as clear as his memory of the night when one man lost his life and his changed forever 64 years ago last week.

"No."

Now there are people who believe him.

Guy Tridgell can be reached at gtridgell@southtownstar.com or (708)633-5970.