

With justice comes peace for ex-soldier

For more than half a century, Samuel Snow kept his discharge from the Army a secret. Then came exoneration - and relief.

BY JOHN BARRY

St. Petersburg Times staff writer

LEESBURG - Eighty-three-year-old Samuel Snow wants a military funeral one day. He'd like an honor guard with spit-shined shoes and brass buttons, a three-volley gun salute, taps on the bugle, folded Stars and Stripes solemnly presented to his wife, Margaret.

Only now can he have those things. Sixty-three years ago, the Army threw Pvt. Samuel Snow in prison. Then it drummed him out of the service in disgrace. He was just 19.

Resting on the sofa in his little ranch house, Snow tries to explain how it felt to come home after a year behind bars. He speaks distantly, almost impersonally. His father helped him burn his dishonorable discharge papers. "I didn't want anyone to see them," he says. "No one wants to be a failure." He found work as a church janitor.

But he adopted a mantra: "Move forward." He married, sent three children to college, taught Sunday school, served two terms as president of his American Legion post. All the while, living in Leesburg, a quiet town with more citrus trees and cattle than people, he kept his secret.

On Oct. 26, the Army admitted that in 1944 it railroaded Pvt. Samuel Snow and 27 other black soldiers - defendants in the largest Army courts-martial of World War II.

He has his good name back. He has back pay coming. Only one thing he hasn't gotten:
An apology.

Snow would still be keeping his secret if a TV reporter in Seattle hadn't stumbled across a mysterious grave site in 1987.

Jack Hamann was covering the dullest of assignments - an expansion project at a sewage treatment plant. He took a walk through a nearby military cemetery. He noticed an odd memorial in the weeds: a weathered Roman column, inscribed with a name and a date, in Italian: Guglielmo Olivotto, 14 Agosto 1944.

Who was this lone Italian soldier in a U.S. Army cemetery? Hamann made a note to look up the name later.

He had exhumed the strangest of stories. Pvt. Guglielmo Olivotto had been an Italian prisoner of war at a Seattle camp called Fort Lawton. He was found lynched after a riot broke out between Italian POWs and black GIs living in the same camp. Forty-three black soldiers were prosecuted. Three were convicted of first-degree murder. Twenty-five were convicted of rioting.

Two things about the court-martial struck Hamann. One was the lynching. Hamann had never heard of blacks lynching anybody. Blacks didn't lynch; they got lynched. The other was the name of the prosecutor: Leon

Jaworski. Could this be the same Leon Jaworski who famously prosecuted Watergate?

He found a surviving black GI in Texas who insisted they had all been innocent. He produced a two-part TV report. Then he shelved his notes for 15 years.

Samuel Snow's youngest son, Ray, never could figure out his father. He

was the hardest-working man Ray had ever known. He worked "can't-see to can't-see," Ray says, meaning Dad left for work in the dark and came home in the dark. He built their first home with his own hands, logged the trees himself. But Dad never seemed to get anywhere. He preached ambition, insisted on good grades and college. But he always worked small, odd jobs - sometimes three at a time. Turned



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Samuel Snow, now 83, burned his dishonorable discharge papers. "I didn't want anyone to see them," he says. "No one wants to be a failure."

down a better job at Florida Telephone for no reason.

Dad was living a lie. He was ambitious. He had gone into the Army hoping to be a mechanic. He had hoped to go to school on the GI Bill of Rights. He had yearned for more than janitorial work. But he couldn't risk an employer checking into his background. He couldn't even tell his wife or his kids.

"When all this began to surface," Ray says, "I understood why."

In 2002, Jack Hamann took up his notes again. He and his wife, Leslie, wanted a project to do together. They visited the National Archives in College Park, Md., and dug through boxes of court documents. After a week's search, Leslie found something called the Cooke Report.

It turned out the Army had conducted a separate, confidential investigation of the evidence against the black soldiers. It was led by Brigadier Gen. Elliott Cooke and included interrogations of 160 officers and suspects.

Cooke concluded that the case was a sham. It lacked any physical evidence. The crime scene - an obstacle course where the Italian soldier had been found hanging from a cable - had been trampled over. Even the barracks where the fighting occurred had been repainted. The whole case was based on the

testimony of two POWs and four black soldiers, whom Cooke believed had scores to settle.

Cooke also found evidence that white MPs had goaded the blacks into fighting the Italians. No white soldiers had been charged. Cooke speculated that one of the MPs actually could have done the lynching.

The prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, had the report. But he succeeded in blocking the defense - two lawyers for 43 defendants - from seeing it.

No one knows why. Hamann thinks the Roosevelt administration wanted to show the world how it strictly honored the Geneva Conventions even if Japan and Germany did not. Most of the convicted soldiers never served their full sentences - which had ranged from one to 15 years. Some even went back into the Army.

All this became a book by Hamann in 2005: *On American Soil*. The book prompted a Seattle congressman, Jim McDermott, to seek a review of the case by the Army.

That year, Samuel Snow got a call at home. A group in Seattle wanted him to come to Fort Lawton and talk about what happened in 1944.

His secret was out.

He'd go back and tell what happened, Snow says, but he wouldn't condemn anyone. What he felt most was a release.

Snow describes it, again, almost

distantly: "I thought, 'I was done with something I'd carried my whole life.'"

Pvt. Snow literally never knew what hit him.

He had only just completed training in Louisiana when he was transferred to Fort Lawton. As soon as he got there, he learned he would be shipped out to New Guinea. He was given 15 days leave. He went home to Leesburg.

He got back to Fort Lawton only a couple of days before departure to New Guinea. The way he tells it, he was clueless about tensions in the camp between black GIs and Italian POWs.

The Italians were prisoners in name only. They weren't locked up; they got passes to go to town; they could drink; they even socialized with American women.

The black soldiers lived in a segregated barracks, near the POW quarters. Some of them felt just one cut above the prisoners in stature.

On the evening before the New Guinea departure, Snow was packing. A fight had started outside the barracks between a few black GIs and Italians. He and others heard a whistle blow, which usually meant to fall out in front of the barracks.

Snow walked out into a mob scene. Almost immediately, he was knocked unconscious by a blow to his head - either from a rock or a club.

A riot exploded. Blacks and Italians fought in the dark with rocks, axes and knives. Twenty-six Italians were hospitalized. Guglielmo Olivotto, who had leaped out a barracks window to escape, was found lynched.

Snow woke up in a hospital bed the next day. He was told the FBI wanted to talk to him. Instead of New Guinea, he ended up in a stockade.

Almost all are now dead: prosecutor Jaworski, the military judges, the white MP who may have lynched the Italian. Snow is one of two of the GIs known to still be alive. The other soldier, Roy L. Montgomery, is in poor health in Chicago.

Snow himself is retired and diabetic. His wife practically padlocks the cookie jar. Two of his three children have passed away. He putters



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Neither his wife Margaret Snow nor their son Ray knew about Samuel Snow's past until recently. A TV reporter's work led to truth.

around the garage and keeps busy at St. Stephen African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The full story of their father's past has left the Snow family in awe. Son Ray teaches fourth grade. When he talks to his students about perseverance, no excuses, he offers his father as an example.

"Dad always told me, 'You can be better than I am.'"

The family isn't expecting an apology. The Army only said he was wrongly convicted, not that he was innocent. If the Army ever starts apologizing to black servicemen mistreated during World War II, Snow will have to wait in a long line, the family says.

What the Snows finally have is the real story.

"It's the great American story," Ray says. "Dad worked hard. Pulled himself up. Made a better life for his children.

"That's the American story. It just wasn't supposed to be for him.

In the know



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Tampa Bay beats the division leaders for its first victory on the road this season. Johan Holmberg, above, makes 40 saves and Shane O'Brien scores twice. Sports, 1C

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Retailers rush to get Aqua Dots off the shelves after it was discovered that legging parts of the toy had caused children to get into trouble. Times 2, 4A

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Wall Street took a modest dip on Thursday, with investors ending recent losses. And while experts predict a pullback, they say it will likely be short-lived. Business, 1B

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The Senate confirmed the appointment of Michael Mukasey as the new director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Politics, 1A

Artist's journey inspires pride

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IN FLORIDIAN

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The Army admitted it was wrong. Now, he's exonerated.



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Rays look on the sunny side



Senat reject Bush veto

Billions in water projects will proceed despite the objection from the president.

BY WELI MILLER AND CHRIS FITZMAURICE

WASHINGTON — Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) says he will vote to override President George W. Bush's veto of a bill to speed up water projects. The bill would allow the federal government to spend \$1.5 billion on water projects in 10 states. The Senate must pass the bill by a two-thirds vote to override the president's veto. The House has already passed the bill. The Senate vote is expected to take place on Thursday.