Triple Nickles -- 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion

The 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion, nicknamed the "Triple Nickles" (using the English spelling of 'nickel'), was a World War II African American unit of the U.S. Army stationed in Pendleton in 1945. The battalion, first organized in November 1943 at Fort Benning, Georgia, was made up of voluntary transfers from other organizations. Created when the U.S. military was segregated by race, the 555th was the only African American parachute unit.

The distinctive insignia for the 555th was a white parachute with a black panther crouching on top. According to Lt. Col. (ret.) John Cannon, "We were the first Black Panthers because that was our emblem, the black panther."

At Fort Benning, the unit's black officers and sergeants were not welcomed in the base and noncomissioned officers' clubs. After demonstrating that they were capable paratroopers, the Triple Nickles trained, worked, and ate together with some degree of solidarity with their white counterparts. Off-base, they continued to encounter discrimination, segregation, and police abuse.

The company transferred to Camp Mackall, North Carolina, in July 1944 to train for duty in Europe. By April 1945, however, the German armies were collapsing and the unit made a permanent change of station to the army air base at Pendleton. Their mission was to recover and dispose of Japanese balloon bombs and to suppress the forest fires the bombs started. The "Fire-Fly Project," as it was called, was experimental and a tightly guarded secret.

The 555th continued to experience racism in Oregon. The base commander made it clear that he disliked having an all-black unit, and it was reported that only two Pendleton bars and one Chinese restaurant would serve unit members. The unit spent most of its time on base, learning how to disarm bombs, use a new type of parachute, fight forest fires, and survive in remote forested areas.

A detachment of the 555th went to Chico, California, where it responded on July 14, 1945, to the unit's first fire call to suppress a blaze on the Klamath National Forest. Through the rest of the season that year, the unit fought fires in Oregon, California, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Canada. They located fire bombs, exploding some and retrieving others for intelligence personnel. They also participated in a training mission for navy pilots, staged a Fourth of July demonstration jump, and attended the Pendleton Round-Up.

By the end of the 1945 fire season, the 555th had participated in thirty-six fire missions with more than 1,200 individual jumps. PFC Malvin L. Brown of Narbreth, Pennsylvania, was killed when he landed in a tall tree and fell 150 feet.

The battalion was assigned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in October 1945 and became an integral part of the 82d Airborne Division. On September 11, 2008, three former Triple Nickles were honored in a ceremony at the Oregon National Guard's Pendleton Aviation Support Facility. The conference room at the facility was dedicated and named for the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion.

Written by Warren Aney

Further Reading:

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