

1st black armored unit in combat

Belated recognition of heroic 761st

by Maj. (ret.) Robert E. Greene

At 11 o'clock this morning, surviving members of the 761st Tank Battalion will assemble at Summerall Field, Ft. Myer, to receive the Presidential Unit Citation. The award belatedly recognizes their heroic accomplishments during World War II.

The black battalion was activated April 1, 1942, and received early training at Camp (now Fort) Hood, Texas. Its men were praised for their performance by Second Army commander Lt. Gen. Ben Lear and Lt. Gen. Lesley J. McNair.

Unit morale was high. Its members were receptive to the remarks of Brig. Gen. Ernest J. Dawley, who addressed them on three occasions. One occasion he told them that some things will happen in combat for which there will be no explanation but which must be laid to the "fog of war." He concluded, "When you get in there, put in

an extra round of ammunition and fire it for General Dawley."

When the 761st entered combat in Europe, one of its tanks was named "The Fog of War." Several rounds were put into it and fired for Gen. Dawley.

The 761st was the first black armored unit to be committed to combat. It was landed at Omaha Beach Oct. 10, 1944, after brief garrison duty in England. The unit had six white and 30 black officers and 676 black enlisted men.

Military historian U.S. Lee has said, "The Negro armored units, by virtue of their use in task forces and the attachment of their companies and platoons to infantry, had closer continuing contacts with the main stream of battle than most other small supporting black units."

Gen. George S. Patton Jr. spoke to the men of the 761st shortly after their arrival in France. "Men, you are the first Negro tankers to ever fight in the American Army. I

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would have never asked for you if you were not good. I have nothing but the best in my Army. I don't care what color you are... Everyone has their eyes on you and is expecting great things from you. Most of all, your race is looking forward to you. Don't let them down; don't let me down."

The unit spent 183 days in action. They fought in Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Germany and Austria as well as in France. Stars and Stripes, Nov. 14, 1944, reported on some of the action in which the men of the 761st participated.

"NEGRO TANKERS CUT DEEP INTO GERMAN LINES

"With U.S. Third Army Forces east of Chateau-Silins, Nov. 13—Negro tank forces, making their combat debut with Gen. Patton's troops sweeping northward across the Seille River and toward the Siegfried defenses, have figured in the successful U. S. breakthrough launched in this sector.

"Early last Wednesday (Nov. 8) two companies of a Negro tank battalion started fighting in the vicinity of Bezange and Moncourt as H-hour of the first round of the offensive struck.

"But the main and sternest mission of the tankers began early Thursday morning when the unit spear-headed an important task force whose objective lay deep in German-held territory...

"Crossing the rain-swollen Seille, just north of the recently taken town of Myonvic, the column was subjected to enemy artillery emplaced on the hills northeast of the river. Shellbursts threw up huge geysers all around the bridge.

"At the little village of Salival it was stopped again by German artillery ranged in on the road. Tanks deployed in and around the little cluster of buildings housing German troops, rooting them out with direct HE fire while dough-boys mopped up.

"But the battle for the town of Morville-les-Vic was the real testing of the tankers. Furious shelling met them at the crossroads, six hundred yards from the town. Tank-infantry teams moved down on the town from three directions and the battle was joined at once.

"Within ninety minutes of the start of the push, Nazi prisoners were being sent rearwards by the first Negro tank troops ever committed to combat operations.

"...tankers suffered their heaviest losses in a running three-hour fight with German AT guns concealed in woods capping a high hill northeast of Morville."

Continuous interest in the 761st led me to the beautiful Lorraine American Cemetery at St. Avold, France, in 1974. Within minutes, I was able to locate the grave of a member of the 761st Tank Battalion. Buried there was SSgt. Ruben Rivers, a native of Oklahoma who was awarded the Silver Star.

I believe that the award of the Presidential Unit Citation to the 761st will not only be a personal gratification to its surviving members but also is a testimony to their heroic accomplishments during World War II. I also believe that this occasion will serve as a further tribute to Rivers and his fellow Americans who rest beside him in St. Avold, France that their personal sacrifice for their country was not in vain.

NOTE: Major Greene, author of *Black Defenders of America 1775-1973. A Reference and Pictorial History*, is an instructor of history at the Northern Virginia Community College.

Alexander Honor's Black WWII Tank Unit

Army Secretary Clifford Alexander, Jr., the first Black to serve as Army secretary, attached a long-delayed presidential unit citation streamer on the colors of the first Black tank battalion to fight in World War II, during ceremonies last week.

Alexander told several hundred veterans of the 761st "Black Panther" Tank Battalion and their relatives that the belated recognition of the unit's battle record "portends great things for the future in an Army in which we must recognize talent regardless of color, regardless of sex."

The blue and white streamer was presented to the unit in a full military honors ceremony at Fort Myer, Va., after a three-decade effort to win recognition for its six months of non-stop combat toward the end of World War Two. The battalion battled its way from France across Belgium and Germany, spearheading the Allied drive and inflicting thousands of casualties on the Nazi army.

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