



MESSAGE FROM THE VEEP



The "Triple Nickles"

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GOVERNMENT secret operations have been quite prominent in the news lately, however government secret operations are not new. I would like to share with you a secret operation from World War II that involved a Japanese operation and an all-Black elite military organization. **The 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion** was nicknamed the "**Triple Nickles**" because of its numerical designation and the selection of 17 of the original 20-member "**colored test platoon**" from the **92nd Infantry (Buffalo) Division**. Hence, the origin of the term **Buffalo Nickles**; *the spelling derives from old English*. Three buffalo nickles joined in a triangle or pyramid is the identifying symbol.



Many years before "Black Pride" became a popular slogan, a small group of Black American soldiers gave life and meaning to those words. Born within an army that had traditionally relegated Blacks to menial jobs and programmed them for failure, the **555th Parachute Infantry Battalion**, or "**Triple Nickles**," succeeded in becoming the *nation's first All-Black parachute infantry test platoon, company, and battalion*.

In the frosty Georgia winter of 1943-44, soldiers and officer candidates traveling to and from **Fort Benning** often saw the sky filled with white parachutes. Most of them assumed that the faces beneath the chutes were also white. The black soldiers they knew drove their trucks, waited on them in mess halls, or hauled their ammunition; they rode in the back of the bus to and from Columbus; they gathered at their own separate clubs on the fort.

Some of the faces beneath those chutes, however, were black. As such they were also pioneers, blazing new trails for

countless black soldiers to follow. It wasn't easy. A proud black lieutenant, sergeant, or private, with polished boots and paratrooper wings, still had to use the "colored" toilets and drinking fountains in the rail-road stations, sit in segregated sections of theatres, and go out of his way to avoid confrontations with racist police.

Black officers continued to find post officers' club closed to them. But they endured, and proved themselves as airborne troopers--"*as fine a group of soldiers as I have ever seen*," in the words of the notoriously fussy **General Ben Lear**.

These Black pioneers were exceptional men, specially selected for the task. They were former university students and professional athletes, top-notch and veteran noncoms. A major element in their success was that, unlike other Black infantry units officered by Whites, they were entirely Black, from commanding officer down to the newest private.



Though combat-ready and alerted for European duty in late 1944, the changing tides of the war resulted in a different assignment--jumping over the blazing forests of the American Northwest searching for Japanese balloon bombs, a job requiring exact skills and special courage. In this unusual role, the 555th also confronted a new dimension in warfare involving the use of biological agents that could destroy woodlands and crops, but not humans. These men soon became known as the "**Smoke Jumpers**".

In early 1945 the "**Triple Nickles**" received secret orders for a permanent change of

station. They were sent to **Pendleton, Oregon** and assigned to the **9th Services Command**, trained by the **U.S. Forest Service**, and became history's first military smoke jumpers. There were two reasons for this assignment, the first being that major commanders in Europe were leery of having highly trained colored paratroopers coming into contact with racist white elements of the time. Second, the Japanese were at the time floating incendiary devices attached to balloons

across the Pacific Ocean, taking advantage of the jet stream's



easterly flow, in an attempt to start forest fires in the northwestern United States.

Fire balloons or balloon bombs were hot air balloons with one 15 kilogram antipersonnel bomb and two incendiary devices attached. They were launched by Japan during World War II to wreak havoc on American cities, forests and farmlands. They were called the **Fu-Go Weapon**, supposedly a revenge bomb for the **1942 Doolittle Raids on Tokyo**.

The bombs actually caused little damage, but their potential for destruction and fires was awesome, not to mention their psychological effect on the American people. U.S. strategy was to not let Japan know of the balloon bombs' effectiveness. Cooperating for national security reasons, the press showed great restraint in not publishing balloon bomb incidents.

The Forest Service asked the military for help and the "Triple Nickle" was ready, willing and able. The battalion answered some 36 fire calls with more than 1,200 individual jumps during the summer of 1945, operating from **Pendleton** and **Chico,**

Calif. The operation covered all of the northwestern states including **Montana**. During fire operations the battalion suffered numerous injuries but only one fatality. **Malvin L. Brown**, a medic assigned to the battalion's headquarters company, died on August 6, 1945 after falling during a letdown from a tree in the **Siskiyou National Forest** near **Roseburg, Ore**. His death is the first recorded smoke jumper fatality during a fire jump.

Soon after returning to **Camp Mackall** in October 1945, the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was transferred to **Fort Bragg, North Carolina**, its home for the next two years. During this period the unit was attached to the elite **82nd Airborne Division**. When the battalion was inactivated on 15 December 1947, most of its personnel were reassigned to the division's organic **3rd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment**.

On 22 August 1950 the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was disbanded. Many of its former members later fought in the **Korean War**, in other units. **First Lieutenant Harry Sutton**, one of the battalion's former officers, died leading a rearguard action during the **Hungnam Evacuation** and was decorated posthumously with the **Silver Star**.

We are all aware of the **Tuskegee Airmen** and the **Buffalo Soldiers** and their contribution to our country's great history; I take great pride in being associated with the **Montford Point Marines** and am humbled by and take pride in having walked in their shadow. The members of the original **555th Parachute Infantry Battalion** were no less heroes and trailblazers. It would be a travesty to let their deeds and legacy be lost to history.

*See the complete history of the 555th Parachute Infantry at TripleNickle.com.



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