The Triple Nickles

THE FIRST ALL-BLACK PARATROOP UNIT IN THE U.S. MILITARY, THE 555TH PARACHUTE BATTALION STOOD POISED TO SERVE IN WORLD WAR II—EVEN THOUGH THE ARMY WASN’T READY TO USE IT.

BY ELIZABETH HOOVER

ON SEPTEMBER 17, 1944, SOME 20,000 Allied paratroopers were dropped onto Dutch soil in Operation Market-Garden, an effort to seize key bridges in the Netherlands from the Nazis. Three months later parachute divisions played decisive roles in the Battle of the Bulge. World War II had been raging for five long years, and the U.S. military had become a formidable force. Yet the use of parachute units in combat was still something of a novelty; there were relatively few...
During the Depression. In need of a job, in 1940 he joined the Army. For two years he worked as a clerk in a reception center for African-Americans at Fort Benning, near Columbus. There he processed new recruits and assigned them the type of jobs available to black volunteers: loading and servicing vehicles, washing dishes or serving food in the mess hall, or being a supply clerk or a cook, but not heading to Europe or the Pacific with white soldiers to fight at the front lines. “In those days there were two armies—the army of the servants and the army of the combat soldiers,” he explains. On patrol the men were strictly segregated, with separate barracks, dining halls, and social clubs.

Morris, like other African-American enlistees, received no basic training (at the time, it was not Army policy to give basic training to black GI’s, but he scored high on his General Classification Test—an aptitude exam used by the Army for placement—and so was allowed to take an officer training course. He passed all but one in a series of qualifying tests to complete the officer’s course. At the end of 1943 he was assigned to guard duty at the parachute school at Fort Benning. He spent days listlessly guarding the calisthenics fields and jump towers with about 200 other men, all carrying empty rifles. “Heaven forbid they give black soldiers their rifles,” Morris says. To boost morale and prevent boredom, Morris decided to put what he’d learned in officer training to use and asked his white commander for permission to organize the guard into a company, with Morris as first sergeant (a senior rank for a noncommissioned officer). The commandant granted his request because, according to Morris, “it didn’t make any difference to him.” Morris turned the somnolent guard detail into a highly disciplined unit. The men woke up early to use the calisthenics field before the white soldiers arrived, and did “jumping drills” out of mock jump doors made of wood that stood on the training grounds. Although they weren’t given access to the jump towers, “they kind of got the idea that they were parachute students too,” Morris recalls.

At that time, Morris was unaware that plans were under way to create an all-black parachute unit. President Franklin D. Roosevelt wasn’t ready to integrate the Army, but he supported the gradual inclusion of African-Americans. By the fall of 1940 Adolf Hitler’s war machine had rolled through and devastated much of continental Europe, and his Luftwaffe had begun to mount massive air strikes on England. Were the United States to enter the fray, its tiny army of little more than 150,000 would be crushed. That September, Roosevelt signed into law the Selective Training and Service Act, the nation’s first peacetime draft. With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States entered the war.

The draft included racial quotas, and the military formed several all-black units to accommodate the draftees. These units were led by white officers; the 555th Parachute Battalion would be the first in which black soldiers served under African-American officers. In 1944 Roosevelt created an Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies, chaired by Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy. McCloy recommended the formation of an all-black parachute unit.

When Brig. Gen. Ridgley A. Gaither, the second commander of the Parachute School at Fort Benning, called First Sergeant Morris into his office, Morris was expecting to be reprimanded for the black test platoon after he’d spied the first sergeant directing the guard detail’s calisthenics, and liked what he saw: “I was as happy as you could imagine,” says Morris.

While Morris trained the enlisted men, Gaither began recruiting African-American commissioned officers, among them Lt. Bradley Biggs. Biggs, who grew up in Newark, New Jersey, had started out in his state’s National Guard, then joined the officer-training program for the Army. In his book *The Triple Nickle: America’s First All-Black Paratroop Unit*, Biggs describes his introduction to Morris at the “colored” barracks at Fort Benning and saying to Morris, “So here we stand, you, the first Negro enlisted man for the airborne forces, and me, the first officer.”

Their days began with three- to five-mile runs, followed by a seemingly endless battery of push-ups, jumping, wall scaling, rope climbing, and then more running. The trainees spent uncomfortable hours suspended in harnesses hung from the ceiling as they worked with their parachutes. The final stage of training included five jumps from an airplane. Morris says: “You don’t only remember your first jump, you remember all your jumps. You never get used to it. It was exciting every time.”

All but 3 of the 22 trainees earned their wings. Joe Murchison, who joined the Nickles in 1947, says: “We were trained by people who thought we wouldn’t succeed. At that time they believed that black people didn’t have the brains or the guts to jump out of a plane. We proved them wrong.”

The paratroopers, blacks as well as whites, considered themselves select units of the U.S. Army. They called other soldiers “legs” and lived by a creed all their own: “A parachutist is not merely a soldier who arrives by parachute to fight, but an elite shocktrooper and . . . his country expects him to march further and faster, to fight harder, to be more self-reliant, and to soldier better than any other soldier.” Solidari ty among the paratroopers led some black men and white men to “hang out together in officers’ clubs and noncommissioned officers’ clubs, but they still had to
contended with off-base racism. Biggs wrote that the men of the 555th did their best to avoid the “local Gestapo,” as he called the Columbus police force.

Morris recalls: “I was so proud and so happy that we were in a parachute company; we weren’t dishwashers, we weren’t supply clerks, we weren’t waiters. We were soldiers. We were paratroopers. But to the Army they were still different from the white parachutists. During the summer of 1944, having grown to a company of 11 officers and 165 enlisted, the Triple Nickles were being shipped to Camp Mackall, North Carolina. In their orders from the War Department, the phrase “555th Parachute Infantry Battalion” was accompanied by an asterisk, which designating them as “Negro Personnel.”

Their new post commander, Col. L. L. Hathaway, ran a strictly segregated base, with a divided theater and separate recreational centers. On June 6, 1944, the Allied forces crossed the English Channel and stormed the German defenses on the beaches of Normandy, France. Hundreds of American paratroopers dropped behind enemy lines in the mission called Operation Overlord, but none were from the 555th. The Allied troops would fight furiously for two months, breaking through the beachheads and liberating Paris in August of that year. The Battle of Normandy would go down as the biggest airborne invasion in history; the one that opened the door for the push into Germany. In December, while the Nickles awaited orders, American airborne units joined their allies to push back an offensive mounted by the Nazis in the Ardennes forest of Belgium and Luxembourg. By Christmas, the Nazis’ advance was stopped and the Allies would go on to win the Battle of the Bulge (named for the 65-mile deep, 10-to-25-mile-wide dent the German army had made in the Allied lines at the start of the offensive); the cost to the Allied forces would be 81,000 dead and wounded, including many paratroopers. The airborne divisions were in urgent need of replacements.

The Triple Nickles were, according to Biggs, “perhaps, one of the most elite handpicked companies in the army,” yet none of them would be sent to Europe or the Pacific. Instead, on May 5, 1945, they left for Pendleton Air Force Base in Oregon to become smoke jumpers and fight West Coast forest fires.

“It was disappointing,” Morris says. Pendleton stood on a barren plateau and was run by a meticulously hand command who made it clear he wasn’t interested in black paratroopers. The nearby town wasn’t much more accommodating. There were only two bars where the black soldiers could socialize. Morris, tallying the number of civilian African-Americans he saw in town, came up with eight, at most.

In early May 1945, the 555th was sent to Fort Bragg and in December 1947 became part of the 82nd Airborne Division commanded by Maj. Gen. James M. Gavin. Under Gavin, the Triple Nickles became the tremendously audacity to leap into the flames. Sometimes the men would spend nearly a week in the middle of the fire, cut off from civilization and relying on each other for everything: food, water, first aid. There were scores of injuries, mostly broken bones. Between July and September, 1945, the 555th completed some 1,200 jumps into 35 fires in five states and parts of Canada, but only lost one man, when he slipped from his harness while trying to lower himself from a tree. He fell 150 feet to his death on the rocks below.

For the Triple Nickles, a job that had started out as disadvantage became exciting, if perilous, and something to be proud of. And the men did get to do their part for the war in a top-secret mission called Operation Firefly. In the fall of 1944 the Japanese began launching balloons attached to hydrogen-filled balloons that were intended to ride the jet stream across the Pacific and then strike American soil. The plan turned out to be a dud. Of some 9,000 balloons released, fewer than a thousand reached the U.S. coast—yet the few balloons that made the full trip were indeed hazardous. In May 1945 one exploded near Bly, Oregon, killing a woman and five children, the only casualties from this massive effort. When they weren’t fighting fires, the Triple Nickles, who had been specially trained for the task, would respond to balloon sightings, locating the balloons and dismantling them.

While the nations celebrated the surrender of Japan on August 15, 1945, and the end of the war, the Triple Nickles battled a fire in Whitman Forest, Washington State. After the fire season the 555th was sent to Fort Bragg and in December 1947 became part of the 82nd Airborne Division commanded by Maj. Gen. James M. Gavin. Under Gavin, the Triple Nickles became the

WHAT’S BEHIND THE UNUSUAL NICKNAME?

Along with the obvious numerical origin of the nickname for the 555th Parachute Battalion, there is another with historic roots. The unit derived the name Triple Nickles from the 19th-century piece depicting the buffalo, which serves as a symbol of the 92nd Infantry Division, one of two all-black units to see combat in World War II. The 92nd, in turn, had adopted its symbol from the Buffalo Soldiers, the black cavalry divisions that fought the Plains Indians and explored the West in the late nineteenth century. The 555th’s unconventional spelling, nickel instead of nickel, was used to make the word visually similar to the word triple.
first black soldiers to be integrated into the Army, eight months before President Harry S. Truman’s July 1948 order desegregated the entire U.S. military. Gavin, who had led his troops through the Battle of the Bulge, and who, at age 37, had been the youngest division commander since the Civil War, wrote in his introduction to Biggs’s book: “Recalling my own experience with black troops, I knew the time had come for a change. . . . This was a serious problem and one not to be taken lightly, for our Army had been a two-colored Army for a long time, just as was our society.”

In 1947 the Triple Nickles became the first black soldiers to be integrated into the Army.

“He was a visionary officer,” says Murchison, adding that some of the Nickles suspected his loyalty to them cost him promotions. Gavin retired in 1958 at the rank of Lieutenant General.

Integration brought a radical shift to the Triple Nickles. It was the first time that some of the white soldiers had interacted with African-Americans who weren’t serving them food or loading their trucks. “It really opened their eyes,” says Morris. “They saw that we put our pants on one leg at a time, that we brushed our teeth the same way. They saw that we didn’t have tails.”

In the years to come, Murchison went on to train the first African-American paratroopers to see combat, fighting in the Korean War. He resigned in 1960, dismayed that the Army was so slow to promote black officers. Even though he was highly trained and experienced, he “couldn’t get promoted faster than any other guy who just had to keep his nose clean,” he says. But in the nearly 50 years since his retirement, the Army, he acknowledges, has changed. In 2000 African-Americans made up a quarter of the Army, although their numbers have dropped precipitously since the start of the Iraq War, and there are more opportunities for blacks to advance to supervisory roles. In 1989 Colin Powell became the Army’s first black four-star general. Murchison says about high-ranking African-Americans, “I’ve met those guys, and they say, ‘If it weren’t for you, the 555th, we wouldn’t be where we are today.’”

In 1979 Morris, Biggs, Murchison, and others formed the 555th Parachute Infantry Association to organize reunions and maintain the outfit’s legacy. Murchison and Morris, now retired, never miss an opportunity to meet with other black veterans. Biggs passed away in 2005. It’s been a long time since the men stood in the doorway of an airplane and speculated about their willingness to risk their lives in a segregated Army, but Murchison thinks he knows why they all were willing to do it. “The Triple Nickles,” he says, “are people who had the courage and the adventurousness to risk jumping out of a plane to prove we could do anything as well—if not better—than anyone else. Why did we want to do it? One word: pride.”

Elizabeth Hoover’s article “Bittersweet Homecoming,” about a South Carolina woman’s reunion with her kinsmen in Sierra Leone, appeared in the Winter 2007 issue.