

Traces of Smoke and Valor - Groves and Pines



Above: The Triple Nickles' Capt. Richard Williams and 1st Lt. Clifford Allen peer out the open door of their C-47. Second Lt. Harry Sutton (on left) smiles at the rest of the crew. In the front far right corner is Lt. General Gavin, an early advocate of an integrated Armed Forces.

IN THIS ISSUE

The Triple Nickles Historical Marker,
Pages 1 - 4

Huntington Wagon Road Junipers, "Trail of Trees,"
Page 4

Drake Homestead Pines, Heritage Trees,
Page 5

Grove of the States Heritage Trees,
Page 6 and 8

The 2017 Maynard C. Dawson Award Winner, Paul Ries,
Page 7

Sponsor a tree in Oregon's Grove of the States,
Page 8

Historical Marker Program honors the Triple Nickles

The 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion, also known as the Triple Nickles, was an elite all-Black paratrooper unit deployed to Oregon near the end of WWII. Their mission was to combat forest fires in the Pacific Northwest caused by Japanese balloon bombs.

Approximately 125,000 Black members of the US Armed Forces served overseas in WWII. Despite their sacrifice and bravery, most enlisted Black personnel were relegated to driving trucks or loading and unloading naval vessels. Exceptions to menial assignments existed, although they were few and far between; examples include segregated tank battalions and Army Air Corps escort fighters.

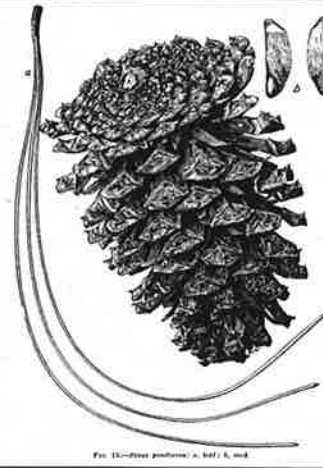
Although never sent into battle overseas, the heroes of the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion belonged to an elite division of Black paratroopers known as the "Triple Nickles."

A unique symbol for a unique division

The 555th's nickname "Triple Nickles," was a combination of three different references: initially, for the assigned number of the division (555) and then from the association of the US coin known as the Buffalo Nickel, and the members who joined from the 92nd Infantry (Buffalo) Division. The new unit's identifying symbol featured three buffalo nickels forming a triangle.

The unit was activated as a result of a recommendation made by the "Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies." On February 25, 1943, the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was constituted. On December 19, 1943, Headquarters, Army Ground Forces, authorized the activation of the company with all-Black officers and enlisted men.

The 555th was not sent to Europe, primarily because it never reached full strength for an Airborne Infantry Battalion. In reaction to the German counterattack that initiated the Battle of Bulge, the Airborne Command considered re-organizing the 555th as a single Airborne Rifle Company and deploying them to help battered Airborne units. However, as the crisis passed, the Triple Nickles would soon encounter a different kind of foe.



Above: Detail from antique botanical illustration of Pinus Ponderosa, a species that belongs to the 2017 Class of Heritage Trees. Read more about the Drake Homestead Ponderosa Pine Trees on Page 5.

Below: The symbol of the "Triple Nickles," the All Black Airborne Division.



The Triple Nickles *continued*

A secret mission leads to Oregon

When the 555th heard about their new orders, they assumed they would be sent into battle against the Japanese in the Pacific Theater. Triple Nickles First Sergeant Walter Morris said of their deployment, "It was a secret mission called Operation Firefly. We (still) thought we were going overseas to MacArthur's theater."

It wasn't until their arrival in Oregon in May 1945, that the men discovered they would be helping the war effort by parachuting into fire-lines in the Western United States.

During the winter of 1944 - 45, the Japanese sent "balloon bombs" towards our US West Coast. The Japanese army launched several thousand 30-foot diameter, hydrogen-filled balloons. They floated skyward across the Pacific Ocean, wafting their way easterly on the jet stream. Each balloon carried five incendiary bombs and one larger explosive device—all set to detonate when the balloon lost altitude and touched trees or the ground.

there were only two bars in Pendleton where Black soldiers were allowed to socialize. Morris noted that during their training period, there were only about eight other African Americans in Pendleton.

Still, the men of the 555th had their orders, and so they trained to fight fires, learning how to parachute close to a blaze or into heavy timber and rough terrain. They also learned to dig ditches to prevent a fire from spreading, and how to survive in the Pacific Northwest wilderness for several days at a time.

Although the Triple Nickles were trained military parachutists, they were not experienced smokejumpers and their standard-issue equipment offered little protection from the forest's harsh conditions.

"It is a sore spot among many that they were not highly trained by the US Forest Service (USFS) or the Army to do the work of smokejumping nor were they given the necessary gear," says Robert Bartlett of the Triple Nickles Association.

Continued on page 3



Above and left: The Triple Nickles altered their standard issue gear. They attached wire mesh to football helmets in order to protect their faces from tree branches and cinders. These two images show smokejumpers in training with a C-47.

Japan's military goal was to ignite destructive forest fires in the Pacific Northwest and cause panic among the American civilian population. The mission of the 555th was to parachute near any forest fires caused by the balloon bombs, fight them, and then disarm and destroy any remaining explosive devices.

The 555th paratroopers arrived in Eastern Oregon in the spring of 1945, and trained in bomb disposal at Pendleton Field. Civilian "smokejumpers" from the US Forest Service's new airborne forest fire-fighting program, helped train the Triple Nickles—focusing on the distinctions between combat jumping and smokejumping.

"It (Oregon) was disappointing," Morris said in an interview. Pendleton Field stood on a barren plateau and was run by a meticulous base commander who made it clear he wasn't interested in Black paratroopers. At the time of the unit's arrival,



The Triple Nickles *continued*

"For example (they lacked) the more maneuverable parachutes used by USFS smokejumpers and long enough let-down ropes," Bartlett notes. This forced the men to improvise.

To protect their faces from cinders, tree branches, and other foreign objects, the Triple Nickles created face masks by attaching wire mesh to football helmets—these evolved into the headgear smokejumpers wear today.

Over the next few months across the PNW, men from the 555th jumped onto 15 fires and fought at least 28, several of which are believed to have been caused by Japanese balloon bombs. The Triple Nickles' efforts were critical in preventing these fires from becoming even more destructive.

The war on forest fires ends

The Triple Nickles served in more airborne units, in peace and war, than any other parachute group in history. With the war's end in August of 1945 and the fire season ending later that year in October, the 555th returned to their home base in North Carolina.

Most of the original paratroopers were mustered out, but the unit still received new Black volunteers offering to serve as paratroopers. In December 1947, the 555th was assigned to the previously all-White 82nd Airborne Division, at the request of its commander Lt. General James Gavin, an early advocate of an integrated US Military.

North Carolina native and Triple Nickles paratrooper Charles Stevens described what it felt like when the 555th stood outside on that winter morning, waiting for their final orders. "We were in battalion formation, and our battalion commander presented us to the commanding general," Stevens said. "In that formation, the Triple Nickles were deactivated." The 555th had just become the 3rd Battalion of the 505th Parachute Infantry Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division.

"Everybody was crying," Stevens said. "I think we were crying for two different reasons. We were glad that segregation was leaving the Army and we were sad we were losing our Triple Nickle(s) colors."

The transition to integration

The Triple Nickles' persistence and distinguished service in the face of segregation helped push the US Armed Forces towards equity and balance. In July 1948, when President Harry S. Truman ordered the desegregation of all forces, enlisted Black troops faced even more challenges.

The men of the Triple Nickles underwent a radical shift following troop integration. It was the first time that many White soldiers interacted with Black troops who weren't serving them food or loading their trucks. "It really opened their eyes," said Walter 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."

It wasn't until seven months later, when President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, that Black paratroopers got their full rights as American soldiers. Executive Order 9981 established equality of treatment and opportunity in the Armed Services for people of all races, religions, or national origins.

In the years to come, Joe Murchison, who joined the Triple Nickles in 1947, went on to train the first Black paratroopers to see combat in the Korean War. He resigned from the US Army in 1960, dismayed by the slow promotion of Black officers.

In 1979 Morris and others formed the 555th Parachute Infantry Association to organize reunions and maintain the outfit's legacy.



Above: Triple Nickles' Jesse Mayes prepares to jump during training.

Below: Men of the 555th participate in a training session.



When Murchison retired, he never missed an opportunity to meet with other Black veterans. When asked why the men of the 555th were willing to risk their lives in a segregated army, Murchison speculated that they were "... 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."

Continued on page 4

The Triple Nickles *continued*

The one fatality ~ Malvin L. Brown

Malvin L. Brown from Baltimore, Maryland, volunteered to serve in the Triple Nickles when it was formed in 1943. After qualifying as a paratrooper, Brown also volunteered for training as a medic. Medical personnel always jumped with paratroopers, since accidents were not uncommon, even in training.

During Oregon's fire season of 1945, the 555th recorded more than 30 jump-related injuries, mostly sprains and fractures, although not an unusually large number for 37 paratroopers averaging 15 jumps each.

On August 6, 1945, Pendleton Field got a call for 15 Triple Nickles paratroopers to respond to a fire near Lemon Butte in the Umpqua National Forest, about 38 miles northeast of Roseburg, Oregon. Brown once again volunteered. This time he replaced the medic on the jump list who was ill.

The fire was burning along a ridge on the south side of the summit, an area of 200-foot old-growth trees and steep ground laced with deep ravines. Military paratroopers were taught to avoid trees and severe inclines, but smokejumpers had to land as near as possible to the fire, often in heavy timber on rough, mountainous terrain.

Brown landed in a tall tree leaning out from the slope of a ravine. In trying to reach the ground with his drop rope, he fell more than 150 feet to his death. He was 24 years old. Brown's fellow paratroopers reached his body (after traversing an 80 percent slope). They carried his body three miles through wilderness before reaching a trail—and then another 12 miles to the nearest road.

Private First Class Malvin L. Brown is buried at Mt. Calvary Cemetery near Baltimore, Maryland. He is remembered as the first smokejumper to die on a fire jump, and as a brave paratrooper who volunteered to help his country and his fellow Triple Nickles.

The Oregon Historical Marker Program congratulates the Triple Nickles and surviving members of the original 555th who jumped their way into history. Their Oregon Historical Marker will be installed at the US Forest Service Smokejumper Museum grounds in Cave Junction. We are honored to help share the story of how they kept this nation safe during wartime. ❖

Class of 2017 Heritage Trees

The latest inductees into the Oregon Heritage Tree Program span the state and, in one case, our nation. For the first time in many years we are pleased to have new Heritage Trees in Central Oregon. Two groves of trees in the Bend area received the honor: the Huntington Wagon Road Junipers and the A.M. Drake Homestead Pines.

Located in the Mid-Willamette Valley, the third honoree, the Grove of the States, is a testament that trees in the program need not be old-growth. An arboretum of state trees located at the southbound French Prairie Rest Area, several species in Oregon's Grove of the States are quite youthful, with the oldest a mere 50 years.

Dedication events for the Bend region trees are planned for June 2017 and on August 28, 2017, for Grove of the States. Keep in touch on Facebook and on the OTE website for updates.

Huntington Wagon Road Junipers ("Trail of Trees")

Species: Western juniper (*Juniperus occidentalis*) Native

Age: Unknown, several hundred years

Circumference: Approximately 90"

Height: From 25' - 33'

Health and condition: Very good

Following the line of a very old Native American Trail, the Huntington Wagon Road was marked by J.W. Petit Huntingtor in 1864 as a route between The Dalles and Fort Klamath. When the road was firmly established, it was used by prospectors, homesteaders, soldiers, and tradesman. Warm Springs Indian scouts frequently used the road in skirmishes with the Paiutes between 1865 and 1867. Heavy wagon-use along the road created deep ruts that are still visible today. Much of the original road later became OR Hwy 97—the main north to south artery through Central Oregon.

In the 1970s a historic campsite was discovered close to a preserved section of the Huntington Wagon Road. Excavations at the camp revealed a variety of 19th century artifacts from soldiers and other travelers, including much earlier obsidian arrowheads from Native Americans who camped in the area prior to the blazed road.

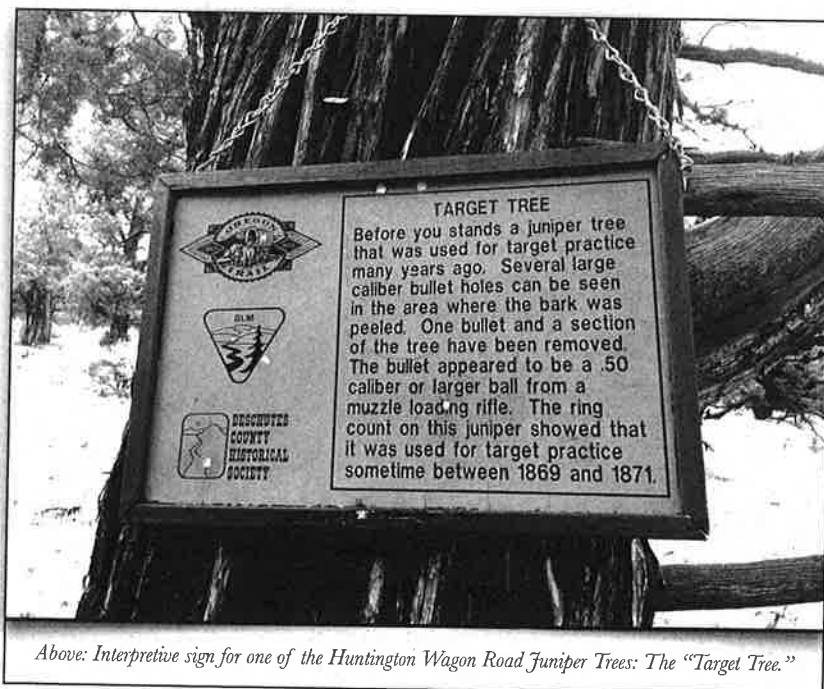
One of the marked trees in the Heritage Trail of Junipers is located very close to the campsite—the Target Tree. The tree is believed to have been used for target practice by soldiers in the 19th century and their large-caliber bullet holes remain clearly visible in the tree today.

Three other blazed Junipers located along the road are included in the heritage grove. They are known as Blazed Tree Number One, Number Two, and Number Three. The heights range from approximately 25-feet to 32-feet and boast girths measuring from just under seven feet to nearly 11 feet.

Today, these craggy-shaggy notched trees are accessed by traversing a two-mile out-and-back hike. The Huntington Wagon Road Trail and Juniper Heritage Trees are located five miles northeast of Bend.

We extend our thanks to the Deschutes County Historical Society and the Prineville District of the Bureau of Land Management for their help in nominating these notable trees for the Class of 2017 Heritage Trees. ❖

More trees on page 5



Above: Interpretive sign for one of the Huntington Wagon Road Juniper Trees: The "Target Tree."