

Senate Concurrent Resolution 30

Sponsored by Senators WINTERS, BOQUIST, HANSELL, MANNING JR; Senators BAERTSCHIGER JR, BEYER, BURDICK, COURTNEY, DEBOER, DEMBROW, DEVLIN, FERRIOLI, FREDERICK, GELSER, GIROD, HASS, JOHNSON, KNOPP, KRUSE, LINTHICUM, MONNES ANDERSON, MONROE, OLSEN, PROZANSKI, RILEY, ROBLAN, STEINER HAYWARD, TAYLOR, THATCHER, THOMSEN

SUMMARY

The following summary is not prepared by the sponsors of the measure and is not a part of the body thereof subject to consideration by the Legislative Assembly. It is an editor's brief statement of the essential features of the measure **as introduced**.

Honors 555th "Triple Nickles" Parachute Infantry Battalion for pioneering achievements and service to their country and this state.

CONCURRENT RESOLUTION

1
2 Whereas the World-War-II-era 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was the first African-
3 American paratrooper unit in the United States Army; and

4 Whereas the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was given the nickname Triple Nickles, using
5 an old English variant spelling; and

6 Whereas the unit's symbol was three buffalo nickels formed into a triangle, due to the associ-
7 ation of nickels with the numeral 5 and many of the original members of the battalion coming from
8 the buffalo soldiers of the 92nd Infantry Division; and

9 Whereas the Triple Nickles were officially activated as a company on December 30, 1943; and

10 Whereas earlier that year, Sergeant Walter Morris was a soldier at Fort Benning, Georgia,
11 where he and many other African-American soldiers were assigned to a service unit that performed
12 menial work for the fort's paratrooper training school; and

13 Whereas in the segregated United States military of that time, African-American soldiers were
14 treated as though they were less capable, brave and worthy than their white counterparts; and

15 Whereas other inequities, such as Italian and German prisoners of war being allowed to eat and
16 drink with the white United States soldiers at the post exchange while the African-American sol-
17 diers were not, affected the men deeply; and

18 Whereas Sergeant Morris recognized that the African-American soldiers felt undervalued and
19 underutilized, and so, to raise their morale, he began to lead about 50 men in his unit in training
20 that mimicked that of the official paratroopers; and

21 Whereas despite the treatment that they had received and the barriers in front of them, these
22 soldiers went above and beyond their duties to demonstrate to themselves and others that they were
23 capable of anything expected of white soldiers; and

24 Whereas the commanding general of the paratrooper school, General Ridgely Gaither, learning
25 of the training activity, summoned Sergeant Morris to his office and rewarded Morris' initiative by
26 making him First Sergeant of a new test platoon then being formed, which was to be composed en-
27 tirely of African-American paratroopers; and

28 Whereas 20 men were selected for the initial training program at Fort Benning, of which 17
29 earned the "silver wings" of the coveted paratrooper badge, and were joined by six officers who
30 soon also completed the paratrooper training; and

NOTE: Matter in **boldfaced** type in an amended section is new; matter [*italic and bracketed*] is existing law to be omitted. New sections are in **boldfaced** type.

1 Whereas the success of the test platoon opened the doors for the army to call for enough
2 African-American volunteers to form a company; and

3 Whereas due to the overwhelming response, the army chose to increase the size of the Triple
4 Nickles from a company to a battalion of more than 400 men at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, with
5 Sergeant Morris, who had gone on to Officer Training School and Adjutant General School and been
6 promoted to Second Lieutenant, as Battalion Adjutant; and

7 Whereas after the battalion was fully trained and ready to be assigned, the members of the
8 Triple Nickles were eager to be sent overseas to fight the Axis troops in either the European or
9 Pacific theaters, but the battalion was still short of the full numbers required for an airborne
10 infantry battalion and field commanders in both theaters still held onto the misapprehension that
11 integrated African-American and white troops would not cohere as a fighting force; and

12 Whereas in May 1945, the Triple Nickles felt that the opportunity to show their mettle had ar-
13 rived when they were ordered westward to participate in Operation Firefly, a secret mission that
14 the battalion assumed would send them to fight in the Pacific theater; and

15 Whereas the Triple Nickles arrived at Pendleton Field in northeast Oregon, expecting a brief
16 stop, but soon learned that they were there to transform from combat paratroopers into smoke
17 jumpers; and

18 Whereas Operation Firefly was revealed to be a military firefighting operation to defend the
19 west coast of the United States from Japanese incendiary balloons; and

20 Whereas in November 1944, the Japanese military had begun launching hydrogen-filled
21 incendiary balloons designed to be carried on the jet stream to the west coast of the United States
22 in order to start fires and cause panic among the American civilian population; and

23 Whereas in addition to fighting fires, Operation Firefly was intended to keep the use of the
24 balloons from being reported by the press, or being known by the general public, in order to deceive
25 the Japanese military into believing that the balloons had been completely ineffective; and

26 Whereas the men of the Triple Nickles were assigned to parachute from planes to fight the fires
27 the incendiary balloons ignited and deactivate any of the balloons' remaining unexploded bombs; and

28 Whereas although disappointed not to be in combat abroad, the Triple Nickles committed
29 themselves fully to their smoke jumper training and became the first African-American smoke
30 jumpers, which required a different set of skills and techniques than those used by paratroopers; and

31 Whereas some of the equipment issued to the Triple Nickles, such as parachutes with low
32 maneuverability and drop ropes of inadequate length for climbing down from tall trees, was ill-suited
33 to use with the new techniques and skills required of a smoke jumper, but the Triple Nickles showed
34 ingenuity in making changes when they could, such as replacing their metal helmets with football
35 helmets that they fitted with wire mesh to protect themselves from cinders and branches, which
36 became the prototype for the headgear worn by smoke jumpers today; and

37 Whereas the Triple Nickles were assigned to two main bases, one in Pendleton, Oregon, and the
38 other in California at the Chico Air Base, and were sent out to defend the forests of at least six
39 western states; and

40 Whereas between May and October 1945, the Triple Nickles bravely located balloons, disposed
41 of bombs and fought more than 30 large fires caused by the balloons, lightning or human care-
42 lessness; and

43 Whereas the Triple Nickles suffered one fatality, when on August 6, 1945, Private First Class
44 Malvin L. Brown parachuted into a tree that hung over a steeply sloped ravine and fell more than
45 150 feet to his death when trying to descend with his 50-foot drop rope; and

1 Whereas Private First Class Brown is remembered as the first smoke jumper to perish in the
2 line of duty and as a brave medic who volunteered to take the place of another man that day; and

3 Whereas on December 15, 1947, the members of the Triple Nickles stood in formation as their
4 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was deactivated and they were transferred into the 3rd Battal-
5 ion, 505th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, simultaneously losing their Triple
6 Nickles identity and becoming the first African-American unit to be integrated into an American
7 combat division; and

8 Whereas by the time that President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981 on July 26,
9 1948, desegregating the United States military, the members of the former Triple Nickles had been
10 integrated for seven months; and

11 Whereas the members of the Triple Nickles, by their competence, initiative and bravery, had
12 helped clear the path for integration; and

13 Whereas the Triple Nickles' contributions are being honored with a historical marker at the
14 Siskiyou Smokejumper Base Museum in Cave Junction, Oregon, to be dedicated in June 2017; and

15 Whereas Second Lieutenant Walter Morris distilled the essence of the Triple Nickles' many
16 achievements and contributions into one phrase, saying, "What we proved was that the color of a
17 man had nothing to do with his ability"; now, therefore,

18 **Be It Resolved by the Legislative Assembly of the State of Oregon:**

19 That we, the members of the Seventy-ninth Legislative Assembly, honor the members of the
20 555th "Triple Nickles" Parachute Infantry Battalion for their pioneering achievements and their
21 service to their country and this state.

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