

WWII vets of segregated 960th to receive long-overdue awards here

Current commander dug out history, planned ceremony

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Three World War II veterans of the 960th Quartermaster Company -- a segregated, black company during the war -- will be honored in a historic ceremony today at the unit's relatively new headquarters in Sioux City.

The men, all in their 80s now, will be recognized with a Meritorious Unit Commendation award the unit is believed to have earned but never received for digging thousands of graves in Holland and Belgium before and after the Battle of the Bulge.

The company will also hang four WWII campaign streamers from its flag during this morning's ceremony. The entire event will be repeated Sunday in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where about 60 soldiers in the modern-day 960th, now an Army Reserve unit, are based. Another 75 or so are based in Sioux City, where the company has been headquartered since 2005.

The 960th was first activated in 1943 in Kansas with a white commander, Capt. William O. Solms Sr. Called the 960th Quartermaster Service Company, it kept U.S. troops in Europe supplied with fuel, ammunition and other necessities.

'One Army' is important

The ceremonies are not just a feel-good look back for the 960th. To the unit's current commander, Capt. Keith Archibald, the 960th's history is absolutely essential to its future.

Finding no history for the thrice-activated, twice-deactivated (once for 47 years) unit, Archibald began researching it a couple of years ago. He got help from a historian at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., who discovered orders bestowing the still-unawarded commendation and campaign streamers.

"The veterans remember that," Archibald said recently, "but no one in (today's) unit knew about it." He started looking for the surviving veterans, finding former Capt. Albert Smaha, former Lt. Jefferson Wiggins and Solms.

For Archibald, "One Army" is not just a slogan. For him it speaks to soldiers connecting to their unit's history, knowing its lineage and becoming part of the continuum. "The ceremony is mostly to help tie my soldiers today with the soldiers of the past," he said. "It's the unit's award forever, so we get to hang the battle streamers on our flag."

Service was a 'privilege'

Smaha, 83, remembered in a recent interview from his home in Orono, Maine, how he joined the Army right out of college at the University of Maine, where he earned his bachelor's degree and quarterbacked the football team. In the Army, he quickly became a platoon leader, then a lieutenant and finally a captain.

The tardiness of the awards doesn't bother him. "Apparently a lot of those things fell through the cracks," he said. "We were so privileged and blessed just to be able to serve."

He said he didn't think his company was put on grave digging duty, one of the worst jobs, specifically because it was a black unit.

"No," he said, "What happened is that the casualties were so heavy the grave registration people couldn't take care of the grave digging. They called us off R&R to go to work." He said the frozen dirt stuck to the shovels. It was slow going. The men were grumbling.

"We had bodies stacked like cords of wood," he remembered grimly. He reminded his men that they were lucky; They weren't the ones being put into the body bags and buried.

And he devised an incentive plan. Anyone who dug two graves a day got to go to the nearby city of Maasterich for a hot shower. It worked, he said. "By the end of the fourth day I was standing out there alone.

"When you think we're in an uproar with 3,500 dead in Iraq We were losing thousands and thousands a day," he recalled. "I've often thought I'd like the politicians to see the bodies we saw."

Smaha, a bronze star recipient, met his wife-to-be in Europe during the war. Jeanne Margaret Brooks was a U.S. Army nurse in the 121st General Hospital Company. They were married for nearly 60 years before her death several years ago. One of their sons was a fighter pilot in Vietnam, and today a grandson serves as a fighter pilot based near Okinawa, Japan.

Smaha went on after the war to become head of a 15-store grocery chain, retiring at age 50 to start a career as a real estate developer. He eventually headed the largest Century 21 franchise in New England, he said.

960th meant a future

Wiggins, 82, rose up through the ranks to become a lieutenant and later became commander of the company.

"I'm delighted that 63 years later we're going to get (the commendation)," he said Tuesday from his home in New Fairfield, Conn. "This means to me the culmination of the whole journey from 1942.

"Of all my service, that's the worst," he said of digging the graves. "Seeing 80 or 100 of these young Americans daily coming to be buried. ... At that time there was no kind of ceremony like we have today. You put the body in a mattress cover and lowered it into the grave."

Unlike Smaha, Wiggins said he believes the 960th was chosen for the "least desirable" work because its members were black. "There was no question about that."

He credits his military service and the encouragement he got from others with the successes in his adult life. The son of an Alabama sharecropper, he entered the service barely able to read. Instead of being caught in poverty, he went on to study political science at Tennessee State University and taught for many years in Alabama and then New Jersey, focusing on multicultural education. He has written several books, including his wartime memoir, "Another Generation, Almost Forgotten," and its screenplay adaptation.

In 1999, Wiggins was awarded an honorary doctorate by Briarwood College in Connecticut, where he has been a distinguished visiting professor. He was named 2001 Multicultural Educator of the Year for Connecticut. He and his wife, Janice, continue that work through their foundation.

Wiggins said Tuesday that his life tells him "none of us achieve anything alone. That's a real part of being an American," he said. "You can always depend on somebody to help you. You can also depend on somebody to criticize you. That goes with the territory."

Solms used authority

In an interview from his home in Atlanta on Wednesday, Solms, 86, remembered training with the

960th in Kansas for six months before shipping out to England in February 1944.

He was the company's first commander -- for two days. He was commander again when the company went to England. The 960th left that country for France in August, landing at Omaha Beach, then proceeding to a combat zone in Holland.

"We spent three weeks burying the dead," Solms recalled. "We must have buried 3,000 American and German dead in that cemetery." Then, on Dec. 16, 1944, the Battle of the Bulge started. His orders were to issue ammunition to any American who wanted it.

The next March, the 960th manned a convoy of amphibious trucks as it watched planes and paratroopers close overhead. It crossed a river under cover of darkness. With German planes overhead, the convoy's supplies were unloaded quickly, and Solms' company began collecting bodies from the battlefield. They buried more than 200 American soldiers and paratroopers, then began burying the dead Germans as well.

He said he had no reason to believe the burial detail was because of his unit's color. "They were a well-disciplined unit," he said. "The officers were efficient. Everywhere they operated they did a good job."

On May 9, Solms said, shooting erupted again. The soldiers were all firing into the air: They'd just heard the war had ended.

After that, commanders were told they could commission noncommissioned officers. Solms said he took advantage of the order to commission three of his men, including Wiggins, as lieutenants.

After the war Solms earned a degree in business administration from the University of Georgia, then attended law school. He graduated, married and accepted a job for \$350 a month with the Coca-Cola Export Corp. He worked largely in South America, living in Argentina, then raised his family mostly in Mexico City before returning to Atlanta 18 years later.

He said he retired from Coca-Cola at age 59 to invest in real estate and the stock market and play golf. He called Coca-Cola recently on a chance it had a plane coming in the direction of Sioux City. It didn't. But now it does. Coca-Cola will fly Solms and his family here for the ceremonies.

960th Quartermaster Company
Campaign Credits -- World War II
- Northern France
- Rhineland
- Ardennes-Alsace
- Central Europe

Decoration

- Meritorious Unit Commendation (Army), streamer embroidered "European Theater"