



Above and Beyond

Fort Knox Auditorium Renamed in Honor of Black Sergeant Who Died of Wounds After Heroism in France

by Private First Class Darryl M. Metcalf

On January 13th, President Clinton awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor to seven African-American soldiers of the Second World War, six of whom had died. These men of color had risked their lives above and beyond the call of duty, fighting for the very freedoms they were often denied by their own countrymen back home. Because of their skin color, their heroic deeds went largely unrecognized at the time. But now, seven of our nation's bravest sons are members of this small fraternity, a fraternity whose only requirement for admittance is selfless service to the nation. One of these he-

roic few, Staff Sergeant Ruben Rivers, was honored in a memorial ceremony at the United States Armor School headquarters building, and on February 13th, MG George H. Harmeyer, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Armor Center and Fort Knox, dedicated the Gaffey II Auditorium of Gaffey Hall to SSG Rivers' memory.

SSG Rivers' valiant actions and total disregard for personal safety in the face of enemy fire are the stuff of which legends are made. It is the simple story of a man who answered the call of his nation.

In November 1944, the 761st Tank Battalion, in support of the 2nd Battalion, 101st Regiment of the 26th Infantry "Yankee" Division, Third Army, launched an attack to seize the French railroad towns of Guebling and Bougaltroff and the high ground beyond. Earlier, elements of the 4th Armored Division had tried to break through the enemy forces in the area without success. As the lead element of the "Yankee" Division, it was up to the 761st, the first black combat unit to see action in WW II, to capture the critical crossroads towns. Able Company, under the command of Captain D.J. Williams,

was chosen to lead the attack, and leading CPT Williams' most forward platoon was a young and audacious staff sergeant named Ruben Rivers.

On November 7th, 1944, while advancing towards Guebling, SSG Rivers' unit encountered a roadblock that impeded its advance. Without thought for his own life or safety, SSG Rivers dismounted his vehicle under heavy direct fire, attached a cable, and dragged the roadblock out of the way, in order for the unit to continue with its mission. For this action, he received the Silver Star. Ten days later, on November 17th, following SSG Rivers' lead, Able Company continued its attack. As the company moved across a railroad crossing, SSG Rivers' Sherman tank hit an antitank mine, sending shrapnel into the turret and slashing Rivers' thigh to the bone. Refusing evacuation and morphine for the excruciating pain, SSG Rivers took control of his section after the section commander was killed and directed the movement towards the enemy strongholds. When the Engineers began constructing a bridge over the river into Guebling, the company commander, CPT David J. Williams, came over to SSG Rivers tank to check on him. It was then that he realized that while SSG Rivers was in unbearable pain, he said nothing of it. Again, the commander told him to administer the morphine and evacuate to the rear. SSG Rivers once more refused both the morphine and the evacuation. For the next three days SSG Rivers went about his duties despite extreme pain, all the while leading the company towards Bougaltruff. As they were entering the town, SSG Rivers encountered extremely heavy enemy resistance and was ordered to pull back. SSG Rivers reported that he had spotted enemy positions and was advancing on them, saying, "I see 'em. We'll fight em." As he entered the city, SSG Rivers destroyed three tanks and their crews before the turret of his Sherman was hit by an 88mm armor-piercing round, killing both Rivers and his gunner. As a result of these heroic actions and SSG Rivers' expertise with the .50 caliber machine gun, he was credited with over 200 enemy deaths. It was this series of events that led his company commander to recommend SSG Rivers for the Congressional Medal of Honor.

After SSG Rivers' death on November 19, CPT Williams went to the battalion commander and told him that he

was going to recommend SSG Rivers for the Medal of Honor. Four days later, he turned in the written recommendation to the battalion commander, but because it was then misplaced or lost, it would be the last time he would see it. For the next fifty years, CPT Williams would spend considerable amounts of time in the pursuit of SSG Rivers' Medal of Honor. Unfortunately, there was one catch that CPT Williams was unaware of. The time limit in which the medal could be bestowed on SSG Rivers had run out in 1952. Finally, in June of 1990, there was a breakthrough. CPT Williams, with the help of sworn affidavits from many of the soldiers who were in France that day, was able to influence Congressman James M. Inhofe (R-OK.) to propose a resolution to Congress to waive the time limitation on the recommendation for SSG Rivers' Medal of Honor. On 6 June 1990, Congressman Inhofe went to the floor of the House of Representatives and told the story of SSG Rivers and why he deserved the award. The house granted the waiver of time limits to SSG Rivers and he was finally awarded his Medal of Honor.

Williams, the company commander, was the guest speaker at the February 13th ceremony naming the auditorium in honor of SSG Rivers. Williams was drafted into the Army while in his third year at Yale, and served for eleven months, reaching the rank of corporal before being selected for OCS. After graduating from OCS, CPT Williams was sent to Camp Clairborne, La., where he thought he would wait out the war. He just could not see the Army sending an all-black unit into battle. But, midway through the war, the black GIs started demanding the chance to fight for their country instead of being assigned menial jobs at Camp Clairborne. The 761st, an all-black battalion, finally received its chance in 1944. Sent to Europe, they landed on Normandy beach in the early fall. During the next several months, they distinguished themselves as one of the best tank battalions in World War II. But, like all black soldiers of the era, the battalion never received its due recognition. Finally, in 1978, at the urging of Williams, the 761st Tank Battalion received the Presidential Unit Citation that it so greatly deserved.

The families, friends, and comrades of the soldiers have spent the last 50 years waiting in anxious anticipation

for the honors recently bestowed by President Clinton. A special Army Senior Officer Awards Board chose the seven men according to facts accumulated by a panel of military historians over a 15-month study. The study included written works from the National Archives, as well as recollections from soldiers who had served with the men on the battlefield during World War II. Two of SSG Rivers' sisters, Grace Rivers Woodsfork and Mae Rivers Hills, attended the ceremony at Fort Knox. Mrs. Woodsfork's son, a former mayor of Richmond, California, also attended. There were local politicians present, as well as members of the area's chapter of the NAACP. During the ceremony SSG Rivers was knighted into the U.S. Armor Association's Order of St. George for extraordinary leadership qualities on the battlefield.

After 53 years, a great wrong has been righted with the honoring of the seven men who received the Medal of Honor, but as a nation and as soldiers, there is an inherent duty to ensure that such injustice never happens again. Soldiers should feel honored in serving in the same Army as these great men. SSG Rivers and the men who served in the 761st unswervingly demonstrated their unique pride in America — a pride that can be shared and should be remembered. They fought for freedom on the battlefields of Europe without the benefits of full freedom at home and in doing so, taught America and the Army a lesson not easily learned. A sense of duty, honor and courage is not dependent on one's skin color, but rather from deep within one's soul.

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