

THE LEGACY OF THE HOUSTON “MUTINEERS”



24th Infantry: Service, Racial Unrest

The 24th Infantry Regiment, an all-Black unit formed after the Civil War (1861-1865), served with distinction at home and abroad in the decades that followed. After U.S. entry into World War I (1917-1918), the Army ordered the regiment’s Third Battalion not to Europe, but to the segregated South for a disappointing guard assignment at Camp Logan in Houston, TX. There, soldiers’ defiance of racist local laws, coupled with disrespect from White civilians and police, created a volatile situation.

On August 23, 1917, Cpl. Charles Baltimore intervened in the police beating of a private who had tried to stop the arrest of a Black woman. Baltimore was shot at and detained but was eventually allowed to return to camp. However, rumor of his death brought unrest to the ranks. Later that night a false report of a White mob caused more than 150 armed soldiers to defy orders and march into Houston. Nineteen died from the violence that ensued—15 White and 4 Black.



Cpl. Charles W. Baltimore, ca. 1914. He was a military policeman at the time of the mutiny. Clipping from unnamed newspaper.

Injustice and Military Legacy

The Army charged 118 black soldiers with murder and mutiny. Three courts martial took place at Fort Sam Houston, TX, between November 1, 1917, and March 26, 1918. Seven men were found innocent, and one was found not competent to stand trial. Of the guilty, most were given prison sentences (many life), and 19 were sentenced to death. The trials were flawed by serious irregularities. The speed of the first executions, within a day of the sentences being approved and without higher review or appeal, compounded the injustice. As a result, on January 17, 1918, the Army issued a General Order that established an appellate review process that forever changed military law.

The Army reviewed the cases in 2023 and determined the widespread racism and tension that triggered the 1917 Houston Riot pervaded the trials for these soldiers, making their trials unfair. The Secretary of the Army set aside all convictions and directed the soldiers’ records reflect honorable discharges. A ceremony honoring their legacy was held on November 13, 2023, at the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum in Houston, TX.

Execution

The first 13 condemned were hanged at sunrise on December 11, 1917. They conducted themselves as soldiers, sang a hymn and stood to attention before collectively dropping to their death. Many penned farewell letters. Cpl. Baltimore wrote his brother:

I am to be executed this morning... It is true I went downtown with the men that marched out of camp. But I am innocent of shedding any blood. But it is God’s will, so don’t worry... Goodbye: meet me in heaven.

An additional six soldiers were hanged in two more executions. Seventeen were reburied here in 1937, moved from nearby graves at Salado Creek.

Cpl. Charles Baltimore, Co. I	Pvt. Pat McWhorter, Co. M
Pfc. William Boone, Co. I	Cpl. Jesse Moore, Co. I
Pfc. William Breckenridge, Co. I	Sgt. William Nesbit, Co. I
Cpl. Larnon Brown, Co. I*	Pvt. James Robinson, Co. I
Pvt. Babe Collier, Co. I	Pvt. Joseph Smith, Co. I*
Pvt. Ira Davis, Co. I	Pfc. Carlos Snodgrass, Co. I
Pvt. James Divins, Co. I	Cpl. James Wheatley, Co. I
Pfc. Thomas Hawkins, Co. I	Pvt. Albert Wright, Co. I
Pvt. Frank Johnson, Co. I	Pvt. Rixley Young, Co. I
Cook Thomas McDonald, Co. I	*Denotes bodies claimed by family

BELOW: Attendance at the first execution was limited to military, police, and religious officials. The Army announced it after the fact, and restricted access to the burial site. The San Antonio Express publicized the hanging in a special issue of the newspaper. Maj. Harry Grier collection, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center.

