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Smokejumper Obituary: Morris, Walter (Pendleton 1945)

National Smokejumper Association

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Smokejumper Obituary

Morris, Walter (Pendleton 1945)

Walter, 92, died Oct. 13, 2013, in Palm Coast, Florida. He was one of the original black paratroopers in the Army's 555th Parachute Infantry Company the "Triple Nickles" and served during the time when the military was segregated.

Walter, a first sergeant, led his men on a westbound train from Camp Mackall, North Carolina, in May 1945, during a secret mission called "Operation Firefly." They had expected to join the fighting in the Pacific, but upon arrival in Pendleton, Oregon, they learned they would be parachuting into remote areas to fight forest fires caused by Japanese incendiary balloons. He told the Associated Press in 2000: "There was this group of loggers sitting around this big pot-bellied stove, and they said, 'Oh, you're here. We've been waiting for you a long time. We read in the paper that you were coming out here to be smokejumpers."

After high school graduation, Walter began an apprenticeship as a bricklayer, but he found construction work was sparse during the Depression. He joined the Army as a one-year volunteer in January 1941. Walter and his men were largely servants to the white combat troops at Ft. Benning, Georgia - they did the cooking, mess hall serving and other mundane tasks, but longed to be paratroopers.

In their off time, Sgt. Morris and a few others trained themselves to be paratroopers while the "jump school" facilities were not in use by "official" trainees. A passing general took note of their efforts and put Walter in charge of a handful of black soldiers, who began official training to be Army paratroopers. Walter was the first black soldier to earn the Army's coveted "Jump Wings." The handful soon became a company with Walter in charge. The Airborne Training School was subsequently inundated with black applicants and the company became a battalion. Walter was promoted to sergeant major, the battalion's highest-ranking enlisted man.

(end of excerpt)