



## Patton's Panthers: The African-American 761st Tank Battalion In World War II

By Charles W. Sasser

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Beginning in November 1944, they engaged the enemy for 183 straight days, spearheading many of Patton's offensives at the Battle of the Bulge and in six European countries. No other unit fought for so long and so hard without respite. The 761st defeated more than 6,000 enemy soldiers, captured thirty towns, liberated Jews from concentration camps -- and made history as the first African-American armored unit to enter the war.

This is the true story of the Black Panthers, who proudly lived up to their motto (Come Out Fighting) and paved the way for African-Americans in the U.S. military -- while battling against the skepticism and racism of the very people they fought for.

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### Editorial Review

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Journalist Sasser, a veteran of both the army and the navy, retells the story of the first "colored" (the term in use at the time) armored unit allowed to enter combat, where it spearheaded Patton's drives, defeated more than 6,000 German soldiers, and liberated concentration camps. The unit's story, like the story of any "first," is also that of the enemies on their own side--the hatred and prejudice that had, for half a century, deliberately consigned colored military personnel to do the work no one else wanted to do. Stylistically, Sasser adopts the storyteller's approach, following various men and officers of the battalion from their homes, through training, and finally into combat in a Europe that is fast departing living memory. Much of the dialogue Sasser uses is constructed, of course, but it is convincing. Though not the first study of the 761st, this highly readable book is one of the best. *Frieda Murray*  
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#### About the Author

**Charles W. Sasser** has been a full-time freelance writer, journalist, and photographer since 1979. He is a veteran of both the U.S. Navy (journalist) and U.S. Army (Special Forces, the Green Berets), a combat veteran and former combat correspondent wounded in action. He also served fourteen years as a police officer (in Miami, Florida, and in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he was a homicide detective). He is author, co-author or contributing author of more than 30 books and novels, including *One Shot-One Kill* and *Hill 488*, both available from Pocket Books. Sasser now lives on a ranch in Chouteau, Oklahoma, with his wife Donna.

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#### Chapter 1

*We are now in this war. We are in it all the way. Every single man, woman and child is a partner in the most tremendous undertaking of our American history. We must share together the bad news, the good news, the defeats, the victories, the changing fortunes of war.*

-- President Franklin D. Roosevelt

A cold January rain drizzled onto the rolling red-dust hills of central Oklahoma the day Ruben Rivers walked to war. He had to walk to Tecumseh to catch the bus that would take him to join the army, because no vehicle could get down the road when it rained, not unless it was pulled by mules or horses. He seemed reluctant to take each step. He stopped and looked back down the muddy road that led past the ramshackle farmhouse behind the rusty barbed wire.

There were those in the little Negro community of Holtuka who insisted this was a white man's war and that Negroes didn't belong in it. The only reason Negroes were invited was so they could cook for the white man and clean up after him while he did the fighting. Ruben didn't see it that way. This was *his* country, too. Hadn't the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor? Ruben and the two other older boys in the large Rivers family, Robert and Dewey, had talked of little else but the war since the sneak attack five weeks ago. Ruben was the first of them to make up his mind to go.

He stood in the churned mud of the road looking back at the house. A gawky farm kid in faded overalls,

brogans, and a raggedy old winter coat, seemingly stuck in a stage of growth that was neither boy nor fully man. Rainwater beaded on a smooth honey-brown face that showed traces, perhaps, of both slaves and slave owners. The jaw was strong and well defined, the eyes dark and so straight-staring they averted under no man's gaze. A lean young man going to war like millions of others from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C.

Little sister Anese stood alone on the front porch waving through the drizzle. A brown little girl wearing a faded feed-sack dress Mama had sewn for her. Tears and rain in her eyes. Waving and waving. The others were out at the barn tending livestock or still inside because they couldn't stand the further heartbreak of actually watching Ruben leave home.

Ruben waved a last time at his baby sister. He then turned abruptly, batted his eyes, lowered his head into the cold rain, and resolutely trudged in the direction of Tecumseh. He would have to walk the whole distance. He never looked back again. He remembered hearing somewhere that the road away from home led in only one direction. Once you left home you could never go back again.

E. G. McConnell was sixteen years old when Moms went with him to the recruiting station in New York and lied about his age so he could enlist in the army. Moms went talking back to the recruiting sergeant, wagging her finger in his face and scolding, "Take care of my boy now, ya hear?"

"Yes, ma'am, we sure will do that."

The skinny kid with the wide boyish grin ducked his head in embarrassment. His brown face flushed even darker when Moms grabbed him and hugged him to her ample bosom, cried some more, and made sure he had his prayer book. Then she left him with the recruiter, her admonishment to "Take care of my boy" still hanging in the air.

E.G. was one green recruit, his first time away from home. Like most draftees or volunteers, he had little knowledge or understanding of the political and military machines that formed the war's "Big Picture." His only concern was with the narrow picture that affected him personally.

He traveled by rail from Camp Upton, New York, to Fort Knox, Kentucky, where he would attend basic training in the armored specialty. He understood that to mean tanks; Negroes had never been allowed to drive tanks before because they were not supposed to be smart enough.

The troop train swayed and rattled on its narrow steel tracks. It was stifling hot inside at times, what with all the black soldier recruits crammed into the cars talking and laughing and shouting and playing cards. Everyone seemed in high spirits, off to some great adventure. Soot and ashes from the steam engine blew in through the open windows. Sometimes a live ember sent men stomping and shouting and hooting with laughter as they frantically brushed it off their clothing and chased it down before it caused further chaos.

E.G. became acquainted with a tall, dark, sour man from Detroit.

"Man, you see how they put all us niggers in cars right behind the engine?" he asked.

"What you saying?" E.G. wanted to know, puzzled.

"The white boys' cars is back at the end of the train where they don't get ashes and stuff from the engine." He laughed bitterly. "The only time we ever go to the front of the line is when the white boys don't *want* to be there. It's gonna be the same thing when we go to the war. We only going to the front line when they don't

want to be there."

E.G. had never realized before that there was so much country to the United States and that so much of it was mountains and forests. The heavily loaded train slowed as it climbed the northern Kentucky hills on its last leg to Fort Knox. Sergeants came through the cars.

"Pull down all the window shades," they ordered.

"What fo'?" the dark dude from Detroit asked.

"Do as you're told."

It got dank and silent in the cars. Was the train being attacked or what? Curious but not about to defy orders and mess with the shades, E.G. stepped out onto the platform between cars to see what was going on. The train had reduced speed as it always did to pass through one of those little rural towns that dotted the countryside. E.G. saw a paved main street lined by mom-and-pop stores, a few parked Ford pickups, some mule teams and wagons in the back alley. Nothing unusual.

Then, with a start, he realized the purpose for pulling the shades. White men and grown boys lined the track, standing almost shoulder to shoulder, each one armed with a squirrel rifle or shotgun. They glared at the train as it clack-clacked through town, as though daring it to stop or to lift a shade to reveal a black face. Rumors went around that several previous troop trains carrying Negroes had been fired upon.

The dude from Detroit laughed. "Yeah, and here we goes to fight fo' these crackers and the whole United States."

Fresh out of tanker training at Fort Knox, Eddie Donald was not overly surprised to find "white" and "colored" drinking fountains and latrines when he arrived at Camp Claiborne southwest of Alexandria, Louisiana. This was the Deep South. Claiborne was totally segregated. After all, it hadn't really been that long ago that slavery ended. Less than eighty years ago. There were still black folks living who had been born in slavery, others who had labored as kids in the massa's cotton fields.

White soldiers were quartered in newly painted white barracks on good ground near Headquarters, the sports arena, and the large Service Club near the front of the camp. Black soldiers were in the lowlands next to the swamp at the back of the camp. They weren't allowed in the white areas, except to walk on through. That was fair enough, Donald thought wryly. After all, white soldiers weren't allowed in the black swamp either.

The tall, lanky black man shook his head, shouldered the barracks bag that contained his issued and personal items, and walked straightaway along the streets until black faces replaced white faces. The appearance of the camp changed drastically. Tents and one-story barracks lined the road, many of them old and sorely in need of repair and painting. They were miserable-looking quarters in comparison to those inhabited by white soldiers. Twelve bunks were lined up in each bay, enough for a squad. There was a coal-heating stove at each end. In the summer the windows were screened and mosquito nets installed.

Donald dropped his bag at his feet and looked up and down the road. Some Negroes were sitting on a barracks stoop talking trash and horsing around with guys on the stoops opposite them. Somewhere in the distance troops were being marched to the rhythm of a Jody call.

"You a new meat for the 758th Tank Battalion?" someone called out.

"I am that."

"Welcome home, boy. Let me show you where you bunking."

Donald sighed, slapped at a mosquito buzzing around his ears, and picked up his bag.

Corporal Leonard "Chico" Holland from Detroit drove freshly arrived Lieutenant David J. Williams from Camp Claiborne headquarters to the Negro section of the camp that quartered the all-black 758th. Lieutenant Williams, like all commanders from company level up, was a white man. About six feet tall, athletic-looking, early twenties, short, dark, wavy hair and even darker eyes. He sat on the passenger's side of the open quarter-ton Jeep, eagerly looking forward to his first command assignment.

Chico drove past the nice neat white barracks and officers' quarters on the hill, past the busy PX and the sports complex.

"Where are we going?" the lieutenant asked his driver, looking around and frowning.

"Lieutenant, you'll see," Chico said mysteriously, a half-grin on his face.

The Jeep slowed where the crest of the hill sloped off into lowlands that had once been a swamp. Williams stared, not immediately comprehending. Weather-beaten tents and raw one-story barracks presented a lithograph of a Civil War bivouac area. He had expected more.

"Officers are in the tents at the top of the row," Chico said. He seemed amused at the stunned expression on the green young officer's face.

The next morning, Lieutenant Williams went back up the hill to report in to the white commander of the 758th Tank Battalion. He saluted crisply. Captain Barnes looked him over with a disapproving eye and told him to sit down on the hard chair in front of his desk. From a folder he extracted a newspaper clipping from the front page of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. He shoved it across the desk. Williams recognized his own photo in uniform above the headline "Pittsburgh Industrialist's Son and Politician Goes with Race Troops."

"It looks like your daddy has money and influence," Barnes said with a dismissive flip of the hand. "Is that why you're here? Your old man put you in a safe place away from the war?"

"Sir, if you've looked at my file you'll see I was drafted as a private in January 1941, then attended Officers Candidate School after Pearl Harbor. I volunteered to come here. It had nothing to do with my father or his money."

"Humpf," Captain Barnes said, as though he didn't believe it. "Be that as it may, you've ended up in a safe place to ride out the war. These negras aren't ever going to fight. We're just marking time down here in these swamps until the war is over."

Lieutenant Williams didn't know what to say. He sat with his hands clasped between his knees.

"You're down here with Eleanor Roosevelt's niggers, Lieutenant," Captain Barnes continued. "These people are different and you've got to handle them different. You're from up east and you don't understand that yet. Boy, I'm going to teach you about negras."

Williams stared mutely at his commander, who seemed to expect some sort of reply. A light knock on the door saved him. A handsome black sergeant entered on Barnes's permission. Williams stood up.

"Turley," Barnes said to the sergeant, "I want you to meet our new second lieutenant from up east. From that uppity college, Yale University. Lieutenant Williams, Turley is one of our company first sergeants."

Williams shook hands. Immediately, Barnes sprang to his feet, his face reddening as if he were about to have a stroke. A thick finger jabbed toward the door.

"Turley, get out of here."

As soon as the first sergeant was gone, Barnes leaned heavily across the top of his desk, his voice low and menacing.

"Boy, don't ever do that again."

"Sir?"

"Shake hands with no negra. Don't ever put yourself on the same level with a nigger."

The venom in Barnes's voice stunned Williams. "Sir, with all due respect, first sergeants run the army. They deserve respect."

"You don't know nothing, Lieutenant. You've been up in that uppity college and the only negras you see up there are sheltered. Dismissed, Lieutenant. Get out of here."

Two weeks later, Captain Barnes summoned Williams to his office.

"We're getting a new negra tank battalion, the 761st," he said. "I'm getting rid of you. You have done ruined my best first sergeant."

On April Fool's Day 1942, the all-Negro 761st Tank Battalion was activated at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. Captain Williams and First Sergeant Sam Turley were both kicked out of the 758th and reassigned to the 761st. Charlie Company's commanding officer, Captain Charles Wingo, took the boot lieutenant aside. Wingo was a soft-looking officer with a pale face.

"You are going to learn, Lieutenant," he said, "that you have got to have a mean coon to keep these boys in line."

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