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World War II smokejumper's place in local history restored



Historian Bob Zybach stands near Steamboat Creek in the Umpqua National Forest on Tuesday. He has uncovered part of the history of one of the nation's first African-American smokejumpers, Malvin Brown, who died at the creek's headwaters in 1945.



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Malvin Brown, an Army smokejumper who died in the Umpqua National Forest in 1945, appears in this photograph with an unknown relative.



Unnamed smokejumpers from the Triple Nickles prepare for a jump in this Army photo from 1945.

STEAMBOAT — Just over 70 years ago, a young African-American Army paratrooper from Pennsylvania parachuted into the Umpqua National Forest in the middle of a forest fire. He landed on what was likely the tallest tree he'd ever seen, slid down his rope and discovered it was about 150 feet too short.

PFC Malvin Brown's life was historic — he served in the first ever all-black battalion led by black officers, and he was the first Army smokejumper to die on a fire jump. But the news of his death, published in the Aug. 8, 1945 edition of *The News-Review*, was somewhat overshadowed by other

historic events reported that day — the bombing of Hiroshima, and the Russians declaring war on the Japanese.

Recently, Brown's story has been rediscovered. An association dedicated to the memory of his battalion found his grave and published his story. And a Cottage Grove historian uncovered new details about what happened to Brown the day he died.

Historian Bob Zybach of Cottage Grove first heard pieces of Brown's story from longtime Umpqua National Forest District Ranger Rex Wakefield 25 years ago. However, he had never heard Brown's name, or known about his service with the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion, but then Zybach attended a book reading in Portland this year and heard someone telling Brown's story.

"I said, 'Wait a minute. I know that story,'" he said.

So he decided to do some research.

Brown, and his fellow paratroopers in the 555th, were known as the Triple Nickles. No doubt they hoped to parachute into Germany, or at least to serve in the Pacific Theater. Instead, they became smokejumpers, relegated to firefighting duty in the Pacific Northwest.

There was a military secret behind the Triple Nickles' deployment to the Northwest, for a mission dubbed Operation Firefly. The Japanese were floating balloon bombs into northwestern forests, starting wildfires and in one incident killing a pastor's pregnant wife and five children at a Sunday picnic in Bly. In all, Japan launched 9,000 balloon bombs into the airstream during the war. About 300 made it to the Northwest. The Triple Nickles were tasked with finding and defusing these bombs as well as fighting fires caused by them.

Brown grew up in Maryland, but lived in Haverford, Pennsylvania when he enlisted. He received training in Georgia and North Carolina before taking trains across country to the Triple Nickles' permanent duty station at the Pendleton Army Air Field. The Triple Nickles were segregated from white soldiers during the journey. Many railcars, restrooms, drinking fountains and restaurants were off limits to them. In some cases, even Nazi prisoners of war had better access to facilities than they did, Zybach said.

The 200 African-American smokejumpers stationed in Pendleton were mostly kept on base and segregated from the local population. In town, only two bars and one Chinese restaurant would serve them.

Many of the locals, Zybach said, probably never knew they were there.

Brown was a highly skilled Army man, trained not only as a paratrooper but also a medic. At 5'6" tall and 139 pounds, he was the ideal size for a smokejumper, strong enough to carry the gear but light enough not to strain the parachute.

According to the original article in The News-Review, Brown was one of 16 smokejumpers flown Aug. 6 to a fire in the Umpqua National Forest at the headwaters of Steamboat Creek. The story attributed the fires not to balloon bombs but to lightning storms.

The soldiers probably jumped at Lemon Butte in Lane County, just over the Lane-Douglas County line. On the Douglas side of the line is a butte named Fireman's Leap. Zybach suspects the name was chosen by Wakefield in Brown's honor.

Smokejumpers were trained to drop into the tops of trees and given a 50 foot rope to rappel down. That may have been a long enough line in some places, but not here.

Zybach recorded his interview with Wakefield in 1989. Wakefield didn't know Brown's name, but remembered how he died.

"They'd come in there and they'd just jump from out of these darn airplanes. Two or three of them hung up on the sides of these big old trees," Wakefield said. "I went down there and, gosh, this one guy was dead. He fell — his (parachute) really hung up here kind of in the top of this old tree ... And, by gosh, you know he didn't have enough rope."

While Brown's Oregon death certificate asserts that he slipped from his rope and fell, Zybach doubts that explanation. Zybach believes Brown came to the end of his rope, quite literally, and still had a 150 foot drop to the rocky ground.

Brown had to have known at that point that he was either going to die or be seriously injured.

"This was Malvin Brown's first introduction to a Pacific Northwest forest. It just had to be impressive, awe inspiring just to have trees that big, and to be hung up in a tree that big," Zybach said. "That had to be terrifying, or sobering, depending on his emotional stuff. I would be terrified."

Wakefield told Zybach that when Brown came to the end of the rope, "down he come; it just mashed him to pieces. It was awful."

Wakefield went to help carry out Brown's body, and help carry out another smokejumper, who was injured falling from another tree.

Brown's body was carried out along Steamboat Creek. He was flown from Douglas County to Walla Walla, Washington, where he was examined by an Army surgeon. The cause of death was listed as a basal skull fracture and cerebral hemorrhage.

Forgotten for 70 years, Brown is finally getting some recognition. On the anniversary of Brown's death this year, the U.S. Forest Service held a ceremony and put up a marker at his grave. Last weekend, an association dedicated to preserving the Triple Nickles' memory put up another memorial.

Brown's story now also appears online at the Triple Nickles website and in an article Zybach wrote for blackpast.org.

Zybach said he was glad to rediscover Brown's place in history.

"I like it when oral histories like the one I did with Rex in 1989 all of a sudden come full circle," he said. "It's rewarding."

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