

Black Soldiers in Defense of America

Troops from the Revolution to Iraq serve bravely despite racism

Editor's note: The Portland Observer celebrates Black History Month by honoring those who fought so bravely on the battlefields only to come home to the cruel realities of racism.

BY RON WEBER

THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Whether on the front lines in mortal combat, in fierce battles in the air or behind thundering guns on the ocean, African Americans have bravely fought for our nation for nearly 300 years.

Unwanted in America's early military, blacks volunteered and demanded the right to fight for the very country that discriminated against them. These brave soldiers were generally only brought in on an "as needed" basis and then let go immediately after each major battle or war, leaving military pensions and other benefits for whites only.

Even though they were forced into non-combat support services, they held out, hoping to be sent to the battlefields of honor. Still, America treated the descendants of Africa poorly.

Finally in the 20th Century black fighters were allowed to prove themselves. In all phases of combat and in all branches of the service, African-American soldiers showed for once and all that they could stand toe-to-toe with white men in war. Though scores paid the ultimate price by giving up their lives,

black battalions continued to square off face-to-face with the worst of enemies regardless of the odds.

Early Patriots

Prior to the colonial times, an African by the name of Estevanico landed in present day Florida with a group of Spanish explorers who had left Spain with 600 men. By the time they reached the eastern shores of Texas, only Estevanico and three Spaniards were still alive due to battles with Native Americans.



Cathay Williams disguised herself as a man to fight in the U.S. Army as a Buffalo Soldier.

During the 1530s, the four explorers traveled on foot, ending up in what is now Mexico City. Estevanico, also known as "Little Steven," is believed to have died fighting Mexican Indians in current day southwest America. He is still on record as the first black man to travel across the southern United States and also the first black man to die in combat in the Americas.

Another black man, named Diego, sailed the high seas in the 1570s with Sir Francis Drake. Some say he died in the Caribbean fighting Indians, others believe he survived and stayed with the ship until Drake dropped him off on an island near his birthplace on their way back to Europe. Prior to the trip home, Drake stopped on the West Coast of America to make much needed ship repairs. It is here that Diego explored an area near

San Francisco making him the first black man to walk in this part of the nation.



Documentation dating to 1639 shows that white Americans were afraid to allow black men to carry guns or ammunition. Virginia passed a law outlawing the ownership of guns by blacks. The colony of Amsterdam only allowed black men to carry a tomahawk or a "half-pike" to help whites fight Indians.

The first man of African descent known to legally have the right to bear arms was Abraham Pierce in 1643. By 1652, Massachusetts required "all Negroes and Indians between 16 and 60 to attend militia training. However, during non-war periods the law was revoked and blacks were not allowed to carry weapons.

By 1770, the black population was 462,000. White Americans feared they might have an uprising and invoked new laws taking black soldiers out of peace time militias. Black women were also excluded from any type of military duty or support function, such as nurses, supply clerks, cooks and similar duties.

Ironically however, when white soldiers fought in wars during this period, black women were often left

in charge of their entire plantation back home. The white man would not trust a black woman anywhere in the military and yet they gave

these women full control of their homes and lands until they returned. Black men were also used for scouts, wagoners, cooks, and



Crispus Attucks (above and center left) was a runaway slave from Framingham, Mass. He led the charges against British troops in the "Boston Massacre."

other general support labor. In Western Maryland, "Negro Mountain" is named for a black man who died there fighting Indians.

Crispus Attucks was the first African American to die in battle for the United States in what led up to the Revolutionary War, which freed this country from British rule.

To understand the wide web of prejudice that still lurks about us, we only need to fast-forward to present day America when two young women were captured and injured as prisoners of war. Jessica Lynch, a young white woman became the poster child for women in the armed forces, while Shoshana Johnson, a young African-American woman had little mention in the media coverage. Only when blacks and whites alike complained in mass

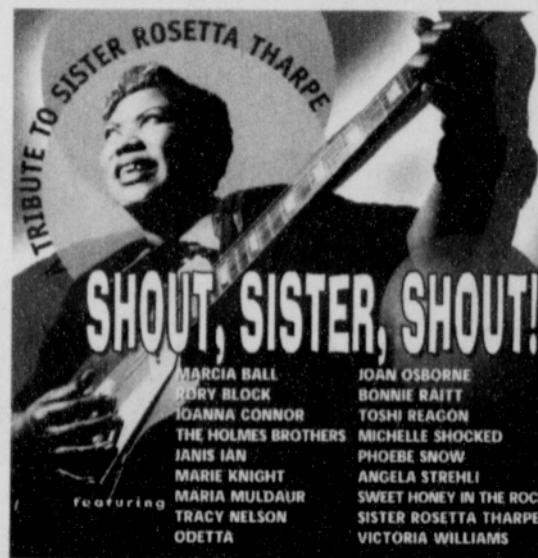
continued ▼ on page A6



Sketch of black Revolutionary War soldier Salem Poor.

CELEBRATE BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Shout, Sister, Shout!



Tribute to Sister Rosetta Tharpe

\$12⁹⁹ CD

MC Records

Offer Good Thru 2-29-04

EASTSIDE
3158 E. BURNSIDE
503-231-8926

MUSIC MILLENNIUM

www.musicmillennium.com

NORTHWEST
801 NW 23RD
503-248-0163

NEW SEASONS MARKET

Chocoholic?

Visit us this weekend for a chocolate tasting.
Saturday • 11:00am-5:00pm



The friendliest store in town.

EASY & FUN TO SHOP • LOCALLY OWNED & OPERATED

CONCORDIA
NE 33rd & Killingsworth
Portland OR 97211
503 288 3838
Open 8am-10pm

ORENCO STATION
NE 61st & Cornell Rd.
Hillsboro OR 97124
503 648 6968
Open 8am-10pm

RALEIGH HILLS
7300 SW Beaverton-Hillsdale Hwy
Portland OR 97225
503 292 6838
Open 8am-9pm

SELLWOOD
1214 SE Tacoma
Portland OR 97202
503 230 4949
Open 8am-10pm