

Vet

continued from page 1

Ever since seeing his uncle come home in his uniform from the 10th Cavalry – of Buffalo Soldier days – did Jones want to join the armed forces. There was also another reason.

“Money,” he said. “We didn’t have no money in those days. It was during the depression.”

Graduating high school from a rural area in Kansas, his mother wouldn’t let him join

If anyone were to ask, ordered the officer, the murdered troop died in battle.

“What can you do when you’re a million miles from home,” Jones asked. “They shot this kid and we could’ve gotten him out. I thought that was dirty. I don’t know if he’s living now, but I doubt it”

Jones says he never saw that officer again and thinks that he probably was killed in action.

The White officers told the Black soldiers it was because their food had been lost at sea, but Jones said he knew they were lying. He’d seen the pits where tons of food had been dumped

right away. Finally, at the age of 19, he enlisted in Coffeerville, Kansas and was sent to basic training in Fort Leonard Wood.

“Just before basic was finished, war broke out,” he said. “We were shipped out the next day to the South Pacific.”

Heading through the Panama Canal, onto Australia, Jones and his crewmates finally landed on New Caledonia for training.

During a standdown on the island – Jones’ all Black 810th and 811th Engineer Aviation battalions were assigned to build bridges. A weapon carrier fell on an unsuspecting troop, pinning him.

“We had all sorts of equipment, we could have pulled the truck off him,” he said.

An officer came over and said we can’t get it off him.

“He pulled out his pistol and shot him in the head,” says Jones.

In Guadalcanal, Jones says that it was hot, humid and full of mosquitoes. It’s not like the ships were any better. He said that on one carrier, the head had overflowed sewage into the sleeping quarters, causing many soldiers to sleep on deck.

“You couldn’t get any rest,” he said. There were weeks when the entire unit would go without food. The White officers told the Black soldiers it was because their food had been lost at sea, but Jones said he knew they were lying. He’d seen the pits where tons of food had been dumped.

“I started going to different tribes on the island to get food,” he said. “Fish and chicken. It wouldn’t help completely, but it was something.”

Iwo Jima was the big battle, he says. “Our main objective was to keep the airstrip open,” he said. “It’s just a rock. Not



PHOTO BY BRIAN STIMSON

Visit The Skanner’s YouTube Channel to watch an excerpt from the interview with Russell Jones.

tree in sight.”

Getting to the island – getting to any of the islands – for Jones was a worry.

“Me, not knowing how to swim, I was really in trouble.”

At one point, trying to board the small boats, he had to descend a rope ladder. He missed the mark, fell into the water and the next thing he knew, he woke up next to his battle buddies. Someone, he doesn’t know who, had pulled him out of the water.

For much of the war, Jones said he got used to tolerating the racism and mistreatment by his senior officers.

“Aboard the ship, they stripped all our ammunition away from us,” he said, leaving the Black soldiers only with the rounds in their rifles. His superiors told them to ‘take

(bullets) off the bodies on the beach.”

“Well, I thought that was a poor answer,” he said. “The Japanese weapons and our weapons are different ... Anyway, I got the message. Later on I asked, ‘Why is it that all the Afro-American units have White officers, and they said ‘That’s because they’re used to taking care of slaves.’ I thought that was a good answer. I thought that’s what they would say.”

During R&R, he learned that his entire unit was wiped out. The war was over for him.

Spending years in the South Pacific, Jones says he has many more stories to tell.

He continued his military service, making a career out of it and was promoted to the rank of sergeant.

Library

continued from page 1

they feel about library programs and services. It’s impacted by how the community feels about those same things and what they value. So I want to learn all of that. I’m also geographically challenged so trying to figure out how to get around to each of the libraries is going to take a little bit longer.

The Skanner News: What are the major challenges facing libraries in general?

Marcellus Turner: Libraries in general across the country are facing a couple of things: remaining relevant and of value, which is not going to be a hard one for the Seattle Public Library because it is such a valued library system. The second thing is funding, trying to find stable funding. And the third thing is trying to stay on top of technology and where it is taking us in the library field in general.

The Skanner News: How is technology affecting libraries?

Marcellus Turner: We are moving into an information age, where everything hinges on knowledge and information. Where technology comes into play is that information is now available at your fingertips and at your earlobes because it’s coming at you through all of your mobile devices; it’s mobile in itself because you can take that quest for information wherever you need to go. So those are the types of things that we are doing. And then everything is becoming information, from how to build something to directions to an event. All of that “is” information and people want it when they want it where they want it.

The Skanner News: There is a challenge there in that not everyone can afford these

mobile devices.

Marcellus Turner: Right and I think that’s where the library plays a very crucial role which is providing access to information for those who do not have a means to get to

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information through a mobile device.

The Skanner News: What would surprise people about what libraries are doing?

Marcellus Turner: I don’t know if people would be surprised at what we’re doing or if it is more of an Aha.

Libraries are playing an important role in connecting the community through, for example, activities. That’s something libraries have always done, but I think we are going to see a lot more of that. Libraries have an opportunity to partner with the community, to really be a partner through hosting events and offering our facilities so that neighborhoods can come together.

The Skanner News: How can libraries help get kids reading?

Marcellus Turner: We can keep them engaged and keep them involved. I think people have to recognize that whatever kids

are reading is useful. Whether it is the back of a cereal carton or if it’s a comic book, then that is going to be valuable for them. And then they will move on to reading other things.

The Skanner News: What are you reading at the moment?

Marcellus Turner: I am reading a couple of things – and one’s an audio book. I’m listening to Push, the book that the movie Precious was based on. And I’m reading ‘Slow Love’ by Dominique Browning. She was with a major publishing house and she lost her job. She was the publisher of Conde Nast’s House and Garden magazine. So the book is about her experience. And I’m reading a third book called Giraffe. I’ve been reading it for a while, so I apologize. I love Giraffe – so that’s the first thing. I thought it was going to be a bit more interesting that it was.

It’s about an experiment where Giraffe’s were moved from one country to another to populate and bring Giraffes as a zoo item for a country. Somewhere in this it goes awry and I’m not sure what happens. I haven’t made it that far yet. That’s what I’m reading.

The Skanner News: Fiction or Non-Fiction?

Marcellus Turner: Both. Giraffe is fiction. Slow Love is a nonfiction. Actually it has a full title. ‘Slow Love. How I lost my job, put on my pajamas & found happiness.’ Push is fiction. And I just read a book about the editor of Parade magazine who lost his

job and found happiness. So I’m not sure why I’m on that track but I think I like it because it’s more about how they found happiness.

The Skanner News: In Portland, every year the library and the colleges choose a book that everyone can read together. Is there a book that you would recommend that everyone should read?

Marcellus Turner: I’m laughing because in fact it was the Seattle Public Library that started the City Reads program. So it will be exciting to go into that. But you know there are just so many great books out there that I couldn’t even begin to recommend one that everyone should read. My favorites tend to differ from others. But I find a lot of value and interest in what others suggest so I’m always happy to just hear what the book title is and then read it.

The Skanner News: Anything else you want to let people know?

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Marcellus Turner: I’d like to send a warm ‘hello’ to Vailey Oehlke, (director of Multnomah County Libraries). And I’d like her to know that I’m very glad that I’ll be in the same part of the country.