

War Era Story Project 2012

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Daniel Field

Recently I had the great pleasure of seeing the movie, *The Help*, and then reading the book upon which the movie was based. This historical-fiction novel has the underlying theme of racial discrimination in the South before and during the Civil Rights Movement.

The movie and the book took me back to my World War II days. I was born and raised in Steubenville, Ohio, and during my growing-up years I was never anywhere near the Mason-Dixon Line. That changed when I entered the army at age 19. After basic training and technical school, I was shipped to Daniel Field, an Army Air Force Base in Augusta, Georgia.

As I age, it becomes difficult at times to remember what happened yesterday. But when I think back to the happenings that occurred over the months following my arrival at Augusta, I'm amazed at how well I remember them. Certainly not in fine detail, but the main gist of each situation is there.

In order to bring these situations into sharper focus, I've used description and dialog; not verbatim of course, but as words might have then been spoken. In no way am I presenting a "Protest Paper." I'm not an antagonist trying to push some agenda, nor am I trying to criticize anyone. I just want to tell my story.

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This, then, is a remembrance of a very short period of my life. The year was 1943. Hopefully, people of all races too young to know those times now realize and appreciate all that the colored people had to endure in those days. (Colored is what they were then called and I will refer to them as such throughout this essay.) What follows are some of the very disturbing situations that I witnessed firsthand:

I soon became aware of the differences between how Steubenville and Augusta treated their colored people. Steubenville had a good-sized colored population and I was aware of some discrimination against them by bigoted and misguided white people. There were also some cross burnings by the Ku Klux Klan on top of a high hill across the Ohio River in West Virginia. The Klan had very little, if any effect on anyone in Steubenville. The only forced segregation I remember was that the colored people were restricted to their own swimming pool. Otherwise, I wasn't aware of any other legislated prohibition against the colored folks.

Not so in Augusta. Segregation in the South was absolute.

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At Daniel Field I became part of a new unit called the 15th Replacement Control Depot (RCD). Its organizational chart called for a sergeant in the position I was assigned to, and as a result I was promptly promoted from private first class to sergeant, skipping the rank of corporal. Lucky me.

The mission of the 15th RCD was to receive soldiers from all parts of the country who were at the time unassigned and then transfer them to where they were needed. Some got turned around quickly; others lingered and became known as "Casuals."

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After a couple of months of operation, we began receiving only colored troops. I couldn't comprehend why colored soldiers were sent to the Deep South unless we were the only RCD in the country; and if we were the only one, why did we have the number 15? That was an example of the many strange things the military did, especially in wartime.

The armed forces at that time were still totally segregated. All of the colored troops were already facing discrimination in the military; now those from the North, although they knew plenty of discrimination at home, were soon to face a more vicious rejection from the civilian population. It was a double whammy.

As a result, morale was almost non-existent.

Due to the segregation it was necessary to find or build barracks, mess halls, recreation areas and any other facilities needed to provide "separate and equal" military accommodations.

In a short period of time we were inundated with enough colored troops to form four squadrons of approximately 120 men each.

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"Milosevich!" called out Captain Bernardi in his big booming voice.

"Sir?" I replied.

"We just got word that another group will arrive shortly. Get ready to receive them."

"Sir, all four of our Squadrons are filled to capacity."

"Well, damn it, create another one."

"Yes sir. That will be Squadron E."

"And while you're at it, appoint yourself as the acting first sergeant."

"Yes sir"

Oh, boy. Now I was in for it. In the Army, being made acting something was an invitation to who knows what, especially if the acting part was for a rank above your own.

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Just about every week, at least one soldier from Squadron E went away without leave (AWOL). Where he went off to, I had no idea, but he was probably shacked up with a newfound girlfriend right in Augusta or nearby. It would have been very difficult for him to leave the area what with the military police checking all means of transportation.

Sooner or later, he was either captured and brought back, or he returned voluntarily, knowing that if he stayed away too long, he would be classified as a deserter, which was a much more serious infraction.

In short order, he faced a court-martial and I, as the “first sergeant,” was required to testify that Soldier So-and-so, known to me only as a name on my roster, was not present for roll call on some given morning, nor could he be accounted for. He, of course, was found guilty and was penalized by reduction of any rank he might have had and/or a fine and perhaps a short time in the guardhouse. I never knew of a prison sentence.

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One afternoon I had a possible mutiny on my hands. I was outside the barracks waiting for the men to fall out for the afternoon roll call and duty assignments. No one came out. I went into the barracks to see what was going on.

“Hey, why aren’t you guys at roll call?” I shouted.

“G’damnit, Sarge,” the man who seemed to be in charge said, “The food’s been bad all along, but that slop they fed us today was the last straw.”

The expletives that came my way were loud, mean and raw. There’s no need for me to delineate them here; suffice it to say those guys were really mad.

“It was so bad that we decided not to fall out,” the in-charge guy spit out, “You and all your white bosses can just go to hell.”

“Whoa!” I shouted. “A bad meal in the army is no reason to disobey orders.” That was greeted by more yells and cussing. “Okay, I’ll go to the mess hall and see what’s going on, but no matter what, if you’re not in formation in twenty minutes, you’ll be in a heap of trouble!”

I hurried to the mess hall. “Where’s the mess sergeant?” I demanded.

“Over here, Sarge, and I know why you’re here,” came the reply.

“So what the hell happened?”

“What we cooked today was oyster stew and sorry to say, it turned out lousy. Here, test it yourself.”

I tried to but the smell was so bad I couldn’t get it to my mouth. “Christ, no wonder the guys were so worked up.”

Twenty minutes since I left the barracks, the troops were still not in formation. I had no option but to get to a phone and report the situation to my headquarters. Within minutes, several military police arrived along with personnel from Intelligence. They grilled me as to what happened. After I explained the situation, I told them that I went to their mess hall to investigate and I agreed with the men that the so-called oyster stew wasn't fit for a dog to eat.

Two officers from headquarters soon arrived and they, along with the military police, talked with a couple of representatives of the men. The officers were very blunt in explaining the seriousness of their actions and told them in no uncertain terms just what the penalty for refusing to return to duty could be.

In all fairness to the men, the officers stormed into the mess hall and raised hell with the mess personnel. They returned to tell the men that the mess officer would be contacted and put on notice that a recurrence of providing such bad food would not be tolerated.

The officers' threats and the likelihood of better chow convinced the men that they had best forget about defying orders any longer and to act more like soldiers. Finally, they got into formation, ready for duty.

The officers were satisfied. Intelligence was satisfied, and Lord knows I was satisfied. The matter was settled and soon forgotten.

That was a little scary.

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The colored troops received passes to town on the same schedule as the white soldiers. But the colored personnel were never seen in the main part of Augusta. They were restricted to some area in town that I never saw.

That arrangement was the norm until the time when the city of Augusta was to have some kind of an election. The city had the gall to request that the base restrict all colored, but not white, soldiers to the base for the entire election day. Why? What kind of an election would have been bothered by the presence of colored troops who were already restricted to their own areas? I just couldn't make any sense of it.

The commanding officer of Daniel Field, a full colonel whose name I can't recall, called a meeting of all the base commands to discuss the request. I was there to represent the 15th RCD. Why me? Where was Colonel Zak, the Commander of the 15th, or Captain Bernardi or any of the other officers of our unit?

The room was somewhat crowded and as far as I could tell, I might have been the only enlisted man in attendance. The "discussion" was typical army. Whatever the colonel proposed was taken as an order. No questions.

The obvious answer to Augusta's request would have been to restrict the entire base, not just the colored troops. But the colonel proposed that Augusta's request be honored, for reasons he did not give. Only the colored soldiers were to be restricted; the white troops were to be allowed in town. In retrospect, I wondered if the merchants of Augusta had pressured the city to not include the restriction of white soldiers in their request. It was quite possible that the merchants feared the loss of revenue provided by the soldiers.

Not one person in attendance had the guts to suggest that all personnel be restricted. That would be the same as questioning the colonel's order. There I was, a lowly sergeant, barely 20 years old, in the presence of all that brass; wanting to speak up, but afraid to do so. I knew if I said one word, I probably would have gotten, at the very least, a severe chewing out.

The colonel augmented his decision by canceling all military exercises throughout the base for the election day and ordering a day of recreational activities for all personnel, including the colored. Baseball and softball games, tennis matches, horseshoe pitching, foot races and such were scheduled and enjoyed.

Apparently the colonel thought the fun day would remove the stigma of the insulting discrimination he had allowed to happen.

Despite the recreational fun it was a sad day. A very sad day.

To the white soldiers' lasting credit, a very high percentage of them boycotted the town and stayed on the base.

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As time went by, the Air Force stopped sending soldiers to the RCD. The last Casuals that we had processed were shipped out some time ago. Apparently our mission was accomplished.

And so, after about 16 or 17 months of service at Daniel Field that included many other happenings similar to, but not as memorable to me, as those I mentioned above, the day came when the 15th RCD was de-activated and each member of the unit was shipped to some place where he was needed; exactly as the 15th had done for so many other soldiers.