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TANYA LEE STONE FOREWORD BY ASHLEY BRYAN

COURAGE HAS NO COLOR

THE TRUE STORY OF THE TRIPLE NICKLES

AMERICA'S FIRST BLACK PARATROOPERS





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THE TRUE STORY OF THE TRIPLE NICKLES
America's First Black Paratroopers

TANYA LEE STONE



CANDLEWICK PRESS

To all the brave, patriotic people
who put their lives on the line for
their nation, no matter the personal
cost. And for Walter Morris,
without whom the Triple Nickles
might never have been.

T. L. S.

“Soldiers were fighting the world’s worst racist,
Adolph Hitler, in the world’s most segregated army.”

—Stephen Ambrose, historian

“Racial intolerance is undemocratic and un-American and can be defended on no intelligent grounds. Its existence in any degree in this country at a time when we are sacrificing our blood and our treasure for the destruction of fascism is an embarrassing contradiction; for racial intolerance is an element of fascism.”

—Evans Fordyce Carlson, colonel,
United States Marine Corps, 1945

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Ashley Bryan, now an award-winning children's book author and illustrator, found a way to paint and draw during his time as a stevedore in the Army's 502nd Central Postal Directory Battalion in World War II. This painting, done in France, shows a signalman in Ashley's company.

FOREWORD

Perhaps you may have read a book, a true account of an event that parallels your own experience. Tanya Lee Stone's story of the Triple Nickles, a story I did not know, does this for me. This story evokes so deeply what I have lived that the emotional passage for me was at times overwhelming. You see, I am a black veteran of World War II. I was drafted at the age of nineteen, out of art college in New York City, into a port battalion. I found my way of insisting on my desire to grow as an artist despite the exhausting work of a stevedore in the Army. From basic training to work on the docks of Boston and then Glasgow, Scotland, and into the surprise invasion of Normandy at Omaha Beach, I survived — with a sketch pad in my gas mask and helped by the warm support of the men in my company. Reading this story moved me to take out some of the artwork I had done during the war and share it with Tanya.

As I read the story of First Sergeant Walter Morris and these black paratroopers, my steps and my mood kept me as one of them. All that you will read in this account is what we experienced. How does one survive and outlast the racism that was our daily fare at that time? You will read of how Morris led the men in his company to tap the essential humanity within, transcend discrimination, and overcome the odds. It is an inspiring story of how one fights to assure that decency and pride survive.

Through her telling of the Triple Nickles' story, Tanya Lee Stone presents an all-inclusive picture of our struggle to realize the democracy we as Americans are still working toward. You will be caught up in the rhythmic pacing of events that underscore how the Triple Nickles served as a beautiful symbol of what we are as humans, not just as Americans. Despite the indecencies directed toward them *because* of color, the black paratroopers held rather to the decencies of people who honored the gifts of service to the nation *despite* color.

This is a moving story, touching, extraordinary. It is an important book.

— Ashley Bryan



A student from The Parachute School jumps near the Drop Zone that was later used by the Triple Nickles test platoon. July 24, 1943.



CHAPTER ONE

COURAGE HAS NO COLOR

What is it like to jump out of an airplane?

Imagine.

You are a paratrooper suiting up for a jump. Guys on either side of you are doing the same. One jokes about having a dream that the chutes didn't open. Another one says he's glad everyone paid the insurance.

You stand strong, even though you are loaded down with a hundred pounds of equipment strapped to your body — main chute, reserve chute, and combat gear.

The jumpmaster walks down the line, inspecting each of you, making sure you are properly fitted. Your life depends on it.

The joking stops.

The jumpmaster commands, "Load."

In jump order, your line of troopers — your stick — climbs into the plane. You follow the trooper in front of you to your spot and sit.

Now you are in the air, on the way to the Drop Zone. You're chatting with your buddies above the noise of the plane. "Puke buckets" are always on board, but you don't need one today.

Twenty minutes from the Drop Zone, it's time to get serious.

The red warning light near the door turns on.

The jumpmaster stands and shouts, "Get ready!"

He walks down the line, alerting each jumper with a word in the ear and a touch on the shoulder, making sure each and every man hears him.

You shuffle forward, sticking close to the man in front of you. The man in back of you does the same.

You watch as the troopers in front of you follow each command, quickly disappearing one by one out the open door of the plane.

And now it's your turn.

"Stand in the door!"

Nothing separates you from the sky but one last sliver of floor. The tip of your left boot hangs slightly over the edge.

The wind whips. The white is blinding, bright.

Adrenaline pulses through you.

You look down at a brown and green patchwork quilt of open fields and thickets of trees.

The roar of the engine pulses with the pounding of your heart.

You are over the Drop Zone. It's time.

The jumpmaster bellows, "GO!"

You jump.

You force yourself to focus. Count.

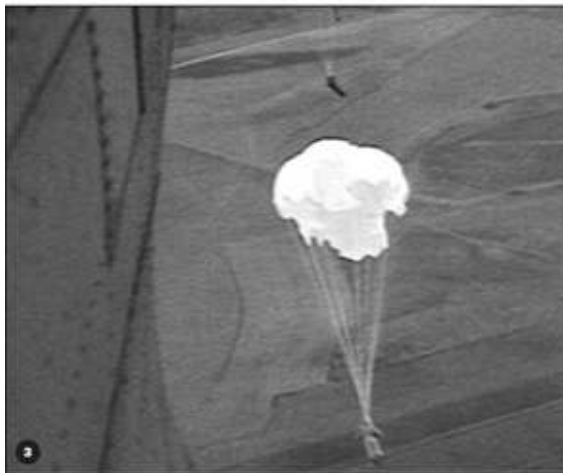
"One thousand, two thousand, three thousand . . ."

Your hand is on the reserve chute, ready if you need it.

Thwap! Your main chute opens, and the line snaps tight. You are floating down . . .

down . . .

down . . .



Stills from a video of the 555th on a training jump in 1944.

- 1) Jumper exits and next jumper prepares to follow
- 2) Static line pulls the parachute from the pack tray on jumper's back
- 3) Parachute begins to take shape
- 4) Parachutes are fully deployed

The rumble of the plane and the jumpmaster's shouts are gone.

Your ears fill with a hush unlike any other.

Extreme quiet.

Looking down, feet together, you see the ground through the tiny V space where the toes of yo

boots almost touch.

Looking up, you see the reassuring inside of your open chute.

Looking out, you see the other jumpers' chutes falling with yours like jellyfish swimming through a sea of sky.



A jumper tugs the front side of his chute to move forward as the wind pushes him back. This is called pulling a front slip. Soon, he will put his feet together for a safe landing.

The ground gets closer, rushing toward you as if wanting to swallow you whole.

For an instant, your billowy chute seems like it might cradle you on impact.

Then you hit the ground. Hard. *Thud!*

Even a perfect landing sends shock waves rolling up through the soles of your feet all the way your jaw, clapping it shut.

What did it take to be a paratrooper in World War II? Specialized training, extreme physical fitness, courage, and — until the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion (the Triple Nickles) was formed — white skin.

It is 1943. Americans are overseas fighting World War II to help keep the world safe from Adolf Hitler's tyranny, safe from injustice, safe from discrimination. Yet right here at home, people with white skin have rights that people with black skin do not.

What is courage? What is strength? Perhaps it is being ready to fight for your nation even when

your nation isn't ready to fight for you.



At the start of World War II, only one out of every 120 soldiers was black, and most were relegated to service duties. Here, Arnold R. Fesser, an oiler, maintains the moving parts of his ship's engine in October 1944.



CHAPTER TWO

SOLDIERS, NOT SERVANTS

Walter Morris stood tall and lean. He was born in Waynesboro, Georgia, in 1921. His family moved north to Newark, New Jersey, when he was just four years old. But Walter's mother sent him back to Georgia to live with his uncle during high school to get him away from the gangs and other bad influences in Newark. Soon after graduation, he joined the Army.

By the fall of 1943, Morris was a first sergeant, in charge of the Service Company of the 8th Central Postal Directory (TPS) at Fort Benning, Georgia. He took his responsibilities seriously but was quiet with a smile. The warm look in his eyes put people at ease. He was well liked by his men.



Walter Morris poses with his wife, Ruby, and baby daughter, Patricia, at Fort Benning.

The Army had begun training parachutists only three years earlier. The job of the men in the Service Company was simple: to guard the facility. Every day, guard duty began at four o'clock p.m. when the white paratrooper students finished their training and left the fields.

Through the night, until eight the next morning, these black servicemen made their rounds. They patrolled past the supply shed, past the jump towers, past the empty airfield, past the vacated exerci-

area.

— Morris's job as first sergeant was to make sure that the company commander's orders were being carried out so his 150 servicemen had what they needed — adequate food, clothing, and supplies — and did what they were supposed to. The men handled their job just fine. But they lacked the most important thing they needed: purpose.

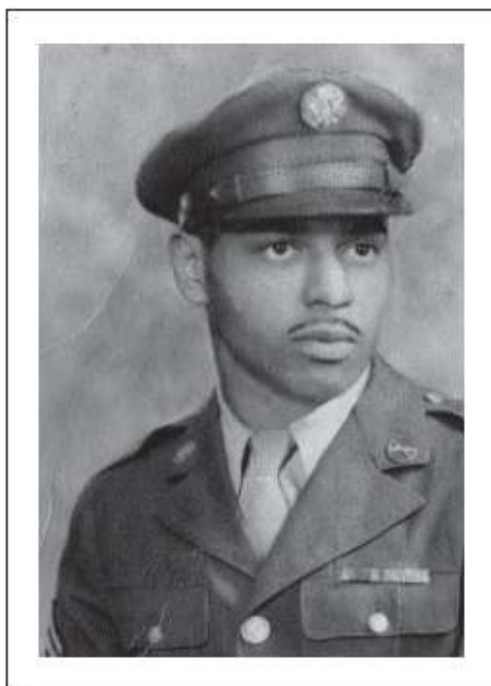
The dull, repetitive, daily task of guarding The Parachute School was taking its toll on them. Their spirits were down. During their off time, they had little interest in doing much other than sleeping.

“As first sergeant, I had to do something about it,” Morris said. He understood how his men felt.

These men were not alone. Most black soldiers in World War II were kept out of combat. Instead, the military often assigned them to service duties such as building roads, driving trucks, sweeping up, unloading cargo, cooking, doing laundry, serving meals, or guarding facilities. Of course, there was no honor in any of these jobs. But less so if the job is forced upon a person, if one is not offered other options. As one soldier put it, “It is hard to identify one's self with fighting a war, when all one does is dig ditches.”

Morris knew his men didn't feel much like soldiers. They weren't being given an opportunity to contribute to the war in a way that meant something to them. He wanted them “to act like soldiers, not servants.”

Clarence Beavers served with Morris. Born and raised in New York City, Beavers was in the National Guard before the draft. Then, in 1941, he was drafted and went to Fort Benning in April 1942, serving as a company clerk. Beavers is a thoughtful man with a great grin. But his smile fades when he talks about wanting more: “We wanted to be a full partner within the war. We did not want to go through this war saying, ‘I washed the dishes.’ . . . I had a grandfather who ran away from his master as a slave and joined the Union Army and fought as a soldier in the Union Army. And here I am coming down almost a hundred years later and I cannot even fight in a war that's about to eat up the whole world.”



Clarence Beavers was about to go overseas with a service unit when he got wind of a possible paratrooper opportunity at Fort Benning. He volunteered to go, but there were no training plans in place when he arrived. He was assigned to The Parachute School as a cadet, attached to the service company until training began.

The Right to Fight

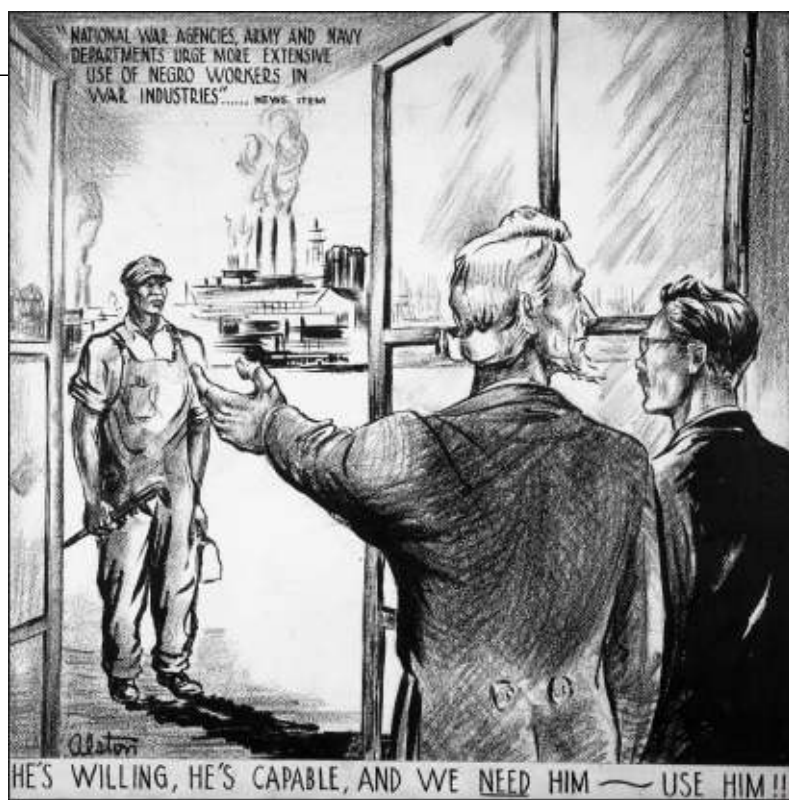
The U.S. military has a long history of racial prejudice, from the Revolutionary War, the Civil War and right up through World War II. Despite the fact that African-American soldiers had served the Army with distinction in World War I, there were outspoken and unfair criticisms about their abilities. In a book called *The Employment of Negro Troops*, considered an official part of U.S. Army history, author Ulysses Lee quotes white officers of all-black units from World War I saying, “The Negro should not be used as a combat soldier” and “The Negro must be rated as second class material, though due primarily to his inferior intelligence and lack of mental and moral qualifications.” No matter how false, these were difficult statements to overcome.

By 1940, neither the Navy nor the Marines had room for blacks outside of service roles. And of the approximately 500,000 soldiers in the Army by the end of 1940, only a little more than 4,000 were black. These men were mostly in the 2nd Cavalry Division and the 92nd and 93rd Infantry Divisions, which reactivated all-black divisions from World War I. (The 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments, which had remained active, were also folded into these divisions.)

Colonel Howard Donovan Queen, an African-American soldier who served in World War I and was later a commanding officer of the all-black 366th Regiment of the 92nd Infantry Division in World War II, said, “World War I [had been] one big racial problem for the Negro soldier. World War II was a racial nightmare. . . . The Negro soldier’s first taste of warfare in World War II was on Army posts right here in his own country. This in its turn caused considerable confusion in the minds of the draftees as to who the enemy really was.”

Black leaders had been fighting for the military to end segregation and increase opportunities for black soldiers. They wanted not only “the right to fight”; they also wanted to be treated as equals alongside white soldiers. In 1939, the Committee for the Participation of Negroes in National Defense was created, led by African-American scholar and historian Rayford W. Logan, who had left the Army during World War I because he was so disturbed by the discrimination he suffered as a soldier. Logan, accompanied by members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the black newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier*, spoke to the House of Representatives Committee on Military Affairs to ask for the number of black military personnel to be increased.

Logan and his fellow advocates also wanted African-American soldiers to be used to their fullest instead of being limited to labor duties. They knew that, in order for this idea to work in practice, antisegregation and other nondiscrimination rules would need to be put into effect. White senators Sherman Minton (who became a Supreme Court justice), Robert Wagner (who ran for president in 1944), and Harry H. Schwartz (who also argued in favor of training black pilots) agreed and proposed amendments to the Selective Training and Service Bill. These amendments were rejected.



During World War II, African-American artist Charles Alston was hired by the Office of War Information to create cartoons that would gain black support for war effort. This 1943 cartoon depicts war agencies urging the use of black workers.

New York representative Hamilton Fish (whose grandfather had served as U.S. secretary of state after the Civil War) went back to the table and asked for an amendment stating that “draftees be selected in an impartial manner” and that “there should be no discrimination in either the selection or training of men.” Although this amendment was approved, some Congress members did not believe it would be enough to end segregation in the military. President Roosevelt agreed and issued a presidential release on October 9, 1940, that supported some of what the black leaders wanted but also included many frustrating conditions.

For example, blacks were given more chances to be officers, but only of all-black units. The presidential release implied that segregation would continue because it had “been proved satisfactory over a long period of years.” It also said that desegregation “would produce situations destructive to morale and detrimental to the preparation for national defense.” In other words, putting black and white soldiers together would cause more trouble than it was worth and could be downright dangerous.

Humble and Sweet . . . or Angry Rebels

What explains this frame of mind? America was in the throes of change. Some regions still enforced racial separation, while in other areas, mainly large cities, pockets of people of different races coexisted peacefully. And although there had been migrations of blacks from the South to the North in the past — especially after the Civil War and World War I — at the onset of World War II, southern blacks and whites flocked to cities in the West, Midwest, and North, where the war industry was offering employment. While people in these areas tended to be more accepting of blacks than those in the South, these regions were not without problems. Some tensions arose because whites suddenly had to share resources such as jobs and housing with large numbers of new black residents. When resources were limited, and ideas of white superiority lingered, clashes broke out.



July 1939. An African-American man drinks from a water cooler marked COLORED in Oklahoma City.

Segregation was still common practice in the South — in jobs, schools, housing, transportation and public areas such as swimming pools, movie theaters, restaurants, and hotels. Blacks who did not follow the rules were in danger. In Eustis, Florida, a little boy named George Starling grew up hearing horror stories of lynching and other violent acts inflicted upon blacks for something as small as drinking from the wrong water fountain — or for no reason at all. He told Isabel Wilkerson, who wrote about Starling’s experiences in her book *The Warmth of Other Suns*, how he felt: “It seemed as if the whole world was crazy. . . . All this stepping off the sidewalk, not looking even in the direction of a white woman, the sirring and ma’aming and waiting until all the white people had been served before buying your ice cream cone, with violence and even death awaiting any misstep.”



During segregation, movie houses like this one in Mississippi had a separate entrance that black patrons had to use.

Stereotypical ideas about blacks came through loud and clear in the media, too. Movies and radio programs categorized African Americans as humble and sweet servants to white bosses, as clowns and jesters happy to entertain, or as angry rebels who needed to be put in their place. In 1915, D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* portrayed a southern pre-Civil War family getting along well with their slaves who "contentedly pick cotton" and "dance and perform for their master." Later in the film, though, the Civil War disrupts this happy scene and the blacks rebel and break free from their roles, but often violently or crudely and never with dignity. Griffith's movie was popular with white audiences, but the NAACP protested it, saying that it harmed society's view of blacks.

Gone with the Wind, the next big movie about the Civil War, came out in 1939. It reinforced more black stereotypes, especially through the character of Mammy, the strong but loving servant who is so loyal to her mistress that she fights off black soldiers to protect the southern plantation she calls home. She even chooses to stay with Miss Scarlett after being set free when slavery is abolished. The "mammy" figure, often a heavysset black woman wearing a maid's uniform or a kerchief on her head, showed up repeatedly across media forms — in cartoons, songs, television shows, movies, and advertisements. All of these portrayals reflected the idea that black Americans were childish, backward, or dangerous — and certainly not equal to their white counterparts.

Stereotypes in Early Movies and Advertising



Lena Horne was the first African American to sign a movie contract that promised not to cast her in negative roles. But then she guest-starred as herself and said, “They didn’t make me into a maid, but they didn’t make me into anything else either.” Directors placed her in scenes that could be cut when shown in the South. Southerners wouldn’t protest her non-subservient roles.



Stereotypes abound in *Gone with the Wind*. Offscreen, the black actors were banned from the premiere. Leading man Clark Gable threatened to boycott if Hattie McDaniel — who played Mammy — couldn’t go. For her role, McDaniel became the first African American to win an Academy Award.



The Birth of a Nation depicts happy pre-Civil War slaves, while post-war scenes turn them into vicious rebels. The Ku Klux Klan (which advocates white supremacy through violence) is glorified as a heroic group that stifles the rebels. The film sparked a resurgence of the KKK.

What Aunt Jemima would never tell them...she got her matchless flavor with a blend of four flours

When, once, you eat this fluff you'll find it the truest Aunt Jemima recipe to give the sweetest, best-tasting pancakes anyone ever had.

That's Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix. It's different to that recipe. It's produced here, of course, with all the advantages of modern milling methods.

Over the years no other pancake-mix has come out here, none ever made pancakes with such flavor as the Aunt Jemima brand. Really, it's true: You can't do better in a homemade batter or get with any other mix the matchless flavor of Aunt Jemima pancakes. Use a special that tops up that flavor with fresh egg whites in the delightful springtime way shown here.

ALPHEUS HILL'S. Please remember according to United States law the Aunt Jemima trademark. But don't let anyone around pretend to be of mixed heritage. Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix is made with only the best of products—no artificial white sugar.

Aunt Jemima was named after a song about a mammy, and the character became a trademark. She wore a head wrap associated with black female slaves, and the advertising campaign featured a former slave named Nancy Green, who made public appearances as Aunt Jemima. A fictional life for Aunt Jemima was created, which included her working on Colonel Higbee's Louisiana plantation, shown in this 1940s ad.

I'SE SURE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW!

STOP WASHING DISHES!

STOP SAVING GARBAGE!

New General Electric Sink Ends the Two Most Disasteful Kitchen Tasks

House Gets Just One Sink

GENERAL ELECTRIC SINK WITH DISHWASHER AND DISPOSAL

Who does this ad target — the black woman in the uniform being shown using bad grammar, or the person hiring her to wash the dishes? Hint: the consumer is not getting her hands wet. This 1930s GE ad assumes racial stereotypes that would not be tolerated today.

Yea Man
THEY SHO'D DO COME CLEAN SINCE
MONEL
CAME TO OUR HOUSE

RUXO GAS WATER HEATER

MONEL

This 1930s Monel ad is a typical example of negative stereotyping. It uses an illustration, a form that allows the art-ist to further exaggerate the cliché of the black mammy character happy to serve the likely white owner of that brand-new water heater.

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