

OREGON HISTORICAL MARKER PRE-APPLICATION FORM

I. GENERAL INFORMATION

A. Name of event, person, place or geologic feature to be commemorated:

555th Parachute Infantry Battalion

A segregated battalion becomes the only military unit in history to work as smokejumpers.

B. Sponsoring Group or Individual Illinois Valley Community Development Organization

Address 201 Caves Highway

City, State, Zip Cave Junction, Oregon 97523

C. Contact Person Roger Brandt - Chair

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II. PROPOSED LOCATION

A. Proposed location on state highway right-of-way or other public land:

The site is located at the historic Siskiyou Smokejumper Base on the east side of Illinois Valley Airport about four miles south of Cave Junction, Oregon (Lat/long: 42.103683,-123.681309).

The property is owned by Josephine County.

B. County:

Josephine

C. Current use of land and current landowner:

The site is within the grounds of the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base Museum in an area that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP Reference#: 06001035). The area is located adjacent to the airports primary tarmac and is used for camping, picnicking, events, and preservation of historic buildings. The airport is used for small, privately owned aircraft. No commercial aviation operations at this time.

D. Explanation of why the proposed site is appropriate:

The 555th was the only military unit in history to work as smokejumpers. Their secret assignment in "Operation Firefly" represents a unique aspect of firefighting history. The Siskiyou Smokejumper Base is the oldest standing aerial firefighter base in Oregon and the smokejumper museum at this site is regarded as the premiere location to tell the story of smokejumping history.

E. Site or Location Plan:

1. Include plan (sketch) of location of proposed marker(s). Indicate location of buildings, trees, roads, and all existing features.
2. Attach city or county map enlargement with proposed site(s) noted.
3. Attach photographs of proposed site(s).

III. MARKER STYLE

 45" x 60" panel on cedar mount
 X 28" x 36" panel on aluminum pedestal

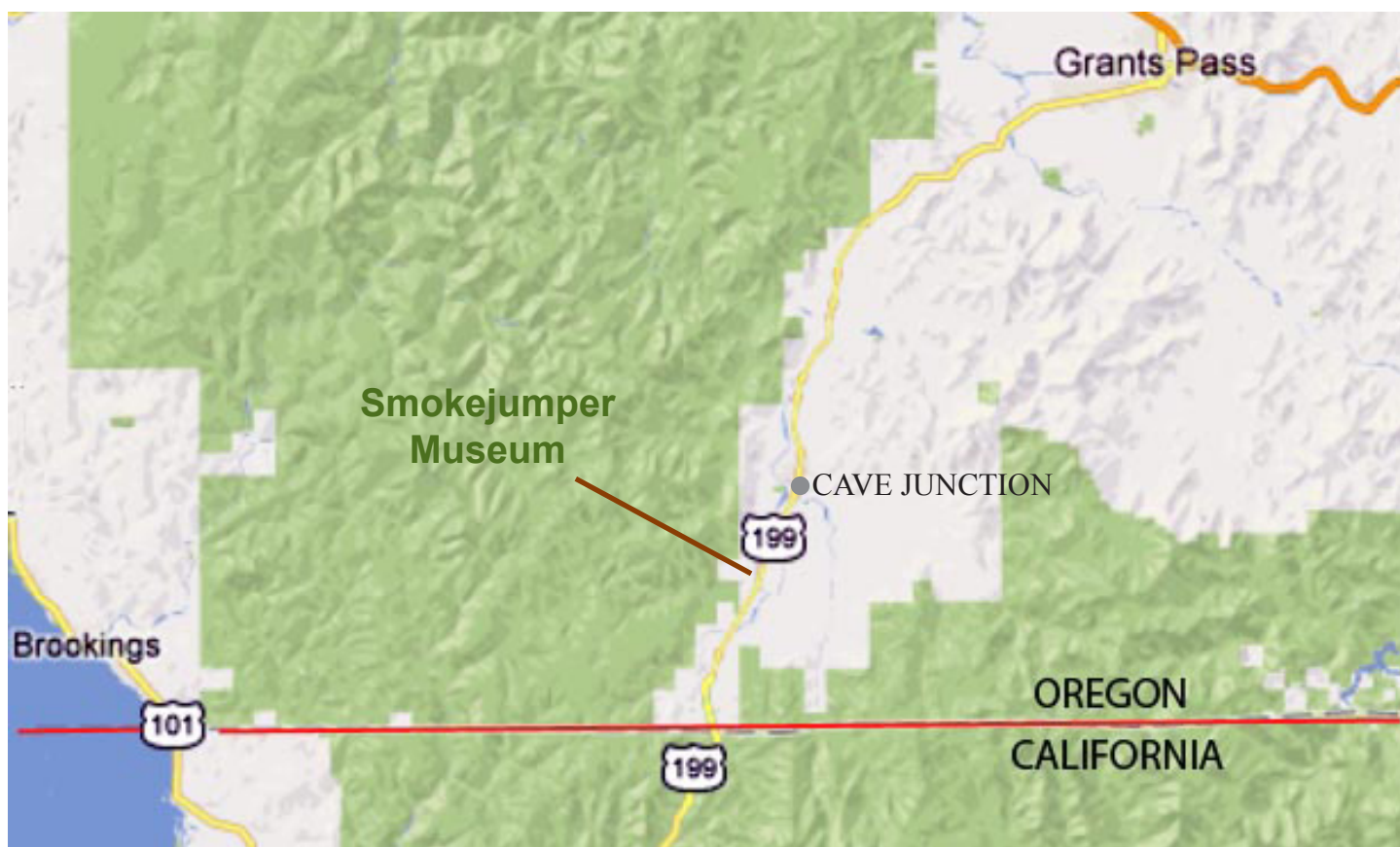
IV. MARKER THEME (A brief description of the person, event, place or geologic feature to be commemorated, including the historical significance.

The 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion, also known as the Triple Nickles [sic], was a segregated military unit of African American soldiers established during World War Two and became the only military unit in history to work as smokejumpers. This was the nation's first African-American parachute infantry battalion.

During the time they worked as smokejumpers, they were stationed in both Oregon and California with much of their work being done in secrecy under the code name "Operation Firefly." They were assigned to find and dismantle "Japanese balloon bombs," which were incendiary bombs attached to 30 foot diameter balloons launched in Japan and carried in jet streams to this continent. The secrecy was intended to avoid public awareness of this on-going attack to reduce panic among the population as well as not let the Japanese know that their intercontinental attack was working.

The first smokejumper death in American history was one of these troopers who died on August 6, 1945 near Roseburg, Oregon.

Maps showing the location of the proposed historic marker



The marker site would be at the historic Siskiyou Smokejumper Base, located about 35 miles south of Grants Pass and 15 miles north of the Oregon-California border. The nearest town is Caves Junction about four miles to the north of the historic base. Highway 199 is a heavily traveled tourist corridor.



An aerial view of the historic smokejumper base showing the proposed site of the 555th historic marker.

Site details

The historic smokejumper base can be reached by vehicle or airplane and has a wheelchair accessible, self-guided, tour around the base with interpretive waysides that show the base in its early history. The proposed site of the marker could be viewed from a vehicle or by pedestrian traffic and is on the self guided tour route.



A possible site for the 555th historic marker would be next to the historic administration building where tours of the smokejumper museum typically start.

A short history of the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion

The following is intended to outline events that may have played a role in the establishment of the 555th and their eventual deployment to Oregon where they contributed to the war effort as wilderness firefighters.

Events contributing to the establishment of the 555th

Since September 1939, war had been raging in Europe. Hitler's armies had virtually seized the mainland and Japan had attacked Manchuria and was making aggressive moves on the Pacific Rim. By the summer of 1940 Great Britain was under relentless attack by the German Luftwaffe, and concerns began to escalate about the potential of an attack on the United States. The nation began preparing for a possible invasion.

American defense industries began producing material of war and in the late summer of 1940, the Selective Service Act was passed, a peacetime draft intended to strengthen the military capability of the United States.

Many new jobs and training opportunities for high skilled, and better paying jobs, were created in private industry but the majority, if not all, were given to white applicants with African American applicants being constrained to work in menial jobs. This was the same situation that African Americans encountered when they entered military service.

On September 27, 1940, leaders of the African American community met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to speak about the many injustices in the hiring practices of the burgeoning defense industry. These leaders specifically mentioned blacks being excluded from almost all skilled trade unions, again limiting their access to high-paying jobs. The discriminatory practices in the military was also discussed.

Roosevelt took this issue to the military and private industry but met considerable resistance, some of which was based on the belief that African American's were not capable of doing skilled work as well as concern about the potential racial violence by white workers if they were forced to work side-by-side with African American workers.

The outcome of the 1940 meeting with the President was a continuance of the status quo and this played a role in prompting a prominent African American leader, A. Philip Randolph, to begin planning for a protest with the goal to rally 10,000 African Americans to march in the streets of Washington DC on July 1, 1941. The protest

was called the March on Washington Movement, and within two months of the March, the number of expected participants grew to 100,000.

Roosevelt was concerned that a large number of African Americans coming into the city might spark a violent response from white residents as well as white workers who would need to compete for jobs and training opportunities with African Americans if they were allowed to apply for higher skilled jobs. Roosevelt realized that riots involving whites violently suppressing a minority group would not be dissimilar to what the German Nazi were doing to Jews in Europe and would corrode the image of America as the champion of democracy.

On June 25, 1941, less than a week before the March on Washington was to take place, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802. It stated, "There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin." The Order also established a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to investigate reports of discrimination so legitimate complaints could be heard.

However, Executive Order 8802 did not address segregation and discrimination in the military, which was becoming an increasing issue as more African Americans were entering the service in compliance with the Selective Service and Training Act signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on September 16, 1940.

Inequality in the military became a legal issue in June of 1942 when Winfred W. Lynn received a letter saying he had been drafted. In response he wrote a letter saying "Please be informed that I am ready to serve in any unit of the armed forces of my country which is not segregated by race. Unless I am assured that I can serve in a mixed regiment and that I will not be compelled to serve in a unit undemocratically selected as a Negro group, I will refuse to report for induction."

The premise of his refusal to serve was based on his belief that induction into segregated units violated Section 4(a) of the 1940 Selective Service Act, which provided that "there shall be no discrimination against any person on account of race or color."

Lynn eventually went to the Supreme Court and lost the case. However, the case established a significant landmark because, for the first time, it brought before the Supreme Court the issue of segregation practiced not by the South, but by the federal government itself.

Another highly publicized effort to gain equal rights for African American soldiers was the "Double V" campaign spearheaded by The Pittsburgh Courier beginning on February 7, 1942. The Double V campaign demanded that African Americans who were risking their lives abroad receive full citizenship rights at home. This campaign was in response to incidents of African American soldiers who were in uniform being beaten, lynched, and subjected to segregation despite the fact that they had been overseas fighting in the war.

The need for desegregation in the military was brought into the lime light by the Lynn Case, Double "V" Campaign, and civilian protest. At the same time, many military leaders began to realize that their separate-but-equal policy of segregation was inefficient in terms of troop utilization as well as disastrous for the morale and discipline of black troops. However, segregation was entrenched in both military tradition as well as within the ranks of white soldiers, many of which had grown up in segregated communities.

In August 1942, the War Department established the Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies (McCloy Committee), which was charged with making the separate-but-equal policy work, an awkward undertaking considering the fact that separate was inherently unequal.

The 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was activated as a result of a recommendation made in December 1942 by the McCloy Committee but, under the separate-but-equal policy, they were to be a segregated unit.

The unit was officially activated on December 30, 1943 at Fort Benning, Georgia with its ranks filled by volunteers, many of which came from an infantry unit at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. It took several months to accumulate troops and provide training. By the time that 555th was ready to go to combat, the war in both the European and Pacific theaters were beginning to diminish. It looked like all the effort to be battle ready was going to be wasted but about this time a new military threat brought the 555th to Oregon.

555th goes to Oregon

In November 1944, the Japanese began an extended attack on the American mainland using large balloons to carry bombs across the Pacific Ocean from Japan. This assault continued for five months with an estimated 9,000 of these bomb carrying balloons being launched. The majority of the bombs carried by the balloons were incendiary devices intended to start forest fires.

Authorities became aware of the attack near the end of November when balloons were found in Wyoming and Montana and quickly came to the conclusion that the greatest danger from these balloons would be wildfires in the Pacific coastal forests. In response to this, the military started the Firefly Project, which later became known as Operation Firefly. On May 5, 1945, the 555th was assigned to the Firefly Project and sent to Pendleton Field, Oregon with a detachment assigned to Chico, California.

The balloon attack on America was kept a secret by the government for two reasons. One was to avoid panic by the American people if they became aware that the country was being attacked and the other was to avoid letting the enemy know that the balloon attack was successful. The secrecy was succeeded in keeping the Japanese unaware of the effectiveness of the attack but also prevented residents from taking precautions around unexploded ordinance. This may have contributed to the death of a family that was killed when an unexploded bomb went off near Bly, Oregon on May 6, 1945, a day after the 555th had been dispatched to Oregon.

In early April, bombing raids by Americans in Japan destroyed the factories that produced the hydrogen used in the balloons and this brought an end to the Japanese bomb attack on America.

Although the balloon bombs did not cause major fires, the 555th played a role in fighting forest fires during a time when “able bodied men” were away fighting in the war and natural fires from lightning or from human carelessness represented a major threat to the timber resources on the west coast. All in all, the 555th had 36 fire missions, which included 1,200 individual jumps.

Desegregation

Operation Firefly came to a close in August of 1945 and the 555th returned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where they continued working as a segregated unit of military paratroopers.

In September 1945, Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson appointed a board of three general officers to investigate the Army’s policy with respect to African Americans and to prepare a new policy that would provide for the efficient use of African Americans in the postwar Army. This became known as the Gillem Board.

On 27 April 1946, the Gillem Board issued Circular 124, “Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Postwar Army Policy.” The goal of this plan was to develop African American leaders and specialists based on individual merit and ability. However, the policy retained the tradition of segregation by combining segregated African American units with white units in composite organizations. African American units were still segregated but there was more opportunity for advancing into skilled jobs and positions of leadership. A separate but equal opportunity.

Assistant Secretary of War, Howard Petersen considered the composite unit one of the most important features of the new policy, and he wanted “at least a few” such units organized. He mentioned the assignment of the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion to the 82nd Airborne Division as a good place to begin.

However, the movement toward integrating African American units into composite units retained a feeling of segregation based on how the units were added to the white units. The procedure used by base commanders was to *attach* the segregated unit to white units rather than *assign* them as organizational elements of a parent unit. This was an important distinction because “*attached*” relayed a feeling of alienation among African American troops and lack of proprietary interest in the unit by base commanders. For this reason, Petersen’s suggestion of *assigning* the 555th to the 82nd was significant step toward integration.

In April 1946, Petersen attempted to negotiate the assignment of the 555th Parachute Battalion to the 82nd Airborne Division. He encountered resistance from the military command and the reason for this is best explained in Morris MacGregor’s, *Integration of the Armed Forces* (p131):

The commanding general of the Army Ground Forces, General Devers, justified attachment rather than assignment of the black battalion to the 82nd on the grounds that the Army's race policy called for the progressive adoption of the composite unit and attachment was a part of this process. Assignment of such units was, on the other hand, part of a long-range plan to put the new policy into effect and should still be subject to considerable study. Further justifying the status quo, he pointed to the [555th] division's low strength, which he said resulted from a lack of volunteers. Offering his own variation of the "Catch-22" theme, he suggested that before any black battalion was assigned to a large combat unit, the effect of such an assignment on the larger unit's combat efficiency would first have to be studied. Finally, he questioned the desirability of having a black unit assume the history of a white unit; evidently he did not realize that the intention was to assign a black unit with its black history to the division.

In December 1947, the 555th was attached to the 82nd Airborne Division as the 3rd Battalion of the 505th Parachute Infantry Brigade. Attached status would remain the general pattern for African American combat units for several years.

Around this same time, President Harry Truman appointed a Committee on Civil Rights that issued a report on October 29, 1947 with suggestions for "safeguarding the civil rights of the people." The formation of this committee was prompted by the President's concern over the assaults and murder of black servicemen and civilians in 1946. The report pointed out that segregation in the military not only denied black soldiers their right to fight but was also an "inefficient use of human resources," and that by allowing racism to exist in the military, the country was "not making use of one of the most effective techniques for educating the public to the practicability of American ideals as a way of life."

On July 26, 1948, seven months after the 555th was attached to the 82nd Airborne Division, President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981. This changed the segregation tradition by declaring a policy of equality of opportunity and treatment in the armed services.

Executive Order 9981 also created the Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Forces (Fahy Committee). In May 1949 the Fahy Committee proposed opening all army jobs and schools to qualified personnel without regard to race or color, assigning all Army personnel according to ability and need, and abolishing the racial quota that restricted the number of African Americans in the military to 10% of the total military force.

During this same time period, Secretary of Army Gordon Gray established the Chamberlin Board to investigate how Army commanders were responding to integration. In September 1949, the Chamberlin Board compiled the feedback from military commanders into a report that concluded the increased opportunities for colored soldiers would adversely affect the combat effectiveness and morale of the Army. This board, like the Gillem Board, favored the traditional pattern of segregation and retaining the 10 percent quota system. The main objection to desegregated units was based on black units having a high proportion of men with low classification test scores, although this may have been due to the military's long history of segregating African Americans into menial assignments. The board pointed out the advantages of not forcing African Americans into competition that they were unprepared to face and avoiding provoking the resentment of white soldiers with the consequent risk of lowered combat effectiveness. There was also concern about the placement of black officers and noncommissioned officers in command of white troops. The Chamberlin Board illuminated the fact that the upper echelon of the military was sustaining a substantial inertia against desegregation.

The practice of attaching rather than assigning black units continued until the end of 1949 when the Army began to assign a number of black units as organic parts of combat divisions. The Korean War accelerated desegregation because of a shortage of staff to fill positions. The outcome of desegregating the military during the Korean conflict illustrated that integration did not result in a loss of combat effectiveness as was predicted by the Gillim Report and Chamberlin Report.

The success of combat efficiency during the the Korean War resulted in the Eisenhower administration promoting the integrated military as an example of American freedom, which served to deny communist propaganda claiming that American-style democracy was institutionally racist and, hence, undemocratic.

In October 1953, the Army announced that 95% of African-American soldiers are serving in integrated units..

Conclusion

The 555th was the only military unit in American history to work as smokejumpers and it is noteworthy that they became involved in this program when smokejumping was only five years old, which makes them among the Nation's earliest smokejumpers. This distinguished element of American history took place in Oregon.

The 555th represents a transition in American civil rights during World War Two. Some of this transition was the result of civilian activism as well as the determination of African American soldiers to surmount prejudices from within the military.

One of the exemplary examples of this determination was a group of African American soldiers stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia in 1943. The following story comes from a 2013 interview with Walter Morris, one of the first noncommissioned officers in the 555th.

Black soldiers were relegated to guarding the parachute school from 4 p.m., when the white paratrooper trainees left the field, until the students returned at 8 the next morning. The morale of the African Americans was miserable. The post was largely segregated, including its movie theater and exchange. "When we walked past the post exchange, we could see the German and Italian prisoners sitting at tables . . . drinking and smoking, and we, in the same uniforms, could not go in." In an effort to boost their self-esteem, the African American soldiers voluntarily began a daily regimen of strenuous calisthenics similar to what they saw the white paratroopers doing during their training. Lt. Gen. Ridgely Gaither, commander of the parachute school, drove by one day and saw "50 black soldiers jumping up and down shouting, 'One thousand one, one thousand two'."

It was this spirit that contributed to the invalidation of the military's prevailing and entrenched stereotypes that African American's were unmotivated and incapable of achieving the same standards as white soldiers. The 555th demonstrated that it was not only possible for African American soldiers to achieve but do so within an environment of barriers that white soldiers did not need to surmount. This is a core element of the 555th story.

It is prudent to acknowledge members of the white community who faced adverse and controversial opposition among members of their own race to advocate for civil rights. The better known are President Roosevelt and his wife Elenore and President Truman but lesser known individuals like Secretary of War Petersen were no less important.

One of the white leaders who members of the 555th remember with praise and admiration is Major General James M. Gavin, a man who unlike so many white commanders of that time, was color-blind to the ethnic background of his troops. He is credited by the 555th as being instrumental in the push to get the 555th attached to the 82nd Airborne.

Members of the 555th risked their lives to protect Oregon's timberlands and for 70 years have received no recognition or gratitude from the State of Oregon for their valor and sacrifice. The 555th historic marker represents a first step in this direction.

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