



By Samuel W. Black, Director of  
African American Programs

## The 351st Field Artillery Regiment

On March 7, 1919, hundreds of Pittsburghers lined downtown streets to watch the members of the 351st Field Artillery Regiment parade through the city. This regiment—made mostly of Pennsylvanians and largely of Pittsburghers—triumphed in World War I over the Axis overseas and racism in the military. A line of officers led some of the notable young men of Pittsburgh's African American community. Those who were aware of the sable-colored men's challenges in their nation's Army cheered them, as did others oblivious to the plight but impressed by the handsome straight-back soldiers who manned the lines of the French eastern front and held back the German advance. These were fighting men, although their commanders in basic training didn't think so.

The 351st Field Artillery Regiment was not called that in 1917 when the first wave of volunteers and enlisted men arrived at Camp Lee in Petersburg, Virginia. According to John Clark, a *Pittsburgh Courier* writer and veteran of the 351st, "There were two chapters.... One was the part Pittsburgh men played in the development of this regiment, and the other was the commissioning of colored officers in artillery for the first time in the history of

The 351st Field Artillery held a reunion in 1942, with Donald Jefferson as chairman of the planning committee. The program includes a list of the regiment's members, photos of the event (such as entertainment by Floyd Fitch's Bombardiers), and a 13-page history of the regiment penned by Sergeant John Clark, later a columnist of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Registration was at the Hill District YMCA, and the opening business session was at the "Hill City Municipality Auditorium," but the rest of the reunion took place in South Park at The [Buffalo] Lodge. Events ended Saturday night with a Dug-Out Party at Greater Pittsburgh Lodge No. 115 on Lincoln Avenue in Pittsburgh's East End.

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the United States Army."<sup>1</sup> The first chapter reference by Clark includes the story of protest and triumph over racism in the U.S. Army. Nearly 300 Pittsburghers would be part of this historic regiment in the first wave of recruits.

The second wave of draftees included 500 men between the ages of 21 and 31 who arrived as the first contingent was transferred out. These recruits included some of the college-age Pittsburghers who would later lead the protest and become officers of historic importance. These men were assigned to the 504th and 505th service battalion. They did not carry rifles — instead they had shovels and picks, and were required to do manual labor including scrubbing floors. They were told by the white commanders that "all officers would be white, all non-commissioned officers would be white. But there might be a possibility of some very good soldier becoming a first class private."<sup>2</sup> In reaction to these conditions, 15 Pittsburghers decided to protest by writing letters, but not just to their families.

The great debate among African Americans was whether to support the war effort in light of the racist treatment of federal workers and the continual rise of racial terror in America. President Woodrow Wilson had segregated federal employees and viewed the racist film *Birth of a Nation* at the White House. *Crisis*

magazine editor W.E.B. Dubois opined that African Americans should fight in the Great War to prove their patriotism and dedication to the nation. The fight against lynching, Jim Crow, and racial violence would be set aside as ranks would be closed around the war effort. The idea was to show loyalty to the nation—their nation—during war and, in turn, white America would open up its democracy to allow full citizenship to African Americans.

The men of the 504th and 505th service battalion found out the hard way that the Army had other ideas. Camp Lee reserved "tents without floors or bedding" for African American soldiers while their white counterparts lived in barracks.<sup>3</sup> Those 15 Pittsburgh protesters were reduced to nine but all still wanted to serve in a combat unit. The nine included John Carter Robinson, Donald Jefferson, Austin Norris, William Curtis, Ode Hall, James Haney, Guy Captain, Armour Strothers, and Henry Alfred Dillard. They knew and understood that a combat veteran stood a better chance to attain the American dream than a service veteran. After all, these were college men and law school graduates who interrupted their careers and matriculation at Pitt, Yale, and Carnegie Tech to answer the call of the draft and serve their country.

The committee decided to investigate Camp Lee and also to inform the Secretary of War Newton D. Baker of the issues exhibited at Camp Lee. Baker assigned his newly appointed special assistant for Negro Affairs, Emmett Scott, to visit Camp Lee and further report on the racist conditions there. Only earlier in the year, June 1917, did the War Department establish an African American officers program at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. "On October 14, 1917, in a historical first, the Army commissioned 639 black officers: 106 captains, 329 first lieutenants, and 204 second lieutenants."<sup>4</sup>

The influence of the Pittsburgh Citizens Committee not only brought Emmett Scott to Camp Lee but Vann decided it was best to send clergy to Petersburg rather than an attorney or journalist. So the Rev. Shelton H. Bishop of the Church of the Holy Rosary in Pittsburgh arrived there on November 10, 1917. Rev. Bishop investigated the claims by the Pittsburgh nine and interviewed officers and soldiers and made "promises that he would report back to the 'Home Committee' that conditions were just as bad as claimed."<sup>5</sup> Within five days of Rev. Bishop's visit, 15 men, including the Pittsburgh protesters, were transferred to Camp Meade, Maryland, and assigned to the 351st Field Artillery Regiment. This marked the beginning of another historic advance: for the first time in U.S. military history, an African American artillery regiment was established.

The story does not conclude at Camp Meade. A select few, including the Pittsburgh protesters, were chosen for officers' training school and received commissions as sergeants and later lieutenants in the regiment. The 351st left Camp Meade for France on June 16, 1918. The regiment landed at Brest, France, on June 26 and proceeded to training in Montmorillon, Lathus, Vienne, and Saulge. On August 12, the regiment proceeded to a French artillery range at LaCourtine, Creuse, in central France. The 351st specialized in

firing the 6-inch or 155-millimeter shells and won honors on the range with its gun squads. Finally on October 29, 1918, the 351st attached to the 2nd U.S. Army Division and moved on to several other cities.

Between November 4 and 11, the 351st was part of the attacks at Pagny, Cheminot, Bois Fréhan, and Bois de la Côte Champey in the eastern front along the Moselle River. "The attack on Bois de la Côte and Champey was the last battle in which the 351st took part."<sup>6</sup>

After the armistice of November 11, 1918, the regiment reconnected with its African American lieutenants at Couterens. The delay in rejoining the officers with their artillery regiment was believed by some to be intentional

and part of the speculation that the Army was continuing to undermine the development of African American fighting men. Regardless of those circumstances, the 351st Field Artillery Regiment served the United States and the city of Pittsburgh proudly during World War I. 🌟

Logo: *Spirit Form* Freedom Corner Monument, Pittsburgh, Pa., © artist Carlos F. Peterson.

<sup>1</sup> John Clark, "The 351st Field Artillery History AEF 1918" in 351st Field Artillery AEF 1918: Reunion, August 20, 21, 22, 1942.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>3</sup> Gail Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military From the Revolution to Desert Storm* (New York: Random House, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 21.

**Uniform of Donald Jefferson.**  
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**Lt. Donald Jefferson, one of the original members of the 351st Field Artillery.** Jefferson was a graduate of Fifth Avenue High School before enlisting in 1917. After the war he completed his training at the University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy and owned the Lincoln Drug Store in East Liberty for 40 years.

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