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The Houston Mutiny of 1917

Garna Christian

One of the deadliest race riots in the strife-ridden World War I period, the Houston Mutiny, otherwise known as the Camp Logan riot, resulted in more than twenty deaths and the largest number of executions in the history of the United States military.

The mutiny occurred on the night of August 23, 1917, less than a month after the Third Battalion of the African-American 24th Infantry arrived in Houston, Texas. Companies I, K, L, and M, consisting of 645 enlisted men and seven officers under the command of Col. William Newman, and later Maj. Kneeland S. Snow, drew the assignment of guarding the construction site of a National Guard encampment in a wooded area five miles west of the city. Houston, which had rapidly developed into the largest municipality in the state, encompassed the largest black community in Texas and bore the image of a progressive and relatively racially-tolerant Southern city. The local administration, supported by a booster press, keenly recognized the financial rewards of a military base and understood the necessity of cooperating with the War Department in the garrisoning of black soldiers. The regiment, composed largely of Southern recruits familiar with regional mores, had compiled an envious military record of service in Cuba, the Philippines, and Mexico. Nevertheless, Houston remained a thoroughly segregated city and contained a typical share of bigots who placed their racial prejudices above the collective welfare. The soldiers, while thoroughly professional and disciplined, believed that their contributions to the security of their country had earned them the respect of the populace and recognition of their constitutional rights.

A series of minor racial incidents preceded the mutiny. From the first days, the enlisted men complained of racial slurs from white construction workers and harassment from the police and trolley conductors. On the

morning of the riot, Houston policemen broke up a dice game of black youths with gunshots and burst into the adjoining house of Sara Travers, forcing her into the street in her bathrobe. Pvt. Alonso Edwards approached the scene to question the procedure and was pistol-whipped by Officer Lee Sparks, already under investigation for shooting a black suspect. Later that afternoon, Corp. Charles Baltimore, a military policeman, requested information from Sparks on the incarcerated Edwards. The officer clubbed and fired shots at the fleeing Baltimore. Unfounded rumors of Baltimore's demise spread among the soldiers, prompting Snow to summons the beleaguered corporal to appear before the troops. Nevertheless, the soldiers remained sullen, moving the colonel to postpone a downtown watermelon party, cancel passes for the night, and augment the camp guards. Adding to the tensions, acting 1st Sgt. Vida Henry, later accused of leading the mutiny, told Snow of possible trouble from the men.

Shortly thereafter, Snow witnessed a group of soldiers raiding the ammunition tent, followed by a cry of an approaching mob. Soldiers raced for their rifles, formed a defensive line within the camp, and a hundred or more of the men marched armed toward the city. Probably intending to attack the police station, the soldiers fired at persons along the way. Guards from Camp Logan left their post after hearing shots from the garrison area and apparently tried to join the march, killing a jitney operator en route. Before the marches aborted, the firing claimed the lives of fifteen civilians, including four policemen, and wounded twenty-one others. The following morning, National Guardsmen, sent by Gov. James E. Ferguson to establish order, found the bodies of several soldiers, one of them Sergeant Henry.

Civil and military authorities proceeded to identify the culprits and the causes of the mutiny. Fearing white retaliation, many blacks sought to leave the city. Employers and city fathers hastened to curb the exodus, while heartily applauding the War Department's removal of black troops from Texas. Indicted battalion members, accused of participating largely because they missed roll call or were found off base the night of the shooting, became enveloped in a civilian-military dispute over prosecution. The military ultimately won out. A local inquiry placed blame squarely on the army's lack of discipline, while acknowledging Sparks' excessive use of force and Police Chief Clarence Brock's lack of oversight.

Col. G. O. Cress, Southern Department inspector, agreed on lack of discipline, but thought discrimination the fundamental cause.

Colonel Cress's broadened investigation led to more arrests and the scheduling of three courts-martial at San Antonio between November 1917 and March 1918. *U.S. v. Sgt. William C. Nesbit et al.* tried 63 defendants on charges of mutiny, murder, and felonious assault; *U.S. v. Cpl. John Washington et al.* judged fifteen members of the guard who abandoned Camp Logan; and *U.S. v. Cpl. Robert Tillman et al.* heard later evidence on the main column, incriminating 40 additional soldiers. Defense attorney Maj. Harry H. Grier pinned responsibility on the deceased Henry, but argued that most reacted from confusion and fear of comrades or a mob. The prosecution argued equal guilt in a conspiracy to kill whites indiscriminately. The Nesbit and Tillman trials convicted 95, imposing twenty-four death sentences and eighteen prison terms ranging from two to eighteen years. The army carried out thirteen executions by hangings within less than two weeks after the first trial. Public outcry from organizations such as the NAACP and National Equal Rights League persuaded President Woodrow Wilson to commute ten death sentences to prison terms the following year. The Washington proceedings ordered five executions and ten sentences of seven to ten years. President Warren Harding initiated the clemency process that freed most prisoners within ten years and the last by 1938.

The episode damaged race relations locally and nationally. An investigator for the NAACP reported that numerous black Houstonians refused to comment from fear of the police. Its organ, *The Crisis*, edited by W. E. B. DuBois, emphasized the abusive treatment of the soldiers while admitting the gravity of their deeds. Intensified race consciousness led to the creation of a Houston chapter of the NAACP and the Civic Betterment League of Harris County. The War Department disbanded the Third Battalion after the war.