The Houston Mutiny of 1917

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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 summon 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.
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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.

The NAACP in the Twenty-first Century

Dianne M. Pinderhughes

"The leadership was overly concerned with recognition from whites, a concern that helped prevent the organization from taking a confrontational stance. The program overly oriented to a middle-class agenda and not nearly strong enough to the kinds of economic issues that mean most to working-class black people. [And] the organization [was] too centralized.”

These views of the problems of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People are not those of a present-day critic, reflecting on the Association’s recent woes. They were formed by Ella Baker during her years as the NAACP’s assistant field secretary in 1941 and as National Director of Branches from 1943 to 1946, as summarized in Charles Payne’s book I’ve Got the Light of Freedom, published in 1995. Yet Baker’s assessment fits extraordinarily well with some of the issues that have called into question the viability and continued relevance of the NAACP as it faces its centennial in 2009.

During its first six decades, the NAACP pursued a program that focused on an anti-lynching campaign, school desegregation, and voting rights. Often working in coalition with other groups, the Association achieved many of its civil rights objectives. But from the 1970s, the Association seemed to have stagnated and lost its vision.

In his short tenure as executive director of the NAACP, Ben Chavis attempted to revitalize the Association by reaching out to a broader constituency. He argued that class is a polarizing factor in the Association,