

Black GIs in Exeter

Presented by Crystal Carter, Community Researcher, Telling Our Stories, finding our Roots; Exeter's Multi-Coloured History

My name is Crystal Carter.

I am the wife of Sam Carter and the daughter of Cordell and Donna Chinn of Los Angeles, California. My father served in the US Navy for 20 years and I grew up as a military brat - living on military bases all over America, listening to rambling sailor stories and fretting at the telly in times of war. My dad wasn't the only one. Two of my uncles served in Vietnam, another Uncle in the Korean War, and my grandfather, Malachi Chinn, served in the US Army in WWII.

I came to Exeter in 2003 as a student and moved here in 2005 to be with my English husband. I have lived in Exeter longer than I ever lived in any one city and have been fascinated by lots of different aspects of its history. So when I found out about the 'Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots' project - an HLF funded project to document the stories and histories of people from around the world coming to, living in, and effecting lives in Exeter - I thought it would be a perfect opportunity for me to connect my life in America to my life here in England.

You see, between 1943 and 1944, County Ground in St Thomas Exeter was home to a number of all black US Army battalions.

So who were they?

Exeter's 'colored troops' as they were known, were quite typical of the types of the assignments that were given to Black Americans in the war.

36 Station Hospital, Detachment of Patients

519 Quartermaster Truck Regiment HQ & HQ Detachment

595 Quartermaster Laundry Company

519 Quartermaster Group, HQ & HQ Detachment

595 Quartermaster Laundry Company

595 Quartermaster Laundry Company, 2 & 3 Platoons

963 Quartermaster Service Company

Despite the promises of recruitment films like 'The Negro Soldier' which promised opportunities of frontline glory and officer training, almost 40% of the nearly 1 million Black American servicemen and women who contributed to the war effort were working these 'Quartermaster' groups, doing unglamorous but necessary work of moving troops supplies, providing food, managing transportation,

fuel and clothing for black and white troops. In Exeter this included running the US Food Depot at the Cattle Market in Marsh Barton.

You will have also noticed that there was mention of a 'Station Hospital, Detachment of Patients'. This was most likely an offsite 'coloured only' ward of the military hospital that was based at Wonford. This was a standard practice and part of US Armed Forces' policy of segregation throughout all parts of its World War II operations. And it's how Black GI's came to be in St Thomas in particular.

The County Ground troops were part of the overall US military presence in Exeter which included White American billeted troops and those in Topsham Barracks. The US military had a policy of segregating black and white troops applied in the US and throughout the European and Pacific Theatres of war. In Exeter this meant that Black troops were based in tents in County Ground, St Thomas, and white soldiers were based in soldiers' quarters at Topsham Barracks.

This level of segregation was common means of managing 1 million American troops in England in the run up to D-Day. The US Army on an 'Off Limits' policy that kept black and white soldiers separated, both on base and in off duty social settings. In some towns this meant that 'commanding officers would declare town "X" as out of bounds for Negro soldiers and town "Y" for white soldiers. In sparsely settled regions, where there were few towns, and most of them small, recreational facilities consisting usually of only a pub or two and a moving picture theater, a system would be set up for whites on "odd" nights and Negroes on "even" nights' (White 19). In Exeter, the 'off limits' rule meant that the city was essentially divided in two. Black soldiers were allowed in St Thomas and West Exe. White soldiers were allowed in the city centre. While US soldiers were stationed in Exeter, the US Army placed MPs, 1 black and 1 white, on either side of Exe Bridges to ensure that black and white soldiers did not cross to the other side. They coordinated patrols around the city to collect anyone who had strayed (Gray).

The New Presence of 'Jim Crow'- an American practice of segregation of Black and White people first implemented in the wake of the Civil War - in Exeter did not go entirely unnoticed. Though these changes were only officially implemented by the US Army, in Exeter as in other cities, towns and villages, there were instances in which local British people took part in this as well. In many instances this was in an effort to avoid the infighting that occurred regularly between black and white troops. Sometimes this meant that publicans and shop keepers declaring a preference - in some cases for black troops and in others for white troops. In Exeter this meant that when well known Black British singer Leslie Hutchinson visited the city during the war, he was not allowed to stay in the Royal Clarence Hotel. And when Joe Louis, the most famous Black GI of all visited Exeter to fight an exhibition match, though he was allowed to stay at Topsham Barracks and visit the city centre, one Exeter resident remembers that a local publican refused to serve him and demanded that he leave her pub, apparently this was not the only occasion.

What did the people of Exeter make of the Black GIs?

Marion Wallen who lived in St Thomas during the war recalled 'down Tin Lane was my dancing school and I saw ever so much that was going on there. My mother nearly stopped me going because of it'

Sister Edward Mary remembered 'One day a pupil asked Sister, I met a black soldier, what are they? This question was later superseded by another - Sister, I met a soldier and he had a funny uniform. On

hearing its description, the child was told he was an American and she responded, Oh no he's not - he's not black.'

Ivey Facey recalled 'their colour 'didn't make a difference. They were accepted. My mother always had someone in for Christmas - the first year it was Frenchman. Later they were Americans, black or white.'

[‘He was very nice, handsome. He was from Tennessee. I think I met him at Emmanuel Hall. My mother told me years afterwards when she was dying in 1962, that she had burnt all the letters and cables that he had sent. I never had them. It was terrible now that you think about it. He must have thought I was killed in the blitz.’]

HW Stubbs, DJ Newbury, Alison Malsen, all remember the Black American GIs. Thelma Baker explained - 'it was also strange that the black GIs were kept below the River in St Thomas while the whites were uptown'

[James Bell recalled](#)

In a letter from father to Gilbert (my elder brother in the RAF) dated 6th June 1943.

'The town is now filled with American soldiers who have come here within the past few days. They seem quite a respectable lot of men in appearance, and have dress uniform to wear when out. It is sad to think what these men may have to face presently.'

Later coloured Americans came and there were near riots between the blacks and whites. The coloured Americans stayed on the [St Thomas](#) side of the Exe and there was no movement between the two groups. I remember that Exe Bridge was closed off, on both sides by American Military Police, and each group shouting dreadful insults across the river at each other. I am sure that if they were allowed to get across there would have been murder. After about a week, the black Americans were moved.

Joyce Bulling said 'I remember the American Soldiers in County Ground, they used to look over into Tin Lane.'

Maurice Pike remembers, 'Contrary to popular belief, there were coloured Americans in Exeter. A dance held at Emmanuel Hall with a band from Torquay produced a tremendous display of 'jitterbugging' by one particular coloured soldier. An amazing athletic performance.

Hilda May Eastley of Exmouth remembered "Yanks also took over the Cattle Market in Exeter. Father was very shocked at these huge dark men, the first he had ever seen, and he touched his cap very respectfully, much to the amusement of the young G.I's. Never had they such respect! It seemed an unreal time, we would never be the same again." ([BBC](#))

Mary Beale remembers...Later, the cattle market was used as a food depot by the American soldiers. - all black- who amazed us children, never having seen a black face and causing havoc with the local girls who had no taboos reference going out with attractive young men. The senior girls school (girls up to 14) on the union street was a magnet at 430pm and the head mistress once called the police to disperse the young men waiting for the girls.

From Exe Bridges down to St Thomas was exclusive to Black soldiers, but there were often fights between the demarcation line between white and black.

Any number of coloured children were soon seen in prams around Exeter but at the end for the war they all vanished and we did wonder if they had all been taken back to America.

What was the legacy? (Babies)

Sylvia McNeill of the British civil rights group, the League of Coloured Peoples, began an investigation into the reality of children fathered by Black GIs. Her 18 page report showed 83 of 553 (15%) known children born of mixed Black American and White English heritage were born in Devon. By 1948, the LCP had revised their figures to a total of 775 children. (Smith 209)

How was Exeter in comparison to other places?

Launceston is a pretty Cornish town on the edge of Bodmin Moor with the port of Plymouth to its south and the seaside resorts of Devon and Cornwall to the north. On Saturday night, 25 September 1943, five black GIs from an ordnance unit were told to return to camp by MPs when it was found that they did not have passes, forcing them to miss the local dance. They did not leave easily and one threateningly told an MP: 'If you lay hands on me, you'll get what's in my pocket.' The next night eighteen black soldiers entered the lounge bar of a pub in the town. White soldiers were drinking there too and the barman told the blacks that they couldn't be served in that part of the house. These blacks had not apparently been in Britain for long and were loath to accept a practice by then common in many public houses of landlords reserving separate areas for black and white Americans. They left, reluctantly, only to sneak back into town later having armed themselves with tommy guns, rifles and bayonets. When they encountered two MPs in a jeep in the town square they ignored calls to disperse and opened fire, causing people to run in all directions. The two policemen were wounded in their legs and a few weeks later fourteen black GIs faced a court martial in Paignton in Devon, charged with mutiny and attempted murder. After a three-day hearing all were sentenced to death or life imprisonment. Some, according to Walter White, were still serving their sentences two years later in prisons in America.

What did black troops make of England?

In January 1943 Walter White, Secretary of the leading African-American civil rights group the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) covered 1700 miles in a tour of the UK visiting Black GI. In his visit, he met with Officials from the US and British armed forces, black and white American soldiers, as well as British civilians. In his book on the experience, he explains how the black soldiers found it stressful working in an environment that saw them treated worse than German POWs by their own country in many cases, but he explains that the troops did find a connection with the British Public, in Walter White's 1945 book 'A Rising Wind' he explains:

‘Almost without exception, the brightest note in the stories of all Negro soldiers I talked with that afternoon was the story of friendships they had formed with the British people. At first alarmed by the tales about Negroes, the British common man had reacted in favor of those who he believed had been maligned and against those who had told stories about Negroes which the British had found to be fantastic and untrue.

There are interesting facets in the reasons for these friendships. Away from the sophistication of cities such as London, Liverpool, and Edinburgh, the British in the smaller towns are a simple, friendly people with a passion for fair play. But the bond between them and American Negroes was not based on abstract principle or indignation against an injustice. The overwhelming majority of American soldiers, white and Negro, are also decent human beings, not given to flamboyant boasting or rowdy behavior. But some soldiers made no attempt to conceal their contempt for towns and people which did not have all of the mechanical gadgets which are commonplace in the United States.

The absence of telephones and radios, electric refrigerators and vacuum cleaners to most soldiers of this type, denoted an inferior civilization and a backward people. When such opinions were loudly and frequently expressed within earshot of the British, they made no contribution to Anglo-American amity. The average weekly income of more than 60 per cent of the British people [was] three pounds, ten shillings or about fourteen dollars at the rate of exchange during the war. More than three fourths of the Negro troops in England early in 1944 came from the South another area of depressed income. They, like the British, were not so accustomed to highly mechanized gadgets. Therefore they were not so prone to derogatory comments upon British living as were some of their white fellow Americans. So, too, did somewhat better manners restrain them from giving offense. Learning this in time, the British developed respect and friendship for Negro soldiers which they, in turn, cherished. For many of the Negroes it was their first experience in being treated as normal human beings and friends by white people’.

Walter White

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