



Veterans Day – 2011

Timuel Black was eight months old in the summer of 1919 when his father, one generation removed from slavery, moved the family from Birmingham, Alabama to the south side of Chicago. The neighborhood, soon known as the Black Belt, was still smoldering from the race riots of July 1919. Even so, Chicago offered opportunities that Alabama denied African-Americans at the time. “It wasn’t poverty that drove many people who were the children of former slaves to leave,” recalled Black in a 2009 oral history interview, “it was a desire to be free, it was a desire to be able to vote. There was a desire to have better schools for their children.” As far as Timuel’s parents were concerned, the key to success was education. “You don’t have to like them,” Timuel’s mother said of some of the white teachers, “just go to school and get what they got.” His father was a black nationalist, intrigued by the teachings of Marcus Garvey, who encouraged blacks to return to Africa. His mother held a different view. “My babies are going to be reared right here in the United States,” she would say, “and we’re going to change things. We’re not going to run away from the struggle.”

Following high school, Timuel took a variety of jobs in Chicago and Milwaukee, but in 1943 he was drafted, and soon headed to Ft. Lee, Virginia for basic training, with a follow-on course in logistics. (African-Americans were generally prohibited from serving in the infantry and other combat units.) While stationed in Virginia, Black also got an education in discrimination – southern style, especially on a memorable bus ride. It didn’t matter that he was in uniform when a white couple got on the bus. He would have to move to the back, the bus driver informed him curtly. Private Black was of a different mind. “It’s time to die now,” he thought to himself. Only because they were close to the train station was the situation defused.

Months later Black’s unit, the 308th Quartermaster Railhead Company, was part of the massive D-Day invasion force going into Normandy, France, with Private Black wading onto Utah beach just days after D-Day. During the days following the landings, when the Americans were bottled up in Normandy, the men of the 308th toiled away, dodging enemy fire even while providing the army with the vital supplies of war. When the Allies finally broke out and surged east through northern France, the men of the 308th followed close on their heels. Soon they were driving through Paris and were greeted with cheers of “Vive la France, vive l’Amérique, vive la Russie!” from tearful Parisians. “They had jazz records that they had kept,” recalls Black, “and they were waving those

records with Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman and Louis Armstrong and the Hot Club of France.”

The euphoria of liberating Paris did not last long, however. Black saw action in the meat-grinder of the Hurtgen Forest, and in late December he traveled north when Patton’s Third Army was sent to relieve the besieged troops trapped in Bastogne. These were the kinds of experiences that forged powerful bonds among the men. “There is no relationship that is as passionate and sincere as [with] your fellow soldiers,” said Black some 65 years later. “I was as concerned about them as I was about myself.”

Of all the memories Black carries from the war, none is more vivid than the day he entered Buchenwald. “My CO and I drove up and smelled it. ... You saw people—human beings—you could almost see their ribs through their skin. My first feeling was ‘Kill all the Germans. Kill them all.’” But then he thought about Generals Eisenhower and Eichelberger and many other Americans with German surnames. “My mind became confused, [and I] reflected back on my heritage as a grandchild of former slaves ... At that moment, without putting it down on paper, ... but instinctually, I made up my mind. The rest of my life was going to be spent trying to bring peace in the world. I’m not the only one who felt that way. That was my mission, and it was, has been, and is.”

Timuel also fulfilled another commitment when he came back home – this one to his mother. “I had to obey my momma—she demanded I come home with an honorable discharge.” But he also came home with a deeper commitment, this one to the nation for which he served, “that everybody who is American should have equality, justice, and freedom. ... My lifelong commitment, small as it has been, is to work to make this a better world for everyone.”

Mark DePue is the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. You can listen to Timuel Black’s entire story, and those of many other veterans, at the program’s web site, http://www.alplm.org/oral_history/projects.html.