

## Chapter 11 War Rumors Hang On

Senator Eastland's attack on black soldiers came on the heels of a possible secret massacre of as many as 1,200 black soldiers in Southern Mississippi at Camp Van Dorn. Perhaps the senator's comments were intended as a *post hoc* justification of the massacre if the facts ever became public.

For years the story has circulated that in December of 1943, unarmed, black, enlisted men were slaughtered at the base located just outside the sleepy town of Centreville, Mississippi; they were not killed in combat but were lined up and mowed down by white soldiers acting on orders from superiors. This is what some Centreville residents – black and white – say, even in 2005. They were not alone in their observations; the military would later conclude there were problem at this camp as well as others.<sup>i</sup>

Rumors of the Camp Van Dorn massacre have persisted among some black veterans, their friends, and families – catching the interest of several investigative journalists. The once sprawling Army base in Southwestern Mississippi was built at the beginning of World War Two as a training camp for ground force divisions. Activated in September 1942, the first troops moved in for training that November.

The U. S. Army base was named after Major General Earl Van Dorn<sup>ii</sup>, a Confederate Civil War hero who resigned his commission in the United States Army in 1861, offering his services to the Confederacy. Gen. Van Dorn's most renowned battle was routing Union forces at Holly Springs, Mississippi in December 1862; he also had a reputation for drinking and womanizing. The general's life ended on May 7, 1863, in his office in Spring Hill, Tennessee, where a local doctor shot him for allegedly having an affair with the doctor's wife. It has been suggested by white Southerners, but not supported by facts, that the physician and his wife were Union spies.<sup>iii</sup>

Carroll Case, a Mississippi reporter, partly documented the alleged 1943 mass murder of soldiers of the 364th Infantry at Camp Van Dorn in his book, "The Slaughter." The 364th originated as the 367th, and trouble began for black soldiers after three were accused of raping a white woman. Thurgood Marshall was involved as an NAACP attorney trying to help the black soldiers, but the 367th was "changed" to the 364th and the regiment was shipped out to Phoenix, and then on to the newly constructed base in Mississippi named after the confederate general. W.T. "Rusty" Denman, III, the book's publisher, gave details to journalist Kam Williams for *Black World Today*:

RD: Their facilities [in Phoenix] were just terrible. The Army was going to house them in a horse stable, but then they put them in tents. And the Army then told them they would build them some new facilities and so forth. The government then let them watch the new barracks being built and right before construction was finished, the Army shipped the 364th out again, this time to Mississippi.

KW: *But how did the situation degenerate to the point of murder in Mississippi?*

RD: Here's what happened. William Walker, a black soldier on the base, got into a ruckus with a white MP. Walker, who was black, got the best of it, and they quit fighting. But that's when the MP issued an order: "Sheriff, shoot this N-word." And he did.

KW: *Where is this documented?*

RD: In the Army's own document. However, the Army's report on the incident was totally bogus. They list William Walker as AWOL and separated from the service on May 15, 1943, when, in fact, he was shot by the sheriff on May the 30th.

KW: *It's just so hard to imagine the US Army sanctioning genocide of so many of its own soldiers.*

RD: You had the two Mississippi US Senators, Theodore Bilbo and James Eastland, screaming their heads off at the War Department to get the 364th out of their state. They had received a telegram from the Mayor of the town where the base was located, saying that unless this specific regiment was moved out immediately, there were going to be race riots. And on July 3, there was a big riot followed by an edict that there would be a blackout, total censorship of any incidents of racial unrest.<sup>iv</sup>

Case, a former bank president in Centreville who was reared in South Mississippi, grew up to quiet rumors of a mass killing of black soldiers on a nearby Army base during World War Two. Case dismissed the stories as folklore, until one day when he heard a story from an employee, Bill Marzall, who "wanted to get something off his chest" and in the break room told his boss about a race crime he witnessed in the fall of 1943.

Case knew this would be a crime of unprecedented proportions in American history if it were true. After Marzall spilled his story, Case spent the next 13 years doing research.

Fascinated by the veteran's story, Case went to work uncovering more facts and eventually discovered reports and letters that supported what Marzall told him: On May 31, 1943, Corporal Anthony J. Smirely, Jr., of the 364th Infantry stationed at Camp Van Dorn sent a desperate letter to the editor of the *Philadelphia Tribune* asking for his help, telling editor Washington Rhodes several anecdotes, including one about a soldier of his regiment shot and killed by a white MP, and another story of a fellow soldier and friend who returned from an over-night pass, beaten about the head by white MPs:

"Mr. Rhodes, I beg of you to please, from my heart, please do something for the fellows and myself who are among the unfortunate to be in this State of blood – Negro blood – that is constantly flowing in the streets," wrote Corp. Smirely.<sup>v</sup>

Some white soldiers on the sprawling base heard stories about the violence and sent out letters about it, too. These letters were among the military's Counterintelligence Corps files unearthed by journalist Ronald Lee Ridenhour, who earlier helped expose the My Lai massacre in Vietnam and started working with Case.

In a letter dated June 6, 1943, and intercepted by military intelligence, Pvt. Harold F. Jones of the 394th wrote to a friend about racial violence that broke out with the arrival of the 364th:

"... they started tearing down their barracks and PXs. Finally they worked over some MPs and killed two white officers. That night they captured five officers and held them in their barracks as hostages. Two battalions of the 5th Infantry were sent in.... Our officers told us they carted 30 dead niggers to the morgue ... but I don't know if that's true."<sup>vi</sup>

Martzall told much the same story, insisting to Case that soldiers from the 364th Infantry were slaughtered, not by white racists “but by the Army itself.”<sup>vii</sup> The 364th, all black, arrived at the Mississippi base in the summer of 1943. However, two months before they shipped out to Mississippi, there had been racial problems in Phoenix, Arizona and several MPs were killed. More MPs were put on duty at Camp Van Dorn, anticipating trouble when the group arrived in Mississippi – and there was trouble. Several disturbances occurred on base, and then problems moved into the small town of Centreville, a completely segregated community.

Local blacks were still not allowed to walk on sidewalks but when the 364<sup>th</sup> came into town, most soldiers from Northern states walked wherever they chose to, and the local sheriff “had to kill one of them to get their attention.”

After several more incidents, including a riot in the white service club, Martzall told Case that one night in the late fall of 1943, MPs on orders armed themselves with 45 caliber machine guns, waited until dark, and opened fire. The area around the black camp, located near the Engineering division close to the railroad, was sealed. The entire 364<sup>th</sup>, by then disarmed, was ordered to move into an open area where they were all killed.<sup>viii</sup>

Case, with Ridenhour’s help, confirmed many pieces of the account, using the Freedom of Information Act to collect private and confidential records. After the first story was published, Case said he experienced death threats and burglaries at his home and office, serious enough that he moved to Jackson to become head of the Mississippi Arts Commission.

A Maryland historian heard about Case and helped the writer locate many classified papers from military archives, including signed letters and affidavits from “desperate black soldiers,” members of the 364th, which are included in his book. The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund also collected letters during a later investigation. Missing records and reports from June 8 to December 1943 could reveal more of a story.<sup>ix</sup>

Meanwhile, Case’s book caught the attention of some members of Congress, the Army, the NAACP, the FBI, and the White House. Mississippi Congressman Bennie Thompson, who represents most of the Delta, wrote a strong letter in 1998 to Secretary of Defense William Cohen calling for a full investigation:

Like many of the other shadowy events or accusations from Mississippi’s troubled past which have been resolved in recent years, questions about the events in Camp Van Dorn must be answered as well in order for the State to continue its progress towards a brighter future. I ask that you call for an investigation of the events outlined in Mr. Case’s book, and to immediately release all classified or unclassified documents relating to the 364th Infantry Division’s service in Camp Van Dorn in 1943. Moreover.... I ask that you involve the N.A.A.C.P. in the investigation to the greatest extent possible.<sup>x</sup>

Kweisi Mfume, then president of the NAACP, also wrote a letter to President Bill Clinton requesting his personal involvement. After two months of silence, the Army responded with one very brief, single-page letter to Congressman Thompson. Dated November 6, 1998, Maj. General Bruce K. Scott, Chief of

Legislative Liaison, wrote that the records of the 364th were in the National Archives and available to the public. Upon investigation of these records, it turned out that an independent review was never conducted.

Following up in 2001, *Newsweek* reported a former 364th Regimental Headquarters clerk admitted he was ordered to alter records from "murdered" to "absent without leave" for 34 soldiers from the regiment. The orders apparently came on four different occasions concerning four different groups of soldiers – numbering 20, 10, three and one, respectively, wrote Don McCraine of the *Natchez Democrat*.<sup>xi</sup> "The same former clerk said his name appeared to have been forged on 364th documents dated in 1942, the year before he entered the service."<sup>xii</sup>

Case learned from several others claiming to be witnesses that the bodies of the murdered soldiers were hauled off by train in boxcars; the Army initially said it examined Corps of Engineers maps and saw no railroad at the camp. But a railroad had been there since the 1890's, according to Case. Historical pictures of train rails in the camp support Case.

"Camp Van Dorn always had a railroad (as did most Army bases), the railroad is still there and functioning today, and many of the Army's own documents mention the troops arriving at Van Dorn by train."<sup>xiii</sup> The investigation of Camp Van Dorn remains continues, with numerous questions unanswered:

Why did the Army construct a large lake and earthen dam on Camp Van Dorn property which are isolated from public access but connected by a private road directly to the railroad?

Why did the Army tell the NAACP there was no more classified information on the 364<sup>th</sup> ... and yet the NAACP unearthed at least ten additional boxes of intelligence reports and records marked "TOP SECRET"?

Why were the classified documents on Camp Van Dorn and the 364th Infantry opened and screened by the Army in 1968, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement?<sup>xiv</sup>

Reporter Geoffrey F.X. O'Connell, an independent reporter working on the Camp Van Dorn story, found that troops not transferred to other units left the camp by train on December 26, 1943. After waiting a month at Ft. Lawton, near Seattle, Washington, the troops left on three ships for the Aleutian Islands —1,500 miles off the coast of Alaska.

Ridenhour, who later died from a heart attack while playing handball, had estimated that nearly a third of the regiment or 1,000 men disappeared from the Aleutians with no explanation, and official records raised more questions than they answered. Some examples:

Military personnel records crucial to the incident along with millions of others were destroyed in a fire in 1973. National Archives intelligence files released to Ridenhour were incomplete and heavily edited. The Army based some of the conclusions in its 1999 report on confidential medical records held by the Surgeon General that are unavailable to researchers.

The 364th's Regimental Journal shows no entries from the day the 364th arrived in Mississippi until November 4, 1943 — almost the entire period in question. The *Regimental Journal's* pages, starting in 1942, are signed by a Sgt. Malcolm LaPlace, whose service record proves he was not even in the service in 1942.<sup>xv</sup>

O'Connell believes the black soldiers at Camp Van Dorn may have been marched off the base to another location where they were slaughtered and killed, possibly with poisonous gas.<sup>xvi</sup> What really took place at Camp Van Dorn may never be known. Officially, the 364<sup>th</sup> was shipped to the Aleutian Islands to perform garrison duty for the rest of the war.

A second Mississippi author also “grew up” around the rumor and suspects that over 1,000 black soldiers were actually massacred at Camp Van Dorn for the “good of the country.” Paige Cothren, a former Ole Miss All-American fullback and professional football player with the Los Angeles Rams and Philadelphia Eagles, in 2004 wrote “The Echo of Silence,” a fictional account of the “60-year-old question.”

From talking to relatives “who worked on the post at the exact time, and to others,” Cothren concluded, “the massacre probably happened. But the times were different then. We were at war!”<sup>xvii</sup> Cothren is white.

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“We now know from declassified Army documents that the following important government and military officials either knew about, or were directly involved in, the 364th's predicament at Camp Van Dorn: ... Senator James O. Eastland ... Senator Theodore Bilbo ...” Carroll Case, author of *The Slaughter*

RESPONDING TO A Freedom of Information Request or FOIA, the law school librarian at the public University of Mississippi wrote that Senator James O. Eastland “papers” were not “records” and were “private” – and “therefore not subject to disclosure under the Act.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Being kept under lock and key at the state-funded university are the senator's papers from 1941-1978; 1,600 feet of legislative and subject files, constituent files, political papers, speech files, materials relating to the Senate Judiciary Committee and Internal Security Subcommittee that he chaired, photographs, cartoons, memorabilia, and a portrait.<sup>xix</sup>

Why is public access to Eastland's entire archival treasure chest so vital? In addition to finding materials that could help resolve the Camp Van Dorn mystery, there should be a variety of unrelated papers and reports on many civil rights events, including the deaths of Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, since the murders occurred on Eastland's turf. And because the senator liked to investigate anyone outspoken or “subversive” from his powerful position as head of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS) of the Judiciary Committee.

A year following *Brown* Eastland had called for an investigation of the influence of the “communist conspiracy” on the Supreme Court's decision regarding segregation. One observer later concluded, “Eastland saw a Red behind every black.”<sup>xx</sup>

There were a few brave people who fought back when Eastland ran them through the gauntlet: Clifford Durr and Virginia Foster Durr of Montgomery, Alabama made good Eastland targets. The Durrs helped to form the radical Southern Conference for Human Welfare, which in the 1950s laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement. When Rosa Parks, their friend, was jailed for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, Virginia Foster Durr bailed Parks out of jail. For her activism, Virginia Durr once found herself facing Senator James O. Eastland's subcommittee:

Virginia Durr was called before an extraordinary 1954 session of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee – an arm of Joe McCarthy's anti-Communist witch hunt. The whole red scare was designed in large part to undermine the work of trade unions and the dawning Civil Rights Movement – both of which Durr had risked her life and her fortune to advance. In the eyes of race-baiting U. S. Sen. James Eastland, D-Miss., that made her a Communist. John Egerton, the

great historian of the early Civil Rights Movement, recalled Durr's appearance before Eastland's Subcommittee in his book, *Speak Now Against the Day*...

She allowed that she was indeed who she was, said she was married to Clifford Durr, said she wasn't a Communist, and then said, 'That's all. From here on out, I'm standing mute.' Eastland and his staff counsel plied her with questions, but she was a stone, coolly pausing now and then to take out a compact and powder her nose. In a written statement, she said she had 'total and utter contempt for this committee.' (Later she would fume that Eastland was 'as common as pig tracks.') Eastland threatened to hold Durr in contempt. But her cool performance so unnerved the arch-segregationist – and drew such high praise even from Southern newspapers – that the senator never pursued the matter.<sup>xxi</sup>

SISS was authorized in 1950 to study and investigate both the administration, operation, and enforcement of the 1950 McCarran Act and other laws relating to espionage, sabotage, and the protection of the internal security of the United States. SISS was also expected to determine the extent, nature, and effects of subversive activities in the United States "including, but not limited to, espionage, sabotage, and infiltration of persons who are or may be under the domination of the foreign government or organization controlling the world Communist movement or any movement seeking to overthrow the Government of the United States by force and violence."

The subcommittee could subpoena witnesses and require the production of documents. Over the years, Eastland's subcommittee pulled in many civil rights activists, calling them communists and subversives,<sup>xxii</sup> and his records would be critical to better understanding parts of the Civil Rights Movement as well as what may have occurred at Camp Van Dorn, particularly in light of Eastland's harsh criticism of black soldiers' performance in World War II, shortly after the slaughter allegedly took place. His relationship to Draper would also be of interest.

Concern over the covert power of Eastland's subcommittee would be another reason for sifting through Eastland's collection. Over the years, rumors have raged about the subcommittee's "ability to form concentration camps for emergency situations" to having its own "SISS secret commandos who at the time made raids on alleged Communist organizations with silenced machine guns and grenades."<sup>xxiii</sup> Gaining access to the Eastland archives might assist in proving or disproving these and other assertions.

Dr. Carol Polsgrove, a journalism professor at the University of Indiana, wanted to write a biography about the late senator and ran into the closed archives: "I ... went so far as to call the University of Mississippi Law School, where his papers were kept [and] was told they were stowed in boxes in a basement—uncataloged and inaccessible. A library staffer explained to me, in hushed tones, that Senator Eastland was--well--not quite politically correct."<sup>xxiv</sup>

Eastland's son, Woods E. Eastland, is an "ideal law school alumnus," giving "generously and regularly" to a long list of Ole Miss funds and projects, according to the school foundation's newsletter. In 1999, Woods Eastland, the president, and chief executive officer of Staplcotn, the oldest cotton cooperative in the United States, joined the Chancellor's Trust with a \$25,000 unrestricted gift.

Also locked up Mitchell Memorial Library are significant papers of Sen. John Stennis who served Mississippi from 1947 to 1989 and has a state highway named after him. Researchers are invited to look through “public papers” defined as “press releases and speeches,” but closed are the senator’s congressional correspondence, legislative files, correspondence, memos, case files, legislative files, project files, staff files, campaign files, radio and television transcripts, photographs, tapes, film, publications and memorabilia.

The papers of U. S. Rep. John Rankin are not available until 2007, according to the archivist for the school’s Center for Southern Culture.

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<sup>i</sup> A “slow process of building toward an open flare-up had been aided by a steady downward drop of morale in many Negro units,” wrote military historian Ulysses Lee in “African American Soldiers in World War II,” a historical volume for research undertaken by Hal C. Pattison, Brigadier General, U. S. A. *Chief of Military History*. “By early summer, the harvest of racial antagonism was beginning to assume bumper proportions. Serious disorders occurred at Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi; Camp Stewart, Georgia; Lake Charles, Louisiana; March Field and Camp San Luis Obispo, California; Fort Bliss, Texas; Camp Phillips, Kansas; Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky; and Camp Shenango, Pennsylvania. Other camps had lesser disorders and rumors of unrest.” One of the “other camps,” Lee wrote, was also located in Mississippi about 20 miles north of Greenwood – Camp McCain. The official account states that “Angered by rough treatment of their fellows in Starkville on the Fourth of July, about fifteen Negro soldiers from Camp McCain, Mississippi, set out with arms and ammunition on the next night, heading for Starkville, seventy miles away. At nearby Duck Hill, along the Illinois Central tracks, they stopped and fired into the nearer town in retaliation.”

<sup>ii</sup> The *Woodville Republican*, July 4, 1942.

<sup>iii</sup> Monroe F. Cockrell, ed., “The Lost Account of the Battle of Corinth,” (North Carolina: Broadfoot Publishing, 2003), Editor’s Introduction.

<sup>iv</sup> Kam Williams, “An Interview with the Publisher of ‘The Slaughter,’” *Black World Today*, December 23, 2000.

<sup>v</sup> Carroll Case, “The Slaughter: An American Atrocity,” (FBC, Inc., 1998), introduction.

<sup>vi</sup> Geoffrey F.X. O’Connell, “The Mystery of the 364<sup>th</sup>,” *Gambitt Weekly*, April 3, 2001. O’Connell’s work is supported by a grant from The Fund for Investigative Journalism. Ron Ridenhour’s investigation was supported by a grant from the Alicia Patterson Foundation. Since Ridenhour’s death, the executor of his estate, New Orleans attorney Mary Howell, has assisted O’Connell in furthering his former colleague’s work.

<sup>vii</sup> Case, *ibid.*, introduction.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>x</sup> The entire letter can be seen online at <http://www.theslaughter.com/congress.html>.

<sup>xi</sup> Don McCraine, “Questions linger about alleged Camp Van Dorn incident,” *Natchez Democrat*, June 12, 2004.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.* Cites the *History Channel* for its report on Camp Van Dorn.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xiv</sup> “The Slaughter” website, <http://www.theslaughter.com/homepage7.html>.

<sup>xv</sup> Geoffrey F.X. O’Connell, “The Mysterious 364<sup>th</sup>, Part II,” *Philadelphia Citypaper.net*, May 17-24, 2001.

<sup>xvi</sup> Susan Klopfer, conversation with Geoffrey F.X. O’Connell, July 2004.

<sup>xvii</sup> Paige Cothren, “The Echo of Silence,” (First Biltmore Corporation, 2003), 317.

<sup>xviii</sup> In a letter received by Susan Klopfer in the fall of 2004 from the University of Mississippi law school librarian in response to a FOIA request, it was stated the Eastland records, all collected as a U. S. senator, are private. The librarian refused to allow full access to the archives but would “help” on a specific request. In the spring of 2005, the following email was received by this author: “In August 2004, the University of Mississippi transferred responsibility for the James O. Eastland Collection from the Law School to the Archives and Special Collections of the J.D. Williams Library. One month later, two full-time staff members and three student workers began processing the collection. We have made tremendous progress thus far, but currently the papers are still closed to researchers. To speed up the availability of the papers, however, we are planning to open portions of the collection as we finish organizing, rehousing, and compiling a basic inventory of that section. The first series -- the Personal/Political Files -- will be made available to researchers sometime in the late Spring of 2005, to be followed eventually by the Press Files, the Legislative Files, the Administrative Office Files, and the Constituent Service Files. In January, Special Collections will add a Political Archives page to its website which will keep researchers informed of the availability of Eastland and other congressional papers. I appreciate your wish to access the Eastland Collections, and I can assure you we are doing everything in our power to hasten its availability to researchers such as yourself. Please e-mail me any further questions you might have, and feel free to contact me again in a few months to ascertain

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our progress with the collection. Leigh McWhite, Interim Political Collections Coordinator, Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi. Asking to remain anonymous, however, a researcher close to the project said the Collection had been “pretty well sanitized” and doubted if “any papers of much importance” were left.

<sup>xxix</sup> Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, “Eastland, James Oliver, 1904-1986,” Guide to Research Collections (online).

<sup>xxx</sup> Charles W. Eagles, “The Closing of Mississippi Society,” *Journal of Southern History*, May 1, 2001.

<sup>xxxi</sup> John Nichols, “Capital Times,” (Madison, WI), March 2, 1999.

<sup>xxxii</sup> For instance, Eastland, James O., “Black Power and the Communists,” Congressional Record, Senate, CXII, Part 21 (October 12, 1967, 28847.)

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Wikipedia encyclopedia, “The Senate Internal Security Subcommittee.”

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Dr. Carol Polsgrove, “Southern Exposures,” *The American Prospect*, Vol. 12, Issue, April 23, 2000.

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