

THE SHENANGO DEPOT MASSACRE

By Hal Klein |



Figure 1, right:
C/C return address:
"A.P.O. 7185, New York, N.Y.",
on a "Free Franked" cover, with a
Universal Machine Company post
office machine cancellation at
"GREENVILLE / PA. / AUG 24
1943," to Banks, Oregon.
(Ten weeks after the massacre.)

All Men Are Created Equal - a phrase emblematic of the ideals on which our country was to be founded. However, as early as elementary school I learned this should have been stated as, *"All men are created equal and thereafter, never equal."*

This brings us to an event in Pennsylvania military history, that occurred just 83 years ago. Something you could not imagine was happening in 1943, Pennsylvania, but the deep South in 1863!

The Shenango Depot Riot and Massacre.

The Shenango Depot, later called Camp Reynolds, was in Transfer (western) Pennsylvania near the Ohio border, along the Shenango River. The Depot was open from 1941 to 1946, serving as a Personnel Replacement Depot (A.P.O. 7185) for over a million G.I.s shipped to Europe during WWII. It also had a German Prisoner of War (P.O.W.) encampment housing some 1,800+ German prisoners.

The Shenango Depot and P.O.W. Camp was located approximately 240 miles from the Ft. Indiantown Gap Military Reservation (I.G.M.R.) in Lebanon County, PA., my postal history interest. When the U.S. Army decided to close Shenango/Camp Reynolds and its P.O.W. facility, both were merged into I.G.M.R.; first the P.O.W. Camp on Dec. 11, 1944, and the balance of the Depot, through 1946. I found a blurb on the Depot massacre while researching the merging of the P.O.W. camps.

To comprehend the Shenango Massacre, you need to remember the mentality of the period, gain insight into the Base Command structure of Shenango, and the nature of U.S. Army Black/White relations. Segregation and *"Jim Crow in Uniform"* were the practice of the military during the 1940s, especially south

of the Mason-Dixon line. Black soldiers had separate hospitals, medical staff, blood banks, barracks and recreational facilities. Black lynchings were commonplace, and Billy Holiday's hit record *"Strange Fruit"* played daily on the radio for years.

Drinking fountains were labeled WHITES ONLY and NEGROS ONLY. Racist remarks, cat calls, street harassment, threatening gestures, and inhuman treatment were a part of life for Blacks, especially on segregated U.S. Army bases where Base Command Officers were of Southern descent--born in the 19th century. Black soldiers were relegated to menial tasks, underpaid and commanded by White officers. Black officers were rarely promoted or even saluted. Shenango Depot was no different.

Shenango began construction in 1941 as a Troop Replacement Depot. It opened in June 1942 under the command of Lt. Col. George H. Cherrington, a native of Covington, Kentucky. He was replaced on May 22, 1943, by Colonel Zim E. Lawhon, of San Marcos, Texas, who was then replaced by Colonel George M. Couper of Marietta, Georgia, on Nov. 8, 1943. (See a pattern here?)



Lt. Col. George H.
Cherrington



Col. Zim Lawhon



Col. George Couper

When it comes to postal history, collectors are collectors, and this is where the marriage of the USPO and the Military Post Office (M.P.O.) meets, as illustrated by period covers. Both organizations functioned separately, with one handled by the U.S. Post Office Department and, during WWII, the M.P.O. by the Quartermaster Corps (Army Transport Service) for APO Mail, which was transferred to the Transportation Corps in 1942. Air Transport Command (APO) delivered Army-Air Force mail, and Naval Air Transport Command (FPO) delivered Navy-Marine mail. These APO/FPO designations functioned like early zip codes.

The covers illustrated show the interconnection of Pennsylvania Postal History and War Cover Collecting, in this case, the “Free-Franked” cover from a White soldier and the “Registered Cover” to a Black soldier, which required a barracks and bunk location; a bunk location because his bed was segregated and positioned OUTSIDE the barracks! That was one of many things at Shenango that would change after the riot, aside from the Depot’s name and Colonel Lawhon’s replacement.

Figure 1 illustrates a “FREE FRANKED” cover from APO 7185, New York, N.Y., ten weeks after the massacre. You won’t find this designation listed in any of the standard U.S. APO geographic location guides from the War Cover Club or Jim Forte, as APO 7185 was a designator for a Temporary Replacement Depot, such as Shenango. Once a serviceman received a new assignment or joined a unit, he received a Unit of location APO/FPO number. The easiest way to locate covers originating from the Shenango Depot is from USPOD cancellations from Greenville, Pa., Sharon, Pa., and Transfer, Pa., with the latter being the scarcest and smallest post office.

Figure 2 illustrates a “Registered” cover to a Black soldier requiring barracks and the outside bunk location. *Of note:* the unusual third line addressing above “Greenville, Pa.” indicates “Shenango P.R.D.” This designation refers to “Parcel Route Delivery” from Sharon, Pa., via Sharpesville, Pa., to Shenango Depot (19 mi).

Figure 2, below:
18¢ Registered Rate Cover (3¢ Domestic First-Class Letter Rate, plus 15¢ Registry Service Fee (<\$5-indemnity). The cover bears a combination usage of two 6¢ Presidentials (Sc# 811), plus two 3¢ Win the Wars (Sc# 905) socked-on-the-nose with 17mm double-ring target killers. The cover is back stamped with three (3) red violet 30mm double-circle circular date stamps, as follows: (A.) two “RUSSELLVILLE, ARK. / REGISTERED / JUN 18 1943,” U.S.P.O. entry cancellations, and (B.) one “GREENVILLE, PA. / ARMY DEPOT BR. / JUN 22 1943” Military Post Office receiving cancellation.



Figure 2: front and back, below.

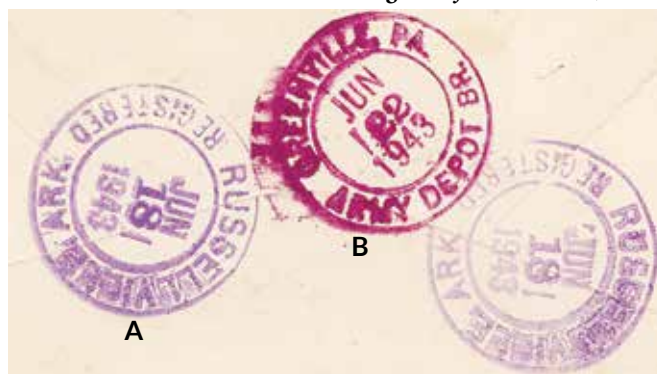


Figure 3 illustrates a “FREE FRANKED” patriotic post card with a corner card indicating Medical Detachment Hospital, Shenango Depot, Greenville, Pa., four months before the massacre. The card from a White Corporal reads, “...this is a new place and far from completed but will be very nice when finished. The barracks here are not as nice as they were at O’Reilly (Army Medical Hospital, Mo)...” Again, you won’t find this designation listed in any of the standard U.S. APO geographic location guide by the War Cover Club or Jim Forte for a Temporary Replacement Depot like Shenango.



THE SHENANGO RIOT, July 12, 1943: *The U.S. Military Version*

The Shenango Depot Massacre: The U.S. military was segregated during Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency. There were separate barracks, post exchanges, theaters and other facilities for White and Black troops. It was in this setting that the ill feelings harbored by some Blacks and Whites alike eventually flared into an ugly race riot that ended up with an exchange of gunfire on Sunday July 11, 1943.

The area newspapers and radio stations did their best to get a line on what transpired. The camp's public relations officials would only say, "...that one 'Negro' soldier had been killed and six others were wounded. Later, six 'Colored' MPs received commendations for remaining on duty during the riot, patrolling their post, in spite of gunfire and disorder around them."¹

The Depot Massacre, July 12, 1943: *Firsthand from White Soldiers*

The late **Joseph G. Magargee** of Greenville, a civilian employee at the camp who later became a Reynolds High School teacher and something of an authority on camp history, once recalled how the first contingent of Black soldiers was not fed at the base but they were placed in leg chains and trucked to the nearby Blue Sky Inn for their meals. Magargee wrote that, "...according to the Blue Sky owner the Black troops were not permitted to enter the Inn when Southern soldiers were inside... Under military guard, the Black troops were served their meals outdoors on the parking lot."

Before he died, Magargee also mentioned that in the camp's early days there was but a single theater for Black troops although they were permitted to occupy the back row seats in a theater for Whites. The only other entertainment originally afforded to Black troops was card games, pick-up baseball and other diversions of their own making. So, it should have come as no great surprise when, on this summer afternoon, tension between the Black and White troops escalated; military police intervened and a deadly gunfight ensued.



Figure 3 right:
C/C: "MED. DET.
STATION HOSP./
SHENANGO PERSONNEL
REPLACEMENT DEPOT/
Greenville, Pa.", on a
"Free Franked" card
with a Universal Machine
Co. post office machine
cancellation at
"GREENVILLE / PA./
FEB 23 1943," to
AUGUSTA, MAINE.

John W. Kerpan, a Greenville funeral director, was a first lieutenant and second in command of the camp's military police forces at that time of the rioting. He recalls that after several White soldiers went into the 10th Street post exchange for Black soldiers, a number of Black soldiers retaliated by attempting to enter the White PX on Seventh Street. The Black soldiers were met with stiff resistance. Tempers flared and the resulting melee soon got out of hand. Kerpan's recollection is that at least two Black soldiers were killed and several others probably were wounded in the resulting gunfire which lasted from about 5 o'clock in the afternoon until long after dark...the rioters were immediately sent to overseas destinations.²

William F. Kerfoot, Sr., of the Vernon, OH area, was a military police sergeant who said that he had a "front row seat" during the gunfire display in which not a single military policeman was wounded...After the rioting, Kerfoot said, he was working in the provost marshal's office and heard that "30 to 35 Black soldiers were killed that day and many more were wounded."³

The Depot Massacre, July 12, 1943: *Firsthand from a Black Soldier*

The most detailed account of this event comes from **Dempsey Travis**, a soldier who was stationed at the Shenango Depot and was himself shot several times by military police. He recorded the story several times in articles and his autobiography, but I find the most compelling version comes from an oral history interview he had with Studs Terkel, who later published it in *The Good War* (1984). Take a few minutes to read his story to see how it squares with another account.



Dempsey Travis

ing at the Black soldiers. *"Kansas was killed on the spot,"* Travis said, and he himself fell with three gunshot wounds in the hip and legs, which resulted in several months of hospitalization.

While in the base hospital, Travis claimed he *"saw 14 or 15 wounded Blacks within a radius of 40 feet."* He recalled a Red Cross worker saying that *"I don't know how many died and how many were wounded."* He maintained that the hostilities were not completely quelled for 48 to 72 hours. The public may never know for certain how many Black soldiers were killed or wounded that day in July.

Travis continues:

The army was an experience unlike anything I've had in my life. I think of two armies, one Black, one White. I saw German prisoners free to move around the camp, walk right into the doggone places like any white American. We were wearin' the same Army uniform, but we were excluded.

When I arrived, I stepped into mud up to my knees. The troop train was *Jim Crow* - a car for Black soldiers and for Whites. They went to their part of the camp and sent us to the "ghetto." It seems the army always arranged to have Black soldiers back up against the woods someplace. Isolated. We were never near the main gate. If you went through camp as a visitor, you'd never know Black soldiers were there, unless they happened to be working on some menial detail.

White troops slept in barrack buildings while Black troops were forced to bunk outside on cots. We didn't have a PX for Black Soldiers. There was a White PX, but we could not use it. They set up a temporary situation, where a guy had some candy bars and a Coke. At the White PX, you could buy almost anything. We had nothin'. There was no Black Servicemen's Club. No place for recreation. The only thing guys could do is shoot craps and play cards. If we were lucky, we might get a pass to Sharon, Pa., about fifteen miles away.

After we'd been there a couple of weeks, they decided to put a make-shift theater right in the center of the Black area. As we walked out of the theater, there was a group of Black soldiers standing around in a big discussion. Some Black soldier's eye had been kicked out for going into the White PX to get a beer. The guys were talking: *We've got to do something about it.* Kansas and I just walked into this.

Within minutes, a caravan of six trucks loaded with White soldiers in battle-color fatigues, like they had in jungle warfare, looked like green leaves, camouflage, they drove up and surrounded the area. Cut the street off. The lights went out and they started firing. Firing, firing, just shooting into the goddamn crowd. Everybody started scrambling like hell. I must have run maybe five feet and fell, my friend Kansas beside me. I put my hand on my leg, and I could feel something warm running down my pants.

Meanwhile, shooting is still going on, and men are screaming. Then shooting subsides. Then comes the Red Cross. The guys started walking through the crowd with flashlights. *"This one is dead."* *"This one is bad."* I don't know how many died and how many were wounded. When they got to me, they said, *"He'll live. He just seems to be shot in several places."* I was shot three times. Then they looked at my friend. They threw a flashlight on him. They said, *"He'll make it. N-----s don't die when you shoot 'em in the head."* This was a Red Cross worker.⁴



Foreground: Black soldiers bunks — Background: White soldiers barracks at the Shenango Depot, circa 1943.

WWII'S SUMMER OF DISCONTENT: 1943

Cities in the U.S. and the Military experienced a wave of racial unrest during the 1940s. Segregation on Military Bases and the policy of *"Jim Crow in Uniform"* was no longer becoming acceptable in the service; the walls of segregation were being broken down slowly. The Shenango Depot Riot was not unique in 1943, but it resulted in almost immediate changes in how Black soldiers were treated and housed at the Depot. These and other Black Soldier WWII riots⁵ ultimately contributed to the desegregation of the military, culminating in President Harry Truman's executive order in 1948 that abolished racial discrimination in the armed forces. ■

References:

1. www.campreynolds.com/history-page/history-page.htm.
2. www.info-ren.org/projects/btul/Pennsylvania/ww2/ww2f1.html.
3. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp_Reynolds.
4. anothercenturyblog.wordpress.com/2020/10/29/the-shenango-depot-massacre/
5. ebSCO.com/research-starters/history/race-riots-1943.