

THE NCO MEDAL OF HONOR RECIEPIENT

STAFF SERGEANT RUBEN RIVERS

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The Medal of Honor Recipient SSG Ruben Rivers

SSG Ruben Rivers born and raised in a small town in Oklahoma called Tecumseh. There in Tecumseh, located in Central Oklahoma, SSH Ruben Rivers lived in a small ramshackle farmhouse. Along with his sisters and brothers, they tended to livestock and other chores inside the rustic barbed wire fence that surrounded his home. SSG Rivers family consisted on 2 sisters and 2 brothers, Grace Rivers Woodfork who (accepted his MOH Post humously), baby sister Arnese, brothers Robert and Duey. SSG Rivers, lived in the Community called Holtuka. Many in his community insisted that this was not an African American War (WWII) and the only reason why African Americans were invited was to cook and clean up after those that wanted to keep them in Slavery. This view and his decision to enter the military put him with odds for those in his community. Many in the Community of Holtuka believed that African Americans purpose for serving in the military, only as supporters the other soldiers who did the fighting. Ruben did not believe this and was steadfast on his decision. His thoughts and beliefs were it was his country too and had it not been for the Japanese attacking Pearl Harbor he would not be giving it much thought.

This is a tribute to not only to SSG Rivers, but to all the men of the 761st Tank Battalion, strong, dedicated men whose courageous deeds received so little notice in spite of their immense value in the successful defeat of Germany in WW II. For 183 days, they continually engaged and defeated the best that Germany had. Although usually outnumbered and facing superior weaponry their resolve and un-relentless dedication too mission and each other, overcame their shortcomings. They punched the hole in the Siegfried Line through which Patton's tanks subsequently poured and raced across

Germany. In award winning movies there is little mentioning of Black Combat units serving and contributing to the WWII conflict.

Heroes often left out when called, the 761st Tank Battalion and its members experienced this first hand. Silence echoes around the deeds of the 761st Tank Battalion in spite of their exceptional courage and boldness in battle. They fought six months without relief; they defeated superior German forces that had stymied, stalled, and frustrated others of Patton's units. As a reward, they (the 761ST Tank Bn) encountered denial of fuel so that they would not be the first to link with the Russians toward the end of the war. The Counter/Slice Battalions or troops of 13th and 14th Armored Divisions received the honors. Typically, the 761st Tank Battalion "Black Panthers" as they had did throughout their participation in WWII overcame the roadblocks; In this particular situation, they found a black quartermaster unit, which provided them with 30,000 gallons of gasoline for their vehicles. Therefore, they were the first American unit to link with the Russians in spite of the deceit and trickery of their superiors. Still there is the lack of publicity acknowledging that fact.

In their very first combat action, they moved in under questionable orders as guinea pigs to the enemy. They unit entered the town of Morville-les-Vic, which had been by-passed by Patton because it was a German stronghold, and he did not want to be bogged down. The 761st was supposed to go in and allow the Germans to exhaust their ammunition on them. Then, their Counter/Slice Battalions and troops would attack and mop up. Instead, after three days of fighting an entrenched, numerically superior, and well-armed enemy, the gallant men of the 761st routed the German defenders and took the town.

In the Battle of the Bulge where Germans broke thru the Ardennes Forest, the 761st now ordered to take the town of Tillet (a German Stronghold). Every other American unit assigned to take the town had lost the area. Tanks, artillery, and infantry inside the Ardennes Forest had assaulted Tillet and all had failed to take it. After a week of steady fighting against entrenched SS troops, the 761st took Tillet and drove the Germans out in full retreat. These are but a few of the remarkable accomplishments of SSG Rivers and another well-known members "SSG Carter" of the 761st Tank Battalion. Interestingly, the only African American in the movie "*Patton*" was his servant. SSG Rivers courage and commitment to lead his soldiers was realized when the crash of artillery fire kept nerves taut in Captain David J. Williams' Company A, 761st Tank Battalion. They were preparing to undergo their baptism of fire at daybreak on November 8, 1944. When the order to move finally came, First Lieutenant Joe Kahoe's five tanks plowed through the mud to take up supporting positions behind a low ridge outside the village of Bezange le Grande. At the same time, First Lieutenant Robert Hammond's platoon, with Staff Sergeant Ruben River's tank in the lead, roared down the road as GIs from the 26th Infantry Division's 104th Infantry Regiment pushed toward their objective, Vic sur Seille. Rivers did not get far, though. Just a couple of hundred yards out of town he encountered a roadblock.

Captain Williams, bellowed out to SSG Rivers to help the doughs by using H.E. Williams grabbed his binoculars and watched in awe as Sergeant Rivers calmly dismounted from his tank, crawled forward with the tow cable, and carefully attached it to the trunk of the large tree that formed the roadblock. Williams could make out the shape of antipersonnel and antitank mines attached to the tree and held his breath as Rivers painstakingly performed the operation while German infantry fired on him and a

brace of mortar rounds exploded nearby. Undaunted, Rivers completed his task, stood up, remounted his tank, and climbed into the turret. When the tank backed up, pulling the tree clear of the road, Williams observed several black puffs of smoke as mines exploded. Impressed by Rivers' cool courage under fire, which cleared the way for the tanks and infantry to move on and take their objective, Williams recommended the intrepid tanker for a Silver Star, the nation's third highest valor award. Hard fighting continued through the next day as the 104th Infantry, still supported by Company A, pushed on in a bloody battle to take Morville-les-Vic. They continued to press forward on the tenth, and reached Chateau Voue on November 11. The next day, two of Williams' platoons repulsed a German counterattack near Weiss. On the thirteenth, the battered company withdrew for maintenance.

Three days later, on November 16, while leading his company's eleven remaining tanks across a railroad crossing near the village of Guebling, Rivers' vehicle hit an antitank bomb. The mine blew off its right track and severely damaged the running gear. A piece of metal knocked loose inside the turret, slashed Rivers' right leg, laying the flesh open to the bone from knee to thigh. Captain Williams, when he saw Rivers outside the vehicle, could plainly see bone, and later expressed amazement that the wound was not bleeding more. When the Medic finished dressing the wound, he turned to Capt. Williams and offered to drive Rivers to the aid station. Rivers brushed Williams' hand away and struggled up on his own. "I'm not goin' back, Cap'n," he said. "You're gonna be needin' me round here pretty soon." Williams started to argue, but Rivers ignored him, pushing past the company commander and hobbling to the nearest tank. As Williams silently watched, Rivers pulled himself up to the turret and ordered the tank commander to get out. The sergeant inside looked questioningly at Williams. When the captain

nodded, the noncommissioned officer (noncom) climbed out and let Rivers take his place inside the tank.

On the evening of 18 November, Captain Williams and the medics again inspected Rivers' wound. It was infected. Williams, says Bracy, was concerned about the possibility of gangrene, fearing that Rivers might die or lose the leg if he was not evacuated. Williams again suggested that Rivers go to the rear, but the noncom still adamantly refused. Williams did not try to dissuade him. He knew the stubborn sergeant's strong-willed nature all too well. Half African American and half Cherokee Indian, the native of Tecumseh, Oklahoma, told his company commander, "My Negro side says it hurts, my Indian side says it don't hurt, so I'll make it all right." This was the last that Capt. Williams heard from SSG Ruben Rivers as he died in the firefight that morning when his tank was hit by a German tank round.

When the fighting ended that afternoon, Captain Williams found the acting battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hollis M. Hunt, and told him he wanted to recommend Rivers for the Medal of Honor. Williams says Hunt first expressed disbelief at the request, then cynicism. "What?" Williams quotes Hunt as saying. "He's already got a silver Star. You can put your request through channels, but..." Hunt's voice trailed off. He pursed his lips, adjusted his scarf, and listened indifferently, without comment, to Williams' description of River's valor. Four days later, Williams again confronted Hunt, this time as Williams was leaving the battalion command post to return to his unit. He paused in the doorway and pulled out a piece of paper on which he had written a brief narrative describing why he thought Rivers deserved the Medal of Honor. "This is my recommendation for Sergeant Rivers," Williams said, walking back and laying the paper

on the colonel's, field desk. Hunt silently nodded, his eyes half closed, and said, "It's not so easy, Captain. We'll see." That was the last Williams heard about the recommendation. He had other problems to worry about at that point. The Germans were falling back toward the Siegfried Line, and the Third Army, of which the 761st Tank Battalion was a part, was again racing across France after them.

Lieutenant Colonel Hunt was right about one thing: getting a Medal of Honor--or any other valor award--for an African American in the Second World War was a difficult proposition. It was especially difficult in separate combat battalions like the 761st, which shuffled from one division to another. Paperwork was frequently lost as the units moved from one division or corps to another. Moreover, no one in any of the higher headquarters seemed to have been particularly concerned about following up on awards recommendations for black troops. The 761st, twice recommended for the Presidential Unit Citation in 1945, but given denials for both requests. Undaunted, the battalion's veterans later banded together to continue their fight for recognition, finally receiving in 1978 the award they sought. Meanwhile, Staff Sergeant Ruben Rivers--who repeatedly led his company's assaults, and was credited by his comrades with killing more than three hundred German soldiers during his stellar twelve-day combat career--received nothing for his heroic efforts, from his serious wounding on November 16 until his final sacrifice himself while covering his company's withdrawal under fire. There is apparently no record of the Medal of Honor recommendation Captain Williams says he gave to Lieutenant Colonel Hunt.

The Presidential Unit Citation was awarded to the 761st Tank Battalion in 1978, decades after their tremendous contributions. One of their members, SSgt. Ruben Rivers,

was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor in 1997, decades after he, with the typical
bravery exemplified by his unit, offered up his life on the field of battle.

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