



The Houston Mutiny and Riot of 1917

Author(s): Robert V. Haynes

Source: *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Apr., 1973), pp. 418-439

Published by: Texas State Historical Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30238208>

Accessed: 17/07/2010 16:08

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=tsha>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Texas State Historical Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Houston Mutiny and Riot of 1917

ROBERT V. HAYNES*

ON THE MORNING OF AUGUST 25, 1917, TWO HEAVILY GUARDED TRAINS carrying the disarmed men of the Third Battalion, Twenty-fourth United States Infantry, left Houston, Texas, for Columbus, New Mexico. After the trains had passed through Schulenburg, Texas, a resident of that town picked up a small piece of paper on the railroad right-of-way near his ice house. He discovered scribbled on the back of a soldier's unused pass a hand-written message: "Take Tex. and go to hell, I don't want to go there anymore in my life. Lets go East and be treated as people."¹

Less than four weeks earlier, 654 black soldiers and 8 white officers of this battalion had arrived in Houston to assume guard duties at Camp Logan, a new training cantonment then under construction and located approximately three and half miles from the center of town. On the evening of August 23, a sizeable group of enlisted men participated in a mutiny and in a march on the city which left twenty persons dead or dying on the streets of Houston.²

* Mr. Haynes, a professor of history at the University of Houston, gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Menil Foundation of Houston, Texas, and of the Office of Research at the University of Houston, both of which provided valuable financial support for much of the research; Dr. Edward Holley, former director of libraries at the University of Houston, and Mr. Phocion Park, a graduate assistant at the University of Houston, also offered generous aid in the preparation of this study.

¹ J. Wolters to [Commanding General] Southern Department, August 27, 1917, with enclosure Henry Sengelmann to Wolters, August 26, 1917, U.S. Army Commands, Headquarters, Southern Department, File 370.61, Box 364, No. 70, Record Group 393, (National Archives).

² Report of Colonel G. O. Cress to Commanding General, Southern Department, September 13, 1917, p. 2, *ibid.* This report consists of a typed manuscript of fourteen pages entitled "Investigation of the Trouble at Houston, Texas, between the Third Battalion, Twenty-fourth Infantry, and the Citizens of Houston, August 23, 1917." References to this work hereafter will be cited as Cress Report.

There are two published studies of the Houston disturbance of 1917: Edgar A. Schuler, "The Houston Race Riot, 1917," *Journal of Negro History*, XXIX (July, 1944), 300-338; and C. D. Waide, "When Psychology Failed: An Unbiased Fact-Story of the Houston Race Riot of 1917," *Houston Gargoyle* May 15, 22, 29, June 5, 12, 1928. The Schuler account relies too heavily upon the inaccurate coverage of the *Houston Post*, and the Waide article suffers from the author's racial prejudice.

As acting Mayor Dan M. Moody later stated, the “feeling that something was going to happen [was] in the air” from the moment the Twenty-fourth Infantry arrived on Saturday, July 28, 1917.³ The white citizens were apprehensive about the presence in their city of armed blacks wearing the uniform of the United States Army, especially since as military guards the soldiers would be in a position to exercise authority over them. The Houston Chamber of Commerce carefully debated whether or not to allow these soldiers in the city and acquiesced only after the War Department had informed its president that black troops alone were available for such duty and that they would remain in Houston no longer than seven weeks. Anxious not to jeopardize the city’s chances to gain lucrative federal contracts, the chamber promised “that, in a spirit of patriotism, the colored soldiers would be treated all right.”⁴

The city authorities made no more mention of their coming than was necessary. As soon as the Third Battalion arrived, however, the local newspapers began a campaign to educate the white citizens about the exceptional talents, the good moral character, and the strict discipline characteristic of black soldiers in the regular army. In an interview with a reporter for the *Houston Post*, Major W. A. Trumbull, Quartermaster at Camp Logan, maintained that the Negro soldier was “a ‘bear-cat’ as a fighter,” that discipline in the ranks was “almost perfect,” and that the soldiers were recruited from the “best and most intelligent negroes in the country.” Even more capable, he asserted, were the black noncommissioned officers who were “among the most efficient in the army.” Trumbull explained that it was “harder to get to be a non-commissioned officer in a negro regiment than it [was] to get a commis-

³ *Houston Post*, August 25, 1917. Major W. A. Trumbull, Camp Logan Quartermaster, later praised the efforts of William Newman, commander of the Third Battalion, “to make harmony under great difficulty” because of the “attitude of the people of Houston against the negro soldier. When it was announced that the battalion of the Twenty-fourth Infantry was coming there for guard, the people thought it couldn’t be done without trouble, and I think that attitude simply breeds trouble.” Statement of Trumbull, September 5, 1917, in “List of Witnesses examined,” by Cress and attached to Cress Report as Appendix A, p. 117. This “List” will hereafter be cited as Cress Report, Appendix A. See also statement of Colonel William Newman, September 20, 1917, Records of the Office of the Inspector General, General Correspondence File No. 333.9, Record Group 159 (Federal Records Center, Suitland, Maryland).

⁴ Adjutant General H. P. McCain to Congressman Jeff McLemore, August 22, 1917, Jeff McLemore Collection (Archives, University of Texas Library, Austin); statement of Newman, September 20, 1917, Records of Inspector General, RG, 159. Quote is from Newman’s statement. The *Houston Post* reported that the construction of Camp Logan alone would involve “an outlay of \$2,000,000. . . .” *Houston Post*, July 23, 1917.

sion as an officer in a white regiment."⁵ Although the more prejudiced whites were hardly convinced by these pronouncements from an army officer, they were at least silenced for the moment.

On the other hand, the soldiers' apprehensions were not so easily relieved. Prior to coming to Houston, the Twenty-fourth Infantry had fought in the Indian conflicts of the late nineteenth century as well as in the Spanish-American War, had served in the Philippine Islands and in Alaska, and had recently returned to New Mexico after participating in the Punitive Expedition of 1916–1917 into Mexico.⁶ Most of the soldiers were not elated over being suddenly reduced from the position of a fighting force to that of a guard detail.

For the Third Battalion, consisting of companies J, K, L, and M, the prospect of service in Texas was grim if not frightening, since the experiences of black soldiers in the Lone Star State had been anything but pleasant. In 1906, three companies of the Twenty-fifth Infantry were discharged without honor by President Theodore Roosevelt for allegedly shooting up the border town of Brownsville.⁷ In 1911 and again in 1916, black soldiers nearly came to blows with white citizens of San Antonio over disagreements involving racial insults and unequal access to places of public accommodation.⁸ In 1916, black troopers of the Twenty-fourth's First Battalion, enraged by the refusal of white prostitutes in Del Rio to accommodate them, pelted the brothel with rocks until the local police and a small detachment of Texas Rangers

⁵ *Houston Press*, July 25, 1917; *Houston Post*, July 28, 30, 1917. The quote is from *Houston Post*, July 30, 1917. In reassuring its readers, the *Post*, July 25, 1917, reported that the officers of the battalion "of course are white."

⁶ The only regimental history of the Twenty-fourth Infantry, William G. Muller, *The Twenty-fourth Infantry Past and Present* (reprint; Ft. Collins, Colorado, 1972), first published in 1923, is uncritical, incomplete, and unpaginated. Some indication of the regiment's earlier activities may be gleaned from William H. Leckie, *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of Negro Cavalry in the West* (Norman, 1967), 143–148, 226–228; Arlen Lowery Fowler, *The Black Infantry in the West, 1869–1891* (Westport, Connecticut, 1971), 16–46, 74–91; Theophilus G. Stewart, *Colored Regulars in the United States Army* (Philadelphia, 1904), 208; Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., "Smoked Yankees" and the Struggle for Empire: *Letters from Negro Soldiers, 1898–1902* (Urbana, 1971), 6–9, 13–18, 42–43, 239–245; Marvin E. Fletcher, "The Negro Soldier and the United States Army, 1891–1917" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1968).

⁷ The latest and most complete study of this affair is John D. Weaver, *The Brownsville Raid* (New York, 1970).

⁸ Arthur Ruhl, "The Gallery at San Antonio," *Collier's Weekly*, XLVII (April 29, 1916), 13; *Chicago Defender*, April 15, 1911, July 8, 22, 27, August 5, 12, 19, 1916; *San Antonio Express*, July 25, 26, 1916.

arrived to stop the bombardment. In the process a Texas Ranger killed one of the soldiers, supposedly in "self-defense," and the army court-martialed two others for inciting the brawl.⁹

The men of the Twenty-fourth Infantry were also aware that Texas was a rigidly segregated state and that it had a reputation for violence against non-white citizens. Two brutal lynchings of Negroes, one at Temple in 1915 and another at Waco in 1916, had been well publicized by black newspapers and journals. Only a month before the Third Battalion's arrival in Houston, a mob of two hundred whites had hanged a Negro in nearby Galveston.¹⁰ Finally, the East St. Louis Massacre, which had occurred in early July, 1917, was still vividly in their minds, and men of the Third Battalion contributed nearly \$150 to a relief fund for the displaced and homeless blacks of that city.¹¹

With both white civilians and black troopers anticipating trouble, it was not slow in developing. On Saturday evening, July 28, most of the newly arrived soldiers went into town to acquaint themselves with Houston and to locate the most suitable places of entertainment. Several incidents occurred on streetcars over the segregated seating arrangements required by city ordinance. In most cases the soldiers obeyed the law or the white conductors disregarded minor violations, but a few black troopers openly defied the system of discrimination by removing the Jim Crow screens which they either kept as "souvenirs" or tossed out the windows.¹²

The most serious confrontation happened the next evening. Two platoons of the Twenty-fourth, fearful about missing the eleven o'clock check, piled onto a streetcar only to have the annoyed conductor order them off for violating the segregation ordinance. While a handful of angry soldiers were threatening to "throw the goddamn thing off the track," others spotted another trolley. As the fifty-eight men swarmed aboard it, one of the soldiers firmly told the conductor that "they would just like to see the first son of a bitch that tried to put them off" while a

⁹ An unsigned and undated manuscript on Del Rio, File 370.61, Box 364, RG 393; San Antonio *Express*, April 10, 11, 1916; Chicago *Defender*, April 22, 1916.

¹⁰ *Crisis*, XI (January, 1916), 145; *Houston Press*, June 25, 1917.

¹¹ The best study of the East St. Louis riot is Elliott M. Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St. Louis, July 2, 1917* (Carbondale, 1964). See also *Crisis*, XIV (October, 1917), 307-309.

¹² Statement of B. M. Speegel, motorman, in Testimony of Houston Citizens Before a Municipal Board of Inquiry, Cress Investigation as attached to Appendix B, 3-6. See also statement of W. F. Legg, motorman, *ibid.*, 7-8; statement of Acting Mayor Dan M. Moody, Cress Investigation, 9; *Houston Press*, July 30, 1917.

few others enlarged the "colored" section by ordering six white passengers to move up front.¹³

By Monday morning, news of the weekend altercations was all over town. Anxious to cool racial tensions before they erupted into serious violence, Houston's Chief of Police, Clarence Brock, met with the traffic manager of the Houston Electric Company and Colonel William Newman to work out a compromise arrangement. Brock agreed to leave punishment of soldiers who violated the segregation ordinances to the army and to allow sixteen specially chosen provost guards to assist police in patrolling black neighborhoods frequented most often by the soldiers. In return, Colonel Newman consented to withhold sidearms from the military police and to equip them only with billy clubs furnished by the Houston Police Department. He also promised to inform the soldiers that they were not to congregate outside the camp in groups of more than three.¹⁴ While these "unprecedented" arrangements assuaged most of the fears of white Houstonians, they multiplied those of the black soldiers who believed that, by depriving them of effective military protection, Newman had left them almost defenseless in a hostile southern community.¹⁵ In time, they would come to feel that justice could not be obtained through normal channels.

The friction that first began on the streetcars soon spread to other areas of contact between soldiers and civilians. The most frequent point of conflict was Camp Logan where 148 men were daily assigned to mount 7 guard posts. Although the guards were issued five rounds of ammunition, they were instructed to load their rifles only in case of an emergency and to treat all authorized personnel with respect.¹⁶ While they generally followed these orders explicitly, most white employees at Camp Logan resented having to show their credentials to black sol-

¹³ Statement of Oliver J. Charboneau, motorman, Cress Report, Appendix B, 20-22; statement of L. E. Gentry, police officer, *ibid.*, 27-28.

¹⁴ Statement of Newman, September 20, 1917; statement of Acting Mayor Dan M. Moody, Cress Report, Appendix A, 9-10; James Z. George to Cress, September 13, 1917, Army Commands, File 370.61, Box 364, RG 393; *Houston Press*, August 1, 1917.

¹⁵ W. E. B. DuBois referred to the disarming of the military police as "unprecedented." *Crisis*, XIV (October, 1917), 284-285. For the attitude of the soldiers, see statement of Corporal Charles Baltimore, Cress Report, Appendix A, 113-114.

¹⁶ The seven guard posts were headquarters, warehouse (cossack post), upper A, lower A, upper D, lower D, and division F. The guards were mounted daily at 1 p.m. and remained on duty twenty-four hours. Testimony of Captain Haig Shekerjian, U.S. v. Cpl. John Washington et al., 27, General Court Martial Case 109018, Office of the Judge Advocate General, General Courts Martial, 1812-1939, Box 5382, RG 153 (Federal Records Center, Suitland, Maryland).

diers and treated the guards accordingly.¹⁷ In fact, a few even made sport of the situation. One reported story that a city engineer had been admitted after flashing a baseball pass became a standing joke among white workers.¹⁸ Sergeant William C. Nesbit of Company I, later convicted of participating in the mutiny and riot, reported that “those [white] people out there wouldn’t obey and said they weren’t taking orders from niggers.”¹⁹

On the other hand, the slightest sign of discourtesy or evidence of misbehavior on the part of the black guards was immediately reported to one of the foremen or to a white officer.²⁰ As the number of complaints increased, Newman detailed an officer of the day to remain at Camp Logan in order to resolve matters of friction before they became serious. In cases where the soldiers were judged at fault, they were appropriately and swiftly disciplined. As long as he was in command, Newman “habitually” made daily inspections of the guard posts at Camp Logan to see that the soldiers were performing their duties in an efficient and military manner.²¹ From all indications, the soldiers were, if anything, too conscientious. Workmen coming to and from the camp demonstrated their resentment by making snide comments as they passed or by blatantly addressing the guards as “niggers.”²² Like other white Houstonians, they made no distinctions between black soldiers and black civilians and treated them both as inferior persons.²³

¹⁷ Statement of Captain David E. Van Natta, 2nd Illinois Infantry, Cress Report, Appendix A, 150; statement of E. E. Ammons, deputy sheriff, *ibid.*, Appendix B, 109–113; statement of Captain Lindsey McD. Silvester, commanding officer of M Company, September 5, 1917, List of Witnesses Examined by Brigadier General John L. Chamberlain, 63–65, Records of Inspector General, RG 159. This latter work hereafter will be cited as Chamberlain Investigation.

¹⁸ Statement of E. E. Sands, city engineer, Cress Report, Appendix B, 98.

¹⁹ Statement of Nesbit, Company I, *ibid.*, Appendix A, 111.

²⁰ Captain Silvester stated that the army officers were “always investigating something” at Camp Logan. “We had had more or less trouble around Camp Logan,” he reported, “ever since we had been there.” Statement of Captain Silvester, September 5, 1917, Chamberlain Investigation, 63–64.

²¹ Statement of Captain W. P. Rothrock, August 29, 1917, *ibid.*, 1–2; statement of Newman, September 20, 1917.

²² Statement of Corporal Larmon J. Brown, Company I, August 31, 1917, Cress Report, Appendix A, 103. In one of his communiques on the Houston affair, Cress noted that the use of the term “nigger” appeared in “practically every case of disorder reported” and that the result was always the same: “a display of anger on the part of the soldier, with profane and abusive language and threats of vengeance.” Cress to Commanding General, Southern Department, File 333.9, October 5, 1917, Records of Inspector General, RG 159.

²³ In his report on the Houston riot Cress commented that the attitude of policemen and “white citizens generally” in Houston was “that a nigger is a nigger and that his status is not effected by the uniform he wears.” Cress Report, 4.

In response to these daily reminders of their degraded position in Houston, black soldiers grew increasingly irritable. By mid-August they were making their annoyance at this treatment obvious to those whites who made frequent use of this type of opprobrium. On several occasions, they firmly declared that they were not "niggers" and that they expected to be addressed as "colored men." "Look here," one guard told the paymaster of the Houston Lighting and Power Company, "I want you to understand that we ain't no niggers. I am no nigger."²⁴

Two incidents in mid-August nearly escalated into serious violence. The first involved the refusal of several guards to drink from the water barrels labeled "colored." Instead they insisted upon using the cans labeled "white." Recognizing the explosive nature of this situation, the contractors hastily added another receptacle and marked it "guards."²⁵ The second episode occurred on Saturday, August 18, when a white tradesman knifed Sam Blair, a black worker, for allegedly butting ahead of him in the pay line. In the ensuing "payroll riot" forty black and white workers engaged in a free for all while the only guard present disregarded the exhortation of one worker who urged his black brothers to "clean up the white laborers."²⁶

In contrast to the rather tense situation at Camp Logan, most white Houstonians were unaware of the black soldiers' presence. At least two factors were responsible for this situation. In the first place, the white officers made a conscious effort to discourage the soldiers from going into town. Instead they tried to attract the Negro community to the Twenty-fourth's camp by adopting a lax policy of visitation whereby civilians could visit the camp each day between 1 p.m. and 10:45 p.m.²⁷

²⁴ Statement of W. T. Patterson, paymaster of Houston Lighting and Power Company, August 29, 1917, Chamberlain Investigation, 11.

²⁵ In the voluminous testimony to the various investigating bodies, there is much discussion of this incident. The summaries are in Cress Report, 2, and Inspector General of the Army to Adjutant General of the Army, September 13, 1917, File 333.9, Records of the Inspector General, RG 159.

²⁶ Statement of Lieutenant W. W. Parker, August 26, 1917, Cress Report, Appendix A, 11; statement of Rothrock, August 26, 1917, *ibid.*, 45; *Houston Post*, August 19, 1917.

²⁷ Newman's visitation policy was extremely controversial and formed the basis for the city's contention that it attracted to camp a large number of "undesirables" who encouraged the soldiers to riot. Most of the witnesses before the Houston Board of Inquiry testified about the prevalence of prostitutes and liquor in the camp. Reverend W. S. Lockhart, pastor of the South End Christian Church, was one of the principal exponents of the "vice and booze" thesis. He attributed the riot to the fact that the soldiers were under the "influence of a bunch of corrupt negro women who filled them with booze." *Houston Press*, August 28, 1917. City Attorney W. J. Johnson agreed. He concluded that "it was a case of booze and women and fancied wrongs on the part of the negroes, and a determination on

The black townspeople, curious about military life and proud of the soldiers, flocked to the Twenty-fourth's camp located on the western outskirts of the city about one mile east of Camp Logan. Civic groups prepared special entertainment; ladies' auxiliaries kept the soldiers well supplied with reading material and culinary delicacies; black ministers frequently held worship services on Sundays; and young ladies came to renew old acquaintances or to make new ones.²⁸ In the process, a few prostitutes came in search of additional clients, but they were the exception rather than the rule.²⁹ In general these visits were both pleasant and rewarding for civilians and soldiers alike, and a few of the men established lasting relationships with black Houstonians. On weekends the numerous visitors from the city's most respected black families gave the camp, according to one curious white officer, the appearance of a "very orderly . . . big picnic."³⁰

In the second place, most soldiers preferred to avoid unpleasant contact with whites whenever possible, since the troops hardly enjoyed these humiliating encounters. Furthermore, they felt more comfortable

the part of the police that our laws would not be set aside by them." Cress Report, Appendix B, September 1, 1917.

On the other hand, Newman categorically denied the truth of this testimony. "The attempt of the citizens committee to make it appear that my camp was a red-light district," he stated, "is cruel in the extreme." In a typical generalization, Newman explained that the "negro is essentially a sociable creature. He likes to be where there are lots of people to talk to and to laugh with. And it was to provide him with diversion of this kind that I allowed visitors to go in the camp." Statement of Newman, September 20, 1917. Newman also quoted a local judge who told him that "the prevailing opinion among white people in the south is that *all* colored women are immoral." *Ibid.*

²⁸ Captain Haig Shekerjian insisted that "the reason for permitting civilians to visit camp was that it kept the men contented by making them acquainted with the more respectable element of the colored race, thus keeping them near camp." Statement of Shekerjian, September 21, 1917, Records of Inspector General, RG 159. Private George A. Singleton, acting chaplain, Company I, testified that "a large portion" of the ladies who visited the camp "were women of standing and force of character, christians and church members who were interested in the spiritual welfare of the command and their moral uplift." He also estimated that "morale was at least 60% better" in Houston than in Columbus, New Mexico, where they had previously been stationed. Testimony of Singleton, September 24, 1917, *ibid.*

²⁹ Captain Bartlett James, commanding officer, L Company, could remember only one incident of a "lewd woman" in camp, and the guards ordered her to leave. Statement of James, September 22, 1917, *ibid.* The wives of two soldiers, Mrs. Burt Goodall and Mrs. Julius Crowell, set up business establishments near the Twenty-fourth's camp. According to Major S. V. Sutphin, assistant judge advocate, Mrs. Goodall "ran a disreputable boot legging establishment," and Mrs. Crowell "was a well known prostitute when Crowell married her." Memorandum, Sutphin to Commanding General, Southern Department, April 5, 1918, *ibid.*

³⁰ Statement of Trumbull, September 5, 1917, Cress Report, Appendix A, 115-117; *Houston Post*, August 7, 1917.

and secure when racial conflicts occurred on federal property than in the city. Almost invariably, the soldiers avoided white neighborhoods and business establishments; instead they frequented “the lower end of Milam Street” and the San Felipe district in search of pleasure and fellowship.³¹

Although racial contacts were kept to a minimum in the city, nevertheless a few black soldiers and one or two white officers received verbal abuse from white Houstonians. One of the latter proudly informed informed First Lieutenant William L. Chaffin, the battalion’s medical officer, “that in Texas it costs 25 dollars to kill a buzzard and five dollars to kill a nigger. . . .” Following the streetcar incidents of July 28 and 29, several of the more prejudiced citizens circulated a wild rumor that the soldiers had assaulted one white conductor so severely that he was not expected to live.³² In passing black soldiers on the streets, white Houstonians sometimes muttered obscenities or hurled racist epithets at them. Some men in the Fifth Infantry of the Texas National Guard, which was temporarily stationed in several downtown buildings, also made derogatory remarks whenever they met black soldiers in the city. In at least two incidents where misunderstandings over saluting occurred, serious trouble was barely averted.³³

Of all the prejudiced groups which they encountered in Houston, black soldiers as well as black Houstonians resented most the condescending manners and the strong-armed tactics of the city police. Although both Colonel Newman and Chief of Police Clarence Brock had arranged for cooperation, members of the police force either had not been properly informed of the agreements or chose to ignore them.³⁴ Consequently there was never any real communication between the military and civil police. Despite the fact that the soldiers were “kicking

³¹ Much of this information was obtained in interviews with black Houstonians, most of whom preferred to remain anonymous. The author has in his possession several tapes of these interviews.

³² Statement of Chaffin, September 5, 1917, Chamberlain Investigation, 32–33.

³³ Statement of Colonel John S. Hoover, commanding officer of the Fifth Texas National Guard, Cress Report, Appendix A, 4; statement of Newman, September 20, 1917. Because of the animosity between the Twenty-fourth and the Fifth Texas, Newman cancelled a boxing exhibition to be held in the city auditorium where two companies of the Texas National Guard were temporarily stationed. Statement of Frank A. Shaffer, sports promoter, *ibid.*, Appendix B, 32.

³⁴ Cress Report, 7; statement of Tice Wilkins, police officer, Cress Report, Appendix B, 297; Inspector General of the Army to Adjutant General of the Army, September 13, 1917, Records of the Inspector General, RG 159. Six of Brock’s friends on the police force testified that they heard the orders to cooperate with the military read at several meetings of police officers. *Houston Press*, September 5, 1917.

about their side arms," Newman followed Brock's advice and kept the provost guards unarmed whenever they patrolled the streets of Houston. Even in situations where blacks were denied adequate protection or where discrimination against them was obvious, the military policemen were helpless to intervene.³⁵

The principal cause of racial bitterness between soldiers and police did not stem from these confused arrangements but from a series of physical assaults on blacks by law officers.³⁶ On August 18, two policemen arrested a black youth for allegedly "throwing bricks promiscuously." After two soldiers who were passing by in a streetcar protested what they regarded as unwarranted harassment, the two patrolmen stopped the trolley and tried to apprehend the two "uppity" soldiers. When the latter "showed fight," the two officers slugged them with their pistols and escorted them to the police station.³⁷

Later the same day, two other soldiers complained to the desk sergeant that two policemen had severely beaten them for objecting to being called "niggers."³⁸ The next day a deputy sheriff of Harris County arrested another soldier for sitting in the "white only" section of a streetcar. When the private allegedly drew a "penknife," the sheriff pistol whipped him and took him to the county jail where he remained until after the disturbance of August 23.³⁹

By late August, as the list of grievances mounted, the situation was becoming intolerable for several black soldiers. On Thursday, August 23, when the temperature soared to 102 degrees, there occurred a series of incidents which channeled the frustrations of this small but influential group of black soldiers into armed revolt. During the morning, Rufus Daniels and Lee Sparks, two mounted police officers, assaulted Private Alonzo Edwards of Company L for interfering in the arrest of

³⁵ Chicago *Defender*, January 26, 1918; statement of Corporal Charles Baltimore, August 30, 1917, Cress Report, Appendix A, 113-114. Acting Sergeant Major William Washington quoted one of the provost guards who complained that "it was a piece of imposition to put men down in town, with nothing more than a club, to be shot up." Statement of Washington, August 30, 1917, *ibid.*, 94.

³⁶ One of the desk sergeants of the Houston Police Department testified that there were twelve arrests of black soldiers before August 23, 1917, on the police blotter. Statement of Knox Polk, *ibid.*, Appendix B, 256-260.

³⁷ Written statement of I. I. Hobbs, police sergeant, *ibid.*, 288; statement of E. F. Dougherty, city detective, August 31, 1917, Chamberlain Investigation, 145.

³⁸ Statement of W. C. Wilson, desk sergeant, Cress Report, Appendix B, 264.

³⁹ Houston *Chronicle*, August 20, 1917; Houston *Press*, August 21, 1917; Statement of Ed Stoermer, deputy sheriff, Cress Report, Appendix B, 14; statement of J. L. Matchett, motorman, *ibid.*, 35.

a black housewife.⁴⁰ Early that same afternoon Corporal Charles Baltimore, a provost guard from I Company, tried to obtain information from the two mounted policemen about the circumstances which had led to Edwards's arrest. Annoyed by this inquiry from a Negro, Sparks, generally regarded as one of the more vociferous racists on the police force, struck Baltimore with his pistol and fired at him three times. Baltimore fled with Sparks in close pursuit. The policemen cornered the bloodied soldier underneath a bed in an unoccupied house on Bailey Street, arrested him, and sent him to jail in a patrol wagon.⁴¹

Immediately news of the beatings of Private Edwards and Corporal Baltimore reached the Twenty-fourth's camp. The report that Baltimore was "shot at" soon grew into the rumor that he was "shot."⁴² Incensed by what they regarded as the unwarranted shooting of one of their most respected noncommissioned officers, several soldiers vowed to avenge Baltimore's death by getting the policeman who had killed him.⁴³ Concerned but unaware of the seriousness of the situation, Major Kneeland S. Snow, former commander of I Company, who had only two days before replaced Colonel Newman as battalion commander, dispatched his adjutant, Captain Haig Shekerjian, to the police station to investigate the circumstances surrounding the arrests of both soldiers.⁴⁴

After Shekerjian had returned to camp with Baltimore, white officers mistakenly believed that the trouble had ended. Lest some individuals become too agitated and foment trouble, however, Snow canceled the "watermelon party" scheduled that night at Emancipation Park, revoked all passes, increased the number of sentries on guard duty at the

⁴⁰ Martha Gruening, "Houston: An N.A.A.C.P. Investigation," *Crisis*, XV (November, 1917), 14-19; *Houston Press*, August 28, 1917; *Houston Post*, August 24, 1917. The temperature hovered around 100 degrees the week before the riot. One newspaper reported the city as experiencing "a period of hot weather during August that has seldom been seen in Houston for such an extended length of time." *Houston Post*, August 19, 1917. Thursday, August 23, 1917 was "the hottest day of the year thus far." *Ibid.*, August 24, 1917.

⁴¹ Baltimore's only version of the incident is in Cress Report, Appendix B, 113-114. He refused to testify in the first trial. For Spark's story see *ibid.*, 21-22. Daniels was killed in the riot of that evening. See Brock's account, *ibid.*, 39-40, and Cress Report, Appendix B, 160-175. See also *Houston Post*, August 24, 1917, and *Houston Chronicle*, August 24, 1917.

⁴² Testimony of Shekerjian, in *U.S. v. Cpl. Robert Tillman et al.*, 273-283, General Courts Martial Case 114575, Office of the Judge Advocate General, General Courts Martial, 1812-1938, Box 5649, RG 153; testimony of Mrs. Eugenia Draper, *ibid.*, 1185-1186; Cress Report, 4.

⁴³ Testimony of Mrs. E. B. Moy, *U.S. v. Tillman*, 1064-1065; testimony of Private Ezekiel Bullock, *U.S. v. Washington*, 308.

⁴⁴ Testimony of Shekerjian in *U.S. v. Sgt. William C. Nesbit, et al.*, 122-126, General Courts Martial Case 109045, Office of the Judge Advocate General, General Courts Martial, 1812-1938, Box 5384, RG 153.

Twenty-fourth's camp, and ordered all sixteen military police to patrol the black neighborhoods that evening.⁴⁵

Not satisfied with Snow's assurance that Sparks would be suspended, several black soldiers were determined to avenge the assaults on Baltimore and Edwards and, if possible, to guarantee that no further incidents of this sort would occur.⁴⁶ A few of the more dissatisfied men, however, threatened to "burn down the town," and one promised to "shoot every white face he saw."⁴⁷

Shortly after eight o'clock that evening, Vida Henry, acting first sergeant of Company I, informed Major Snow, who was at the moment preparing to ride into town with a civilian friend, that he was afraid there might be trouble in the company. In the process of investigating this report, Snow caught a few men stealing ammunition from one of the company supply tents. He instantly ordered the first sergeants to collect all rifles and to search the men's tents for loose ammunition.⁴⁸

While Snow's orders were being carried out, Private Frank Johnson of Company I slipped to the rear of the company street and yelled: "Get your guns men! The white mob is coming!" This cry stampeded the frightened men into rushing the four company supply tents where they grabbed arms and ammunition.⁴⁹ After approximately thirty minutes of confused and indiscriminate firing, Sergeant Henry ordered the men of

⁴⁵ Cress Report, 4; testimony of Snow, *U.S. v. Nesbit*, 36–38.

⁴⁶ Testimony of Private Frank Draper, *U.S. v. Nesbit*, 1027–1028, 1037–1038; testimony of Private Loyde Shorter, *ibid.*, 1049–1063, 1073; testimony of Private John Denty, *ibid.*, 1104, 1116–1117; testimony of Private Cleda Love, *ibid.*, 1268–1269. Most of these witnesses repeat the same story in *U.S. v. Tillman*.

⁴⁷ Statement of Private Wiley L. Strong, Company M, August 28, 1917, Cress Report, Appendix A, 127; testimony of Bullock, *U.S. v. Washington*, 130.

⁴⁸ Testimony of Snow, *U.S. v. Nesbit*, 39–40, 64; testimony of Private Joseph Alexander of Company I, *ibid.*, 1125–1126; testimony of Shekerjian, *U.S. v. Tillman*, 243; testimony of Shorter, *ibid.*, 1469–1470; statement of Private Leroy Pinkett, Company I, *Houston Press*, August 24, 1917.

⁴⁹ Cress Report, 4–5; Inspector General of the Army to Adjutant General of the Army, September 13, 1917. Quote is from testimony of Private Draper, *U.S. v. Tillman*, 1200–1203. These summaries are based upon a wide variety of testimony given during the investigations conducted by both Chamberlain and Cress. In addition, numerous witnesses in the *Nesbit* and *Tillman* trials verified these conclusions. All of these sources agree that the cry about the white mob coming served as a signal to begin the firing in camp. On the other hand, a brief prepared by a black attorney in Kansas City and based upon interviews with the convicted soldiers who were serving terms in Leavenworth Penitentiary argued not only that the men believed a white mob was approaching the camp, but also that the evidence introduced in the *Tillman* and *Nesbit* trials proved that the bullets later discovered in homes near the camp had to be fired by persons outside the camp. Appeal to Judge Advocate General by men confined in Federal Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas [May 15, 1919], Records of the Judge Advocate General, Court Martial Case 109045, Box 538C, RG 153.

Company I to “fall in” and to fill their canteens. Rallying the soldiers with cries of “stick by your own race” and “To hell with going to France. . . . Get to work right here” and with threats to shoot anyone who refused to join them, ringleaders of the mutiny were able to attract the support of the bulk of Company I and a small contingent from Company M together with a scattering of men from the other two companies.⁵⁰ In all some 75 to 100 men moved out of camp and, about nine o'clock, began a determined march on the city.⁵¹

Circuitously approaching the city through the friendly confines of the San Felipe district where they hoped to find Lee Sparks and Rufus Daniels, the black soldiers encountered the police first at Washington Avenue and Brunner Street and later at Wilson and San Felipe streets, and easily repulsed them each time.⁵² After killing Daniels and three additional policemen and wounding three others, one of whom subsequently died, the black rebels, weakened by numerous desertions, fell into disagreement over what course of action to pursue next.⁵³ The vast

⁵⁰ Cress Report, 5; testimony of Sergeant Rhoden Bond of Company I, *U.S. v. Tillman*, 2204–2210; testimony of Draper, *ibid.*, 1200–1203.

⁵¹ The exact number of men who left camp can never be determined with any degree of accuracy. The army tried 118 men, but the evidence presented in the three trials does not justify the convictions of several men found guilty by the military boards. White witnesses frequently gave exaggerated figures of over 200 men. The number suggested in this paper is based upon a careful reading of the trial records and an assessment of the damage done by the mutinous soldiers. A check of missing men taken at 9:30 P.M. revealed 151 men absent from camp. The number who left could hardly have been greater than that figure. The wild shooting in camp certainly frightened a number of men who took refuge in the woods adjacent to the camp. Since the military court-martialed only 118 men, the authorities must have accepted the alibis of several missing soldiers. On the other hand, the woods would have been alive with men had all of those who insisted they took refuge there actually done so. There is also good evidence in the trial records that some of the whites killed that night were not victims of Henry's group. Instead they were shot by soldiers who left camp individually or in small groups during the firing and returned before Henry's column of men could have reached the San Felipe district. They could possibly have made the 9:30 check.

⁵² Testimony of Shorter, *U.S. v. Nesbit*, 1056–1076; testimony of Private William Kane, *U.S. v. Tillman*, 1396–1414.

⁵³ Testimony of W. H. Long, mounted policeman, *U.S. v. Tillman*, 832–841; testimony of James Lyon, civilian, *ibid.*, 850–858; testimony of Asa Bland, civilian, *ibid.*, 862–868; testimony of J. E. Richardson, police officer, *ibid.*, 881–887; testimony of Private Zemmie F. Foreman, Fifth Texas National Guard, *ibid.*, 905–913; testimony of Private Draper, *ibid.*, 1206–1207.

Since it is the contention of this paper that the soldiers were interested in wreaking vengeance only against the police, the author has avoided any prolonged discussion of the others killed in the riot. In addition to the four policemen (Rufus Daniels, Ira D. Raney, E. S. Meineke, and Horace Moody) killed during the riot, eight white civilians (E. M. Jones, E. A. Thompson, A. R. Carstens, Fred J. Winkler, C. W. Wright, Earl Finley, Senator Satton, and Eli Smith), one Mexican-American (Manuel Gerrado), two national guardsmen (Captain Joseph W. Mattes of the Second Illinois Field Artillery and Private Melvin

majority balked at Sergeant Henry's proposal to continue the march to the police station. They left and circled back to camp. The remainder, too small to accomplish Henry's objective, sought refuge in the homes of black Houstonians where they were captured the following day by city police and soldiers.⁵⁴ Sergeant Henry, one of the few to realize the true seriousness of their actions, refused either to return to camp or to implicate others by hiding in their homes. Instead he shook hands, one by one, with his fellow soldiers as they departed for the Twenty-fourth's camp.⁵⁵ Supposedly he later placed the barrel of his rifle against the roof of his mouth and pulled the trigger. The next morning, some boys discovered his body, with the back of his head blown out, lying across the railroad track in the city's Fourth Ward.⁵⁶

In evaluating the tragic disturbances of August 23, 1917, several groups must share responsibility for the Houston mutiny and riot. In many ways, city officials were the most culpable. Having decided against jeopardizing the economic opportunities associated with a new training camp and in favor of allowing black troops temporarily in Houston, they were unwilling to endanger their political popularity by guaranteeing that the soldiers receive fair and impartial treatment within the confines of the city's segregation system. Although the men of the Twenty-fourth were willing to accept proscription as long as it was

D. Everton of the Fifth Texas Infantry), and two soldiers of the Twenty-fourth Infantry (Henry and Private Bryant Watson) also died during the disturbance. Two more black soldiers (Private Wiley Strong and Private George Bivens) died within a few days of the episode. On September 8, 1917, D. R. Patton, one of three policemen shot in the riot, died of tetanus. Among the approximately seventeen persons wounded during the disturbance, six were seriously injured, and the lives of two of these were spared only by amputating an arm. *Houston Post*, August 24, 1917; *Houston Press*, August 24, 25, 26, September 8, 1917; *Houston Chronicle*, August 25, 26, September 8, 9, 1917.

⁵⁴ Testimony of Private Henry H. Peacock of Company I, *U.S. v. Nesbit*, 1219, 1221, 1253-1257; testimony of Shorter, *ibid.*, 1271-1274; testimony of Kane, *U.S. v. Tillman*, 1415-1417; *Houston Press*, August 24, 1917.

⁵⁵ Testimony of Draper, *U.S. v. Tillman*, 1208; testimony of Private Ernest Phifer of Company I, *ibid.*, 1322-1323.

⁵⁶ Statement of Sergeant William D. Carrier and Private Arthur Reynolds, September 25, 1917, Army Commands, File 370.61, Box 364, RG 393. Although the official report stated that Henry died "as a result of a gunshot wound inflicted by a person unknown," oral tradition among the Twenty-fourth Infantry is that he committed suicide by pulling the trigger of his rifle with his big toe. Although there is little evidence to support that tradition, the testimony in the trial records strongly corroborates the suicide theory. Proceedings of the Board of Officers of the Twenty-fourth Infantry Concerning the Death of Sgt. Vida Henry, September 13, 1917, Records of the Judge Advocate General, Court Martial Case 109045, Box 5384, RG 153; Additional Proceedings Concerning the Death of Sgt. Vida Henry, October 14, 1917, *ibid.* Henry's death certificate, which lists the cause of death as "Gun Shot Wounds," is in the Bureau of Vital Statistics, City Health Department, Houston, Texas.

courteously applied, they absolutely refused to tolerate the unrestricted police brutality against Negroes which city officials were unwilling to stop. The acting mayor of Houston, who took over the reins of city government in early July following the sudden death of Mayor Joseph Jay Pastoriza, felt insecure in his new position. He pursued a hands-off policy toward the police department even though he realized that Chief of Police Brock was incapable of controlling the actions of individual policemen who delighted in making life miserable for black Houstonians. As the former superintendent of city parks, Brock was unfamiliar with police practices and never able to win the respect of a majority of his men. Most policemen disregarded his instructions as frequently as they obeyed them, and several looked to former Chief of Police Ben Davison for advice and counsel. Consequently, mounted police officers like Sparks and Daniels felt free to use any tactic they desired against Negroes without fear of permanent suspension from the force.⁵⁷

Brock also abdicated his responsibilities on the evening of the riot. Although he urged Major Snow and Captain Shekerjian to take strong precautionary measures against a possible raid on the city, Brock refused to do likewise, insisting that he lacked jurisdiction over the military.⁵⁸ Consequently, he failed even to alert the police department of any potential danger to the safety of the city. Either Brock was immobilized by loss of nerve or he really did not believe the threat was as great as he intimated to Snow.

The War Department was also guilty of misjudgment. In ordering the Twenty-fourth Infantry to Texas, the army ignored the objections of southern whites to the training of Negro troops in the South and the advice of Newman who strongly disapproved of again sending black troops into Texas.⁵⁹ By deciding to throw proud black soldiers of the

⁵⁷ Inspector General of the Army to Adjutant General of the Army, September 13, 1917; Cress to Commanding General, October 5, 1917; statement of Newman, September 20, 1917; T. A. Binford to R.V.H., interview, March 3, 1970. In explaining why he had struck a black suspect, Sparks stated that he "wasn't going to wrestle with a big nigger." Statement of Sparks, Cress Report, Appendix B, 279.

⁵⁸ Statement of Brock, Cress Report, Appendix B, 161-166.

⁵⁹ Statement of Newman, September 20, 1917; *Congressional Record*, 65th Cong., 1st Sess., August 16, 1917, pp. 6063-6066; "Where to Encamp the Negro Troops," *Literary Digest*, LV (September 29, 1917), 14-15; Marvin A. Kreidberg and Merton G. Henry, *History of Military Mobilization in the United States Army, 1775-1945* (Washington, 1955), 313-314.

Ironically, Secretary of War Newton D. Baker received another complaint about the stationing of black soldiers at southern camps just before the Houston riot occurred. A. F. Lever to D. F. Houston, telegram (copy), August 20-21, 1917, Newton D. Baker papers, Box 4 (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).

regular army into the maelstrom of southern racism, the War Department must bear some of the blame for the Houston tragedy.

In the final analysis, however, the men of the Third Battalion had to decide whether to accept the oppressive conditions of Houston or to fight back. A sizeable number chose the latter course. By retaliating against the police, they resorted to what they regarded as the only system of justice available to them, an option open to them but not to black Houstonians since as soldiers they had better access to firearms and were more proficient in their use. In addition, a few of the troopers acted as self-appointed protectors of Negro rights. Enraged by the treatment given black civilians, the soldiers at first berated them for enduring it, but they came to realize that the local citizens had no other choice.⁶⁰ Once they were aware of this fact they decided upon retaliation in order to restore their own dignity as well as to advertise the sufferings of black Houstonians.

Infuriated by the assaults on Edwards and Baltimore, they reacted out of hostility and in a fit of rage but not without planning. By convincing most of the men that a white mob was approaching the camp, the organizers of the mutiny stampeded them into rushing the supply tents and indiscriminately grabbing rifles. In this way they precluded the possibility that the army could later connect participants in the mutiny with rifles discovered on the city streets. By frightening the men into discharging their pieces in camp, they also prevented the army from using the evidence of their rifles having been fired as proof that they were involved in the riot. By creating panic and confusion, they hoped to clear the camp of all men by forcing those uninformed about the plans either to join them in the march to town or to flee into the adjoining woods for safety. Finally the leaders of the mutiny pledged themselves to secrecy and swore not "to snitch" on each other.⁶¹

If these fairly elaborate preparations had proven successful, the army would have been hard pressed to discover the guilty persons. Since the

⁶⁰ In one of his reports, Cress stated that the black population, especially "the class frequenting dives and pool rooms in particular, and the women, appear also to have exerted their influence towards arousing the soldiers, to take measures that they supposed would secure better treatment for them all." Cress to Commanding General, October 5, 1917. Chamberlain reported that "men of the battalion abused civilians of their own race for allowing themselves to be imposed upon by the whites and for not asserting their rights." Inspector General of the Army to Adjutant General of the Army, September 13, 1917.

⁶¹ This interpretation is based upon numerous testimonies by both white officers and black soldiers in *U.S. v. Nesbit* and *U.S. v. Tillman*.

majority of those involved had to believe in the success of this venture, they fully expected to escape severe punishment and calculated that the worst that could happen to them would be dishonorable discharge from the army—the fate of the Brownsville soldiers in 1906. Military investigators successfully persuaded eight participants, four of whom were new recruits and one a twenty-year veteran, to testify against the others in return for promises of immunity.⁶² In this way the military authorities broke the case and saved the United States Army from the embarrassment of another Brownsville.⁶³

The Houston riot of 1917 was in several respects a prelude to what James Weldon Johnson later described as the “Red Summer of 1919” when the ostensible racial harmony of at least twenty-five American communities was suddenly disrupted by rioting and serious bloodshed.⁶⁴ In rather marked contrast to their behavior in riots before World War I, black Americans in the immediate post-war period were no longer disposed to endure violence against them without some type of retaliation. When whites in the summer of 1919 invaded their neighborhoods intent upon murder, plunder, and wanton destruction of property, they usually fought back.⁶⁵ For black Americans, the period during and after

⁶² The “immunity witnesses” who testified in the Nesbit case were Private Loyde Shorter of Company I, Private John Denty of Company M, Private Joseph Alexander of Company I, Private Elmer Bandy of Company M, Private Henry Peacock of Company I, and Private Cleda Love of Company I. The principal “immunity” witness in the Washington Case was Private Ezekiel Bullock of Company K. Although Private Ernest Phifer of Company I was not used as a witness until the Tillman case, he seems to have been important for the prosecution in obtaining evidence for the Nesbit trial as well. The testimony of these eight soldiers provided the basis for the Judge Advocate’s case. In the Tillman trial, Private William S. Kane of Company I, who was convicted and sentenced to life in prison in the first court-martial, was promised and later given immunity, but his testimony was not important in breaking the case originally. Phifer, Shorter, Denty, and Love enlisted in 1917, while Peacock had been in the service since 1896.

⁶³ The controversy over the Brownsville Affair is adequately covered in Ann J. Lane, *The Brownsville Affair: National Crisis and Black Reaction* (Port Washington, New York, 1971). See also Weaver, *Brownsville Raid*, 103–278; James A. Tinsley, “Roosevelt, Foraker, and the Brownsville Affray,” *Journal of Negro History*, XLI (January, 1956), 43–65; Emma Lou Thornbrough, “The Brownsville Episode and the Negro Vote,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIV (December, 1957), 469–493; Lewis N. Wynne, “Brownsville: The Reaction of the Negro Press,” *Phylon*, XXXIII (Summer, 1972), 153–160.

⁶⁴ James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York, 1933), 341. The best general description of the riots of 1919 is Arthur I. Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In* (Garden City, New York, 1967), 1–218. An excellent study of the Chicago riot of 1919 is William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York, 1970).

⁶⁵ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, “Black Violence in the 20th Century: A Study in Rhetoric and Retaliation,” in *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr (New York, 1969), 399–411; James P. Comer, “The Dynamics of Black and White Violence,” *ibid.*, 444–464; Allen D. Grimshaw (ed.), *Racial Violence in the United States* (Chicago, 1969), 1–115. For an understanding

World War I was one of rising expectations combined with a determination to claim those lawful rights which they had deferred for too long.⁶⁶ One of the earliest manifestations of this spirit of militant self-defense occurred in Houston when approximately one hundred black soldiers protested against police harassment and streetcar proscription by seizing arms and marching on the city.

Except for the Houston affair, however, the other racial outbreaks during the summer of 1917 followed the more traditional pattern of white aggressiveness and black passivity. The most serious of these took place at East St. Louis on July 2, 1917, when white mobs invaded Negro neighborhoods, inflicted thousands of dollars worth of property damage, and killed at least thirty-nine blacks and wounded scores of others. Most Negroes in East St. Louis preferred to flee the city rather than to risk further physical violence by striking back.⁶⁷ Smaller racial disturbances also broke out in Chester and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Lexington, Kentucky; Newark, New Jersey; and New York City.⁶⁸ In all but one of these racial clashes, more blacks were killed and wounded than whites. The lone exception was the Houston riot, where sixteen whites and four blacks died. None of the four Negro soldiers, however, lost his life at the hands of a white assailant.⁶⁹

The one ingredient which separated the Houston affray from the other racial disturbances of 1917 was the involvement of black soldiers of the regular army. Although the vast majority of the men in the Third Battalion were born and raised in the South, the years of rigorous mili-

of the pre-World War I pattern of race riots, see Linda K. Kerber, "Abolitionists and Amalgamators: The New York City Race Riots of 1834," *New York History*, XLVIII (January, 1967), 28-39; Charles Crowe, "Racial Massacre in Atlanta, September 22, 1906," *Journal of Negro History*, LIV (April, 1969), 150-173; James L. Croumathel, "The Springfield Race Riot of 1908," *Journal of Negro History*, XLV (July, 1960), 164-181.

⁶⁶ Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 20-23, 262-263; Allen D. Grimshaw, "A Study of Social Violence: Urban Race Riots in the United States" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1959), 180-183. For a good discussion of the concept of the "New Negro" see Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 1971), 52-83.

⁶⁷ Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St. Louis*, 41-57.

⁶⁸ None of these minor race riots in 1917 has been the subject of historical study. Information about them can be gleaned from the *New York Times*, May 27, 31, July 4, 26, 27, 28, 29, September 2, 4, 1917; and from *Crisis*, XIV (July, 1917), 145; *ibid.*, (October, 1917), 313; *ibid.*, XV (November, 1917), 35, 36.

⁶⁹ Henry, the recognized leader of the riot, committed suicide; Watson and Strong were accidentally shot by their own men; and Bivens subsequently died of gangrene resulting from medical neglect of wounds he received after the riot. Testimony of Phifer, *U.S. v. Tillman*, 1322-1323; testimony of Kane, *ibid.*, 1410-1411, 1417-1418; statement of Strong, August 24, 1917, Cress Report, Appendix A, 127; statement of Bivens, August 25, 1917, *ibid.*, 142-144; *Houston Post*, August 24, 1917; *Houston Press*, August 24, 25, 28, 1917.

tary training had liberated many of them from the psychological trauma of the southern caste system.⁷⁰ While their parents remained faithful to Booker T. Washington's philosophy of accommodation and forbearance, black troopers found the concepts of racial pride and equality as expressed by William E. B. DuBois more germane to their experiences and more in tune with their aspirations.⁷¹ Several men in the Twenty-fourth Infantry were avid readers of DuBois's *Crisis*, the influential organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Robert S. Abbott's *Chicago Defender*, a militant black newspaper with a decidedly antisouthern posture. The regimental chaplain expressed the views of more than one member of the Third Battalion when he praised DuBois for his "noble fight for manhood rights for our people" and asserted that "the entire enlisted command" of the Twenty-fourth Infantry was ready "to aid you in any way. . . ."⁷²

Proud to be participants in a military crusade "to make the world safe for democracy," black troopers nevertheless expected to be accorded the same privileges and to be shown the same respect as other men in uniform and they were also intent upon achieving those same rights at home that they were fighting to uphold in Europe. The historical record of black involvement in American wars, however, should have provided little encouragement for this hope, and the experiences of the Second and Third Battalions in Texas in 1917 were hardly reassuring.⁷³

⁷⁰ Among the 110 men of the Third Battalion who were found guilty of participating in the Houston riot, 23 were born in northern states, 20 in border states, and 67 in the secession states of the South. Through the assistance of Senator Ralph Yarborough, the army permitted the author to examine the service records of these soldiers but placed severe restrictions on the use of this material in order to protect the individual soldiers. These records are in the Federal Records Center, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁷¹ An excellent study of the controversy between Washington and DuBois is August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915* (Ann Arbor, 1963). A suggestive contemporary account concerning the attitude of black soldiers is W. E. Burghardt DuBois, "An Essay toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War," *Crisis*, XVIII (June, 1919), 63-87. The best study of the black soldier before World War I is Fletcher, "Negro Soldier and United States Army." The most thorough and useful account of black troops in World War I is Emmett J. Scott, *Scott's Official History of the American Negro in the World War* (Chicago, 1919).

⁷² *Crisis*, XIV (October, 1917), 307-309; *Chicago Defender*, October 6, 1917. The quote is from *Crisis*, 307. The *Chicago Defender* closely followed the exploits of black soldiers and took special interest in the Houston riot and in the three courts-martial which grew out of it. A *Defender* reporter interviewed the prisoners at Leavenworth in early 1918. *Chicago Defender*, January 26, 1918.

⁷³ The best accounts of black participation in the Civil War are Dudley T. Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York, 1956) and Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston, 1953). A good study of the disillusionment of black Americans in the post-Reconstruction period is Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal*

Their intense resentment of the humiliations and injustices they encountered was one early indication of this disappointment, and the resort to armed retaliation in Houston was another.

Although Negro troopers had demonstrated remarkable restraint in most situations of discrimination, they were nevertheless in the best position of any black Americans to insist upon respect and equitable treatment. In the past they had employed more than militant rhetoric in protesting various forms of offensive insults. The Houston affray was only the latest as well as the largest, in terms of the number of men involved and of persons killed, of a long line of militant protests by black soldiers who had always insisted upon fairer treatment than most southern whites were accustomed to give Negroes.⁷⁴ The fact that black troopers were both young and single also made them less inclined to brook unprovoked racial insults from prejudiced whites.⁷⁵

On the other hand, the mere presence of black soldiers was sufficient in most areas of the South to activate anti-Negro prejudice. White

of the Negro (New York, 1965). On black involvement in the Spanish-American War, see Gatewood, "Smoked Yankees," 3-12.

The First Battalion of the Twenty-fourth Infantry, assigned to guard construction at Camp MacArthur on the outskirts of Waco, Texas, also took offense at the Jim Crow regulations. On July 29, 1917, two days after the battalion arrived in Waco, from six to twelve armed soldiers slipped out of camp and attempted a small raid on the town. Only the hasty action of the battalion commander who dispatched a company to intercept them prevented serious trouble from occurring there. Six soldiers were found guilty by a general court-martial; one was sentenced to ten years and the rest to five years at hard labor. *Waco Times-Herald*, July 30, 1917; *Houston Post*, July 31, September 4, 1917.

⁷⁴ There is a longer and more significant pattern of resistance to discrimination by black soldiers than most historians realize. For example, see Frank N. Schubert, "Black Soldiers on the White Frontier: Some Factors Influencing Race Relations," *Phylon*, XXXII (Winter, 1971), 410-415, and Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., "Negro Troops in Florida, 1898," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLIX (July 1970), 1-15.

Before the Brownsville affray of 1906, black soldiers committed "acts of violence" at Sturgis City, Dakota (1885), at Winnemucca, Nevada (1899), at San Carlos Agency, Arizona (1899), at El Paso, Texas (1900), near Fort Niobrara, Nebraska (1904), at Walla Walla, Washington (1891), at Suggs, Wyoming (1892), at Huntsville, Alabama (1898), at Fort Concho, Texas (1881), and at Athens, Ohio (1904). U. S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Military Affairs, *Affray at Brownsville, Texas*, 60th Cong., 1st Sess. (Serial 5252), Doc. No. 402, Part 2, p. 419.

After Brownsville, similar incidents took place at San Antonio, Texas (1911 and 1916), at Seattle, Washington (1912), at Iwilei, Hawaii (1915), and at Del Rio, Texas (1916). George S. Schuyler, *Black and Conservative* (New York, 1966), 41-43, 65-68; *Chicago Defender*, April 15, 1911, April 22, July 22, 29, August 8, 12, 19, 1916.

⁷⁵ Among the 110 soldiers convicted of participating in the Houston affair, the median age was twenty-four. Only 11 were over thirty and 7 under twenty years of age; 49 were between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-five. All but four of the men declared themselves as single, although several may have been secretly married. This information was obtained from an examination of service records of the above men at the Federal Records Center, St. Louis, Missouri.

Houstonians would tolerate no breach of existing racial customs by soldiers for fear it would set off a chain of black civilian reaction. Lee Sparks was representative of southern policemen who saw themselves as self-proclaimed defenders of the "southern way of life," and few prominent Houstonians were bold enough to criticize their methods of enforcing racial segregation.⁷⁶

The results of this Houston encounter were tragically predictable. The Houston riot and mutiny of 1917 was closely followed by the largest court-martial in American military history, by the mass execution of thirteen soldiers at Camp Travis at dawn on December 11, 1917, and by the sentencing of forty-one others to life in prison.⁷⁷ Not satisfied with this impressive retribution, the army tried 55 more soldiers in two additional courts-martial which sentenced 16 to hang and 12 to life terms.⁷⁸ Under extreme pressure from enraged Afro-Americans, President Woodrow Wilson saved ten of the latter sixteen men who were convicted of capital offenses from the gallows by commuting their sentences to life in prison.⁷⁹ The rendering and execution of these verdicts closed

⁷⁶ Sparks learned little from the riot experience of August 23. The following Sunday, August 26, he shot and killed a black Houstonian, Wallace "Snow" Williams, according to two black witnesses. Sparks was indicted for the murder of Williams but the jury took only "one minute" to acquit him. *Houston Press*, August 27, September 8, October 15, 16, 1917.

There are numerous studies of racial attitudes in the post-Reconstruction South. The best and most thorough are Claude H. Nolen, *The Negro's Image in the South* (Lexington, 1967); I. A. Newby, *Jim Crow's Defense: Anti-Negro Thought in America, 1900-1930* (Baton Rouge, 1965); George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York, 1971). Some idea of race relations in Houston during the first two decades of the twentieth century can be gleaned from David G. McComb, *Houston, The Bayou City* (Austin, 1969), 157-165.

⁷⁷ The trial of the first group of 63 soldiers consumed the entire month of November, 1917. Although the court reached its verdict on the evening of November 30, it was not announced until after the 13 men sentenced to death had been hanged at 7:17 o'clock on the morning of December 11, 1917, along the banks of Salado Creek adjacent to Camp Travis. *Houston Chronicle*, November 1, 2, December 2, 12, 1917. For an excellent description of the hanging, witnessed by a Houstonian stationed at Camp Travis, see *ibid.*, December 13, 1917. Other interesting accounts of the mass executions are in *New York Age*, December 22, 1917; *Cleveland Gazette*, December 15, 1917; *Chicago Broad Ax*, December 15, 1917.

⁷⁸ A table, dated December 20, 1918, and indicating the disposition of the 118 soldiers accused of participating in the Houston mutiny and riot, is in Records of the Judge Advocate General, General Court Martial Case 109045, Box 5384C.

⁷⁹ A delegation of the New York branch of the N.A.A.C.P., headed by James Weldon Johnson, presented petitions to President Wilson, signed by approximately 12,000 persons, which requested executive clemency for the five soldiers condemned to death in the second court-martial. *Crisis*, XV (April, 1918), 283. For reaction of both the black and white press to this verdict, see *ibid.*, XV (February, 1918), 187-189. See also W. F. Crozart et al. to President Wilson, telegram (copy), January 7, 1918, Woodrow Wilson Papers, series 4 (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.); Rev. F. A. Cullen to Joseph Tumulty, February 13, 18, 1918, *ibid.* The position of the Wilson administration was ex-

one of the most tragic chapters in American race relations and one of the darkest hours in the annals of the United States Army.

plained in a letter drafted by Secretary of War Newton D. Baker for the President's signature. Wilson to Dr. P. L. Hawkins, January 13, 1918, *ibid.*

President Wilson commuted the sentences of 10 of the 16 men condemned to death in the last two courts-martial. Memorandum of President Wilson, August 22, 1918, Records of Judge Advocate General, General Courts Martial Case 109018, RG 153, Box 5382.