

Army Corrects the Record About a Black Soldier Killed by a White Sergeant in 1941

Private Albert H. King is one of dozens of Black service members believed to have been killed on or near U.S. bases because of their race but whose stories were largely papered over.



By Remy Tumin

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On March 23, 1941, Pvt. Albert H. King left Fort Benning near Columbus, Ga., for a night off base with friends. With a good-conduct pass in hand, Private King took a break from training and stayed out until dawn.

But the revelry stopped abruptly on the segregated bus ride back to the Army barracks.

Private King, a 20-year-old Black soldier with the Quartermaster Corps, would later find himself escaping a mob of white soldiers on the bus. A white member of the military police, Sgt. Robert Lummus, shot Private King five times, killing him as he walked on the main road at Fort Benning toward his barracks, according to military records.

Sergeant Lummus claimed self-defense and, 13 hours after killing Private King, was found not guilty by a military court.

At the time, Private King was listed as having died “not in line of duty.” Last month, more than 80 years after Private King’s death, Army officials corrected the record.

The Army Board for Correction of Military Records changed the death record of Private King to list him as having died “in the line of duty.” The change had been sought by Helen Russell, a first cousin to Private King and his last known living relative, in an effort to fight for her “family and their rights.”

“To fight for something such as this and to make history and correct the law, and the Army itself, it’s a great thing,” Ms. Russell said.

In a Nov. 28 letter, the board notified Ms. Russell that her petition had been reviewed by the board and that Private King’s status would be updated to “reflect this new finding.”

“We remain committed to assist you in honor of Private King’s dedicated service to our great nation,” wrote Col. Michelle L. Schaumburg, the chief of the casualty and mortuary affairs operations division for the Army.



Selectees at Fort Benning in Georgia on July 21, 1941. 161st Sig. Photo. Co./U.S. Army

In a statement, a U.S. Army spokesman, Sgt. First Class Anthony Hewitt, said that “the Army puts a high priority on honoring the legacy of all our soldiers and their families, especially when there is an error or injustice, as there was in the case of Pvt. Albert King.”

Private King is one of dozens of active-duty Black military personnel who were believed to have been killed on or near U.S. bases during the World War II era because of their race but whose stories were largely papered over.

Official status changes like that in Private King’s create “a new version of history,” said Margaret Burnham, the founder of the Northeastern University School of Law’s Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project, which first brought his story to light.

“The cases become part of a quilt that gives us a new vision and a new understanding of the ways in which racism and white supremacy completely distorted our nation’s perception of World War II on the home front as well as abroad,” she said.

Among those untold stories was that of Felix Hall, who was lynched on Fort Benning just weeks before Private King was killed. Last year, the Army installed a plaque in Private Hall’s memory, although details about his death remain unclear.

The two soldiers were in different units and most likely did not know each other, Professor Burnham said, but re-examining cases like Private King’s and Private Hall’s, “where racism overwhelmingly determined results that were detrimental,” is the first step to a long road to setting the record straight, she said.

“Removing the taint is an important dynamic for the whole country, not just for the families, but for the understanding of this particular history,” she said.

According to Ms. Russell’s petition, in the early hours of March 24, 1941, the white driver of a segregated, chartered civilian bus described Private King and his friends, who were sitting in the back of the bus, as “hollering and laughing and cutting up” and said he had told them to be quiet or they would be removed. The driver asked for help from Sergeant Lummus, who was patrolling the road on a motorcycle.

Sergeant Lummus ordered Private King and his friend Private Lawrence J. Hoover off the bus. As they were disembarking, Sergeant Lummus hit Private Hoover in the back of the head with a blackjack. Private King fled, while a dozen of the white soldiers from the bus beat Private Hoover until he was semiconscious, according to the petition. (He went on to serve in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, according to The Washington Post.)

Sergeant Lummus was the only person to testify about what happened next. The sergeant said he had found Private King and ordered him to stop. Sergeant Lummus said the private had begun running toward him and had “kept coming” while the sergeant fired five shots.

According to Ms. Russell’s appeal, three gunshots struck Private King on the side of his head and neck, and there was one each in his lower back and the front of his body.

Fort Benning’s investigation into the killing began and ended the same day Private King was killed. A military court determined that Sergeant Lummus, who was transferred to Fort Knox, Ky., had been justified in the fatal shooting.

A second, independent investigation by a board of officers determined that Private King had died in the line of duty. Less than two weeks later, though, the commanding general of Fort Benning, Maj. Gen. Lloyd Fredendall, ordered that the board reconsider its findings, and the decision was reversed.

Decades later, researchers at the Northeastern University School of Law’s Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project explored Private King’s story and published an investigation in The Washington Post.

It was the first time Ms. Russell had learned about Private King. The project also approached lawyers at the firm Morgan, Lewis & Bockius in Boston, where three military veterans — Christopher Melendez, Matthew Hawes and Micah Jones — worked on the case pro bono. They filed Ms. Russell’s petition in June 2021.

“Their willingness, after 80 years, to remedy this wrong, to right this wrong is important,” Mr. Hawes said. “If they hadn’t been willing to see the injustice that was done and been willing to take this step to correct it, there really was no other path available here.”

Under a statute of limitations, applications for a record change of this kind traditionally must be filed within three years, but the Army regularly waives that limit “in the interest of justice,” Mr. Melendez said.

It remains unclear if Ms. Russell will be entitled to any military or death benefits as a result of the change, but she said the appeal had never been about money.

“The main thing for me with my family is correcting this and correcting his paperwork, that means more to me,” she said. “I don’t know what’s going to come after this but what means most for me is my cousin’s life and his rights.”

Private King is buried in a historically Black cemetery in Columbus, Ga., but Ms. Russell hopes to have his body moved to a military cemetery near Fort Benning.

“He doesn’t have a plot or nothing like that,” Ms. Russell said. “Last I saw, it was a tree branch there for his markings. I’m going to make sure everything is properly done for him. That’s my first step. There will be something in honor of him.”

Alexa Mills contributed reporting.