

# CAMP LOGAN 1917: BEYOND THE VEIL OF MEMORY

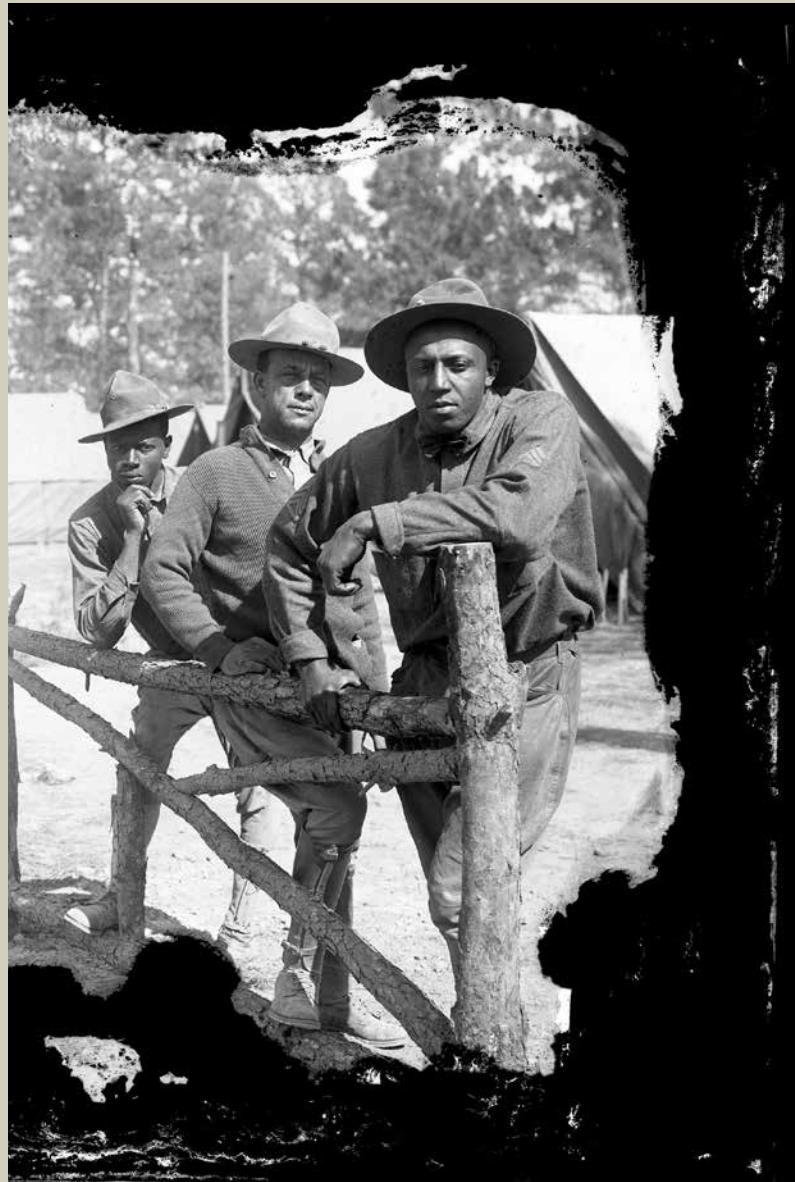
By Matthew Crow

**F**ew of Houston's residents today realize that during World War I Houston had a military base just west of downtown. Camp Logan, one of sixteen auxiliary military training camps established during the era, sprawled across much of the area that is now Memorial Park, south of Washington Avenue and across the bayou from River Oaks. The camp housed and trained over 30,000 soldiers, who lived in neatly organized tents amongst the then scattered trees on the grounds. On the night of August 23, 1917, African American soldiers from Camp Logan incited by police violence earlier that day, armed themselves and marched into town in the only race riot in American history that saw more white casualties than black.

Business leaders expected the Houston economy to grow rapidly with the arrival of the military. The Houston-based American Construction Company received the contract to build the camp at a cost near one million dollars a month, according to newspaper reports at the time. Further, citizens expected the camp to generate \$60,000 a week for the local economy.<sup>1</sup> Knowing soldiers on leave would enter the city to spend their hard-earned pay, residents welcomed the coming military installation. Although the Chamber of Commerce assured the Army that racial tensions would not be a problem if it sent black troops to Houston, the chamber members failed to account for an unprofessional police force and culturally condoned bigotry.

When African American soldiers of the Third Battalion, Twenty-fourth Infantry Regiment (3/24th) were sent to Houston to guard the construction in 1917, they faced hostility from the start. The soldiers resisted the Jim Crow segregation of the era, particularly on streetcars. Discrimination from the white construction workers occurred almost daily, and they found similar tensions in town, courtesy of the Houston police. The clashes between police and the black troops stood in sharp contrast to the more subdued African American Houstonians. Fearing a loss of control with the locals, police officers may have "picked on soldiers to show everybody that [they were] in charge."<sup>2</sup> Colonel William Newman "ordered all of his men disarmed including the battalions military police, and stored the arms under lock and key" to minimize the hostility of local whites. Only those on guard duty had access to weapons. *The Crisis* reported, the African American troops "were supposed to call on white police officers to make arrests" if needed.<sup>3</sup>

Tensions between black soldiers and civilians were in no way limited to that time and place in Houston. Beginning with the arrival of the first black soldiers in Texas during Reconstruction through the early twentieth century, discrimination against black soldiers was rampant. In 1889 soldiers of the Twenty-fifth Infantry Regiment were accused of shooting towards the city of El Paso. In 1906 in Brownsville, racial tensions led to an incident in which other Twenty-fifth soldiers were accused of shooting up the town and shooting a bartender. Military authorities punished 167 of the soldiers with a dishonorable discharge despite the lack of any specific evidence. Additionally soldiers in San Antonio and police



*African American soldiers of the Third Battalion, Twenty-fourth Infantry often encountered conflict with Houston police as white officers attempted to undermine their authority.*

Photo courtesy of the Fred. L. Vermillion Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Libraries, MSS0224-007-3.\*

\* This image derives from a glass plate negative, described as "gelatin dry plates." They were created by suspending light-sensitive silver salts into a gelatin binder applied to glass plates. The stability this process brought to film marked the beginning of the photographic film industry because it made photography much more accessible. Photographers no longer had to coat pieces of glass with an emulsion in a light tight tent next to the camera, then shoot the picture and develop the negative before the film dried. But the gelatin is easily scratched and vulnerable to pollutants, moisture, heat, and improper storage. Any or a combination of these conditions can cause the emulsion to shrivel, lose adhesion with the glass, and flake away. This flaking usually starts at the edge of the negative and moves toward the center. The area on the negative where the emulsion is missing prints as black.

—Joel Draut, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Libraries.

nearly clashed on two occasions in 1911 and 1916. Above all the Brownsville incident “gravely undermined the Negro’s trust in the Army’s ability to guarantee equal justice for all soldiers.”<sup>4</sup> This background of racial tension was likely well known to the soldiers as they pulled into Houston.<sup>5</sup>

One of several segregated units, the 3/24th had served with distinction in the Philippines and was one of the remaining links to the Buffalo Soldiers of the Old West. Although comprised largely of veteran soldiers, the 3/24th replaced much of its leadership prior to the events that occurred on August 23, 1917. Commanding officer Colonel William Newman, who had been with the unit since 1915, was promoted and relinquished command to Major Kneeland Snow two days earlier. Additionally, prior to the unit’s movement to Houston, a large portion of the senior noncommissioned officers were sent to officer training school. While this signaled advancement for these black soldiers, it also left the 3/24th with a “vacuum of leadership” at its new posting.<sup>6</sup>

The Houston police force was also under new command, headed by Chief Clarence Brock. Formerly the superintendent of parks, he lacked the popularity of his predecessor. His attempts to professionalize the force met with resistance and added to his unpopularity. At the time the 3/24th arrived in Houston, the force claimed only two black officers.<sup>7</sup> Lacking a strong command of his personnel, Brock could not maintain efficient control of his officers.

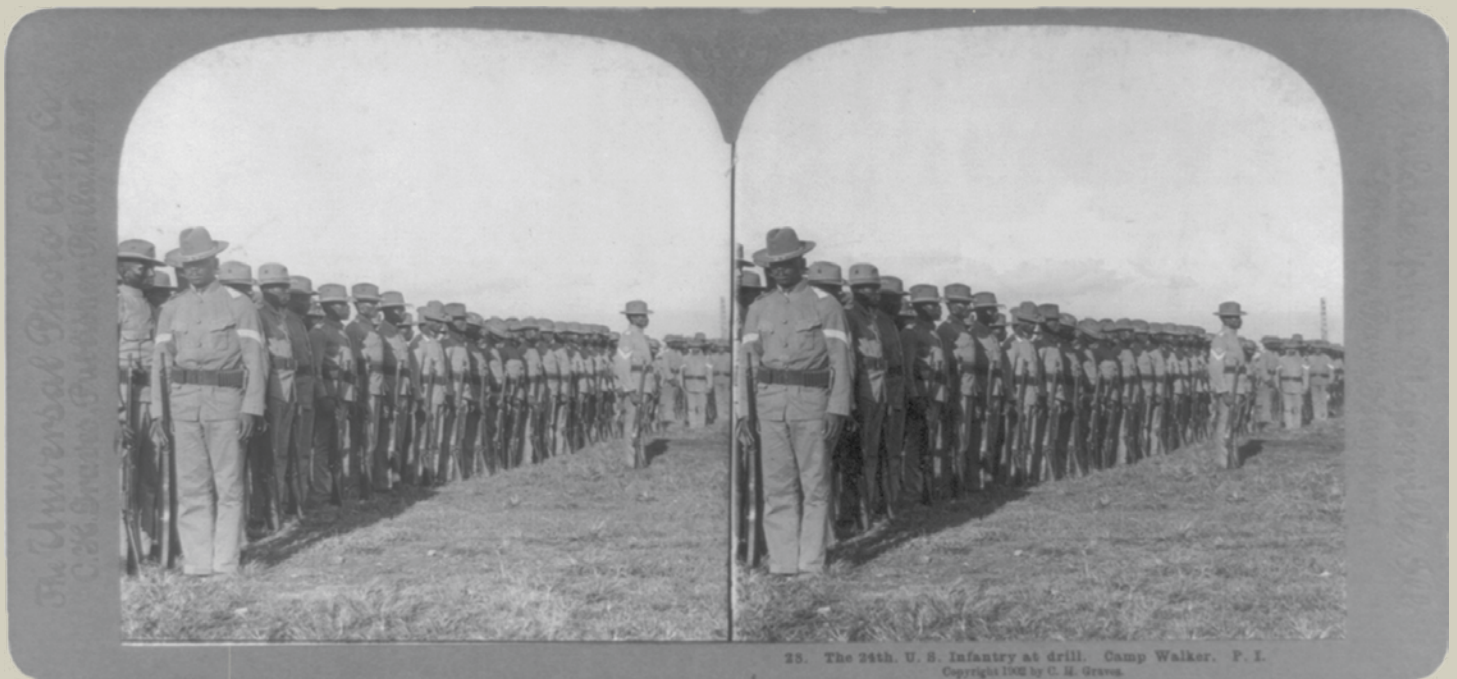
Racial hostility reached a boiling point on August 23, 1917, when two Houston police officers attempted to break up a gambling game located in the all-black neighborhood, the San Felipe District. The officers were Rufus Daniels, known as “Daniel Boone” in the black community, and Lee Sparks, who was notorious for using violent tactics.<sup>8</sup> A foot chase ensued that led to the officers barging into the home of Sara Travers, dragging her outside even though she was scantily clad, and accusing her of hiding one of the gam-

blers. A soldier from the 3/24th, Private Alonzo Edwards, intervened on her behalf and the officers promptly pistol whipped and arrested him.<sup>9</sup>

In anticipation of such difficulties between soldiers and police, a system of provost guards similar to military police was established to keep peace between the military and civil authorities. Although the guards were instructed to cooperate with police and vice versa, Chief Brock may have failed to disseminate the order to cooperate with the military provost guards.<sup>10</sup> One of the guards, Corporal Baltimore went to ask the police officers about Edwards. The police pistol whipped him, and Officer Sparks shot at him as he ran before being caught and arrested. A rumor that Baltimore had been killed quickly permeated the camp and alarmed the soldiers. Despite Baltimore returning to camp and proving the rumor false, word may not have reached everyone; and Snow was unable to calm his command, whether the soldiers knew Baltimore was alive or not. Provost guards had been instructed to cooperate with civil authorities but the civil police were arresting provost guards. One soldier reportedly remarked to Major Snow before the incident, “We are treated like dogs here.”<sup>11</sup>

Police Chief Brock suspended Sparks as punishment for his violent tactics. Sparks reportedly remarked “any man that sticks up for a nigger is no better than a nigger” and stormed out.<sup>12</sup> Although Brock suspended Sparks, he failed to inform the officer retrieving Baltimore of that fact—news that might have softened the tensions at a critical moment.

Rumors also circulated that a white mob had formed. Major Snow was informed of impending trouble by acting First-Sergeant Vida Henry. Snow attempted to assemble his command and collect all of the men’s arms and ammunition but failed to do so in any meaningful manner. As fears of white violence against the troops rose, a cry of “Get your guns, boys! Here comes the mob” catapulted the night from static to kinetic. Many soldiers grabbed rifles and began a



25. The 24th U. S. Infantry at drill. Camp Walker. P. I.  
Copyright 1902 by C. H. Green.

Stereograph card of the Twenty-fourth U.S. Infantry at drill, Camp Walker, Philippine Islands, circa 1902.

Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/itdm/2002709614](http://www.loc.gov/itdm/2002709614).





Largest Murder Trial in the History of the United States.  
 Scene during Court Martial of 64 members of 24th. Infantry U.S.A.  
 on trial for mutiny and murder of 17 people at Houston Tex. Aug 23, 1917.  
 Trial Held in Gift Chapel, Ft Sam Houston.  
 Trial Started --- Nov 1, 1917 - Brig Gen. George K. Hunter, Presiding.  
 Col. J. A. Hull - Judge Advocate. Counsel for Defense,  
 Maj. D. V. Sulphin, Asst. Maj. Harry S. Grier.  
 Prisoners guarded by 19th. Infantry, Co. C Capt. Carl J. Adler  
 This photo Copyrighted by. W. C. Lloyd. San Antonio Tex. Reproduction not allowed.

*The Nesbit Trial was the largest murder trial in the nation's history. It was held in Gift Chapel, Fort Sam Houston, beginning November 1, 1917. Thirteen soldiers at this trial received death sentences, and an overwhelming majority were found guilty on at least one charge.*

Photo courtesy of the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

period of indiscriminate firing at which point Major Snow lost all control, fleeing the camp towards town in a reported daze. Later testimony of Captain Rothrock described him as "not [being] in physical or mental shape to take command."<sup>13</sup> Snow ceased being a viable actor in the events until the following morning.

The existence of a white mob was dismissed by the investigation, but the investigators were predisposed to that finding; and, in any case, the fear of a mob must have been very real. This period in American history witnessed numerous incidents of white mob violence throughout the South. Lynching was commonplace and justice was rarely, if ever, served for the victims of those crimes. Texas lagged

behind only Georgia in the number of lynchings, some by white mobs.<sup>14</sup> This was a period of bloody race riots as well; just one month prior, the East St. Louis riot occurred in which at least forty blacks were killed and massive property damage done with "large sections of the city razed to the ground" as white mobs targeted black populations.<sup>15</sup>

At some point, Sergeant Henry reportedly led a large group of soldiers onto the road and towards Houston proper. They were encamped at what is now T. C. Jester Boulevard and Washington Avenue, and their march east crossed Buffalo Bayou at Shepherds' Dam Bridge and continued east down what is now West Dallas Street (then San Felipe Street) before dissipating just shy of downtown.

*Camp Logan was constructed in 1917 as a training ground for U.S. troops in World War I.*

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Libraries, MSS0481-001.







*The grave of Corporal Charles Baltimore, who was one of the first group of men hanged following the initial court martial, rests in the cemetery at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. The Army originally buried the men near the execution site along Salado Creek, before moving the graves in 1937.*

Photo courtesy of Jenny Meeden Bailey.

Another group of soldiers joined the group and unknown others left throughout the march. The soldiers shot and killed eleven civilians and four policemen, including Rufus Daniels who had been involved in the earlier arrests. Another twenty-one Houstonians were wounded and survived the incident. Of the 3/24th soldiers, Sergeant Henry reportedly took his own life and another, Private Watson, was killed by friendly fire. A white officer of the unit was also mistakenly killed; Captain Mattes's death dissipated the soldier's anger and effectively ended the violence.<sup>16</sup>

The next morning Houston was under martial law as the military began the massive process of investigating the event. The unit was immediately transported to New Mexico, and a list of the suspected rioters was sent to Fort Bliss to await trial. Police Chief Brock was transferred back to his old job as superintendent of parks.<sup>17</sup> On the very same day that his former partner Daniels was buried, Sparks shot and killed a black Houstonian and was indicted. The jury's not guilty verdict was returned in less than a minute. In March 1918, Sparks shot two more black men, killing one, while working as a security guard and was subsequently released from the force.<sup>18</sup>

Dual military and civilian investigations were conducted in which "local inquiry placed the blame squarely on the Army's lack of discipline."<sup>19</sup> The military, however, tries its own. The three military tribunals following the incident constituted the largest murder trial in American history. A total of twenty-four sentences of death and ninety-one

various prison sentences were handed down. Every one of the accused was represented by one man, Major Harry Grier, who was not a lawyer. The prosecution relied mostly on the account of several soldiers who had been offered clemency for their testimony. These soldiers' testimony could be considered coerced since they were facing death penalties (by hanging). Overall the level of justice afforded to the 3/24th soldiers was appalling.

The confusion of the night made identifying who actually fired or hurt someone nearly impossible. The first trial, known as the Nesbit Trial, sentenced thirteen soldiers to death for their roles in the riot. They were executed secretly on December 11 with little notice and no opportunity to appeal. The second and third trials, known as the Washington and Tillman trials respectively, resulted in another eleven death sentences, although some were commuted after the trial. Eventually six more soldiers of the 3/24th were hanged. Out of the 118 men tried, 110 were found guilty of at least one charge.<sup>20</sup> Much like the Brownsville incident, the soldiers' trials lacked due process. In addition to not having an opportunity to appeal, the soldiers faced a murder trial with inadequate legal counsel. President Wilson found himself deluged with petitions and letters appealing on behalf of the soldiers. A New York branch of the NAACP sent the following: "[T]he hanging of 13 men without the opportunity of appeal to the Secretary of War or to their Commander-in-chief, the President of the United States, was a punishment so drastic and so unusual in the history of the nation that the execution of additional members of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry would, to the colored people of the country, savor of vengeance rather than justice."<sup>21</sup>

This NAACP letter, accompanied by a 12,000-signature petition, was just one of hundreds from across the nation. Even a memo to the secretary of war from the judge advocate general described those sentenced to death as belonging to two groups: the guilty and those who could not be connected to particular violence. President Wilson eventually intervened and the sentences of five were commuted to life imprisonment. In response to the executions the War Department issued General Orders No. 7 prohibiting executions without review by the judge advocate. The legacy of General Order No. 7 is that it began the first formal appellate structure of the U.S. Army.<sup>22</sup>

The woods surrounding Memorial Park contain the ruins of Camp Logan. Concrete foundations for ovens and





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My name is H.D. Goldstein, I am embalmer for the Sid Westheimer Undertaking Company, I examined the body of Vida Henry, negro soldier, who was killed on the night of August 23rd, 1917, in riot on or near San Felipe Street in this City, His head was badly crushed with a blunt instrument, and he had a knife or bayonet wound about five inches deep ranging from the clavicle to the heart, either wound would have caused death,  
 Signed Harry D. Goldstein;  
 Sworn to and subscribed before me this the 24th day of August, 1917,  
 J.M. Ray, J.P. and ex officio coroner, Harris County, Texas,

My name is Lincoln Kennerly, I am in the employ of the Sid Westheimer Company as Ambulance driver, On the morning of August the 24th, 1917, we received a call to come to the corner of San Felipe Street and S.P. Crossing, saying a dead soldier had been found, On arriving there we found a negro lying dead about 1/2 mile south of that point, his head was crushed and otherwise injured, He was identified as Sargeant Vida Henry, of the 24th U.S. Infantry, by his identification plate, he had been found by a squad of the Illinois National Guards, lying by the S.P. Railway tracks and had the appearance of being dead for several hours,  
 Signed Lincoln Kennerly,  
 Sworn to and subscribed before me this the 24th day of August, 1917.  
 J.M. Ray, J.P. and ex officio coroner, Harris County, Texas.

NOTE WELL—INSTRUCTIONS ON THE REVERSE SIDE.  
 WRITE PLAINLY WITH UNFADING INK—THIS IS A PERMANENT RECORD.  
 Where birth is given as cause of death, the birth certificate. Every item of information should be carefully supplied. AGE should be stated EXACTLY. PARTICULARS should state CAUSE OF DEATH in plain terms, so that it may be properly classified. Exact statement of OCCUPATION is very important.

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27626 PLACE OF DEATH County Harris City Houston		780-517-50M TEXAS STATE BOARD OF HEALTH BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS STANDARD CERTIFICATE OF DEATH	Reg. Dis. No. 22384 Registered No. 9297
FULL NAME Sargeant Vida Henry		(No. Camp Logan St.)	Ward (If death occurred in a hospital or institution, give its NAME instead of street and number.)
PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS		MEDICAL PARTICULARS	
1 SEX Male	4 Color or Race Black	5 Single, Married, Widowed or Divorced (If write the word) Single	16 DATE OF DEATH Aug 23 1917
6 DATE OF BIRTH	Sout Brown		17 I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from 101 to 101 that I last saw h... alive on 101 and that death occurred, on the date stated above, 101. The CAUSE OF DEATH* was as follows: Gun shot wounds (Homicide)
7 AGE 24 yrs.	If less than 2 years state if breast fed		18 LENGTH OF RESIDENCE (For Hospital Institutions, Transients, or Recent Residents) At place of death 2 yrs. 10 mos. 10 days
8 OCCUPATION (a) Trade, profession or particular kind of work Sargeant U.S. Infantry	(b) General nature of industry, business or establishment in which employed (or employer) U.S. Infantry		19 PLACE OF BURIAL OR REMOVAL College Park
9 BIRTHPLACE (State or country) Sout Brown	10 NAME OF FATHER		DATE OF BURIAL Aug 27 1917
11 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (State or country)	12 MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER		20 UNDERTAKER Sid Westheimer Co.
13 BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (State or country)	14 THE ABOVE IS TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE (Informant) Charles E. Snow (Address) 415 Army		ADDRESS Caroline & Prairie St.
15 Filed 8-26-17	R. A. Cardina Registrar		

After the initial night of violence, SGT Vida Henry was identified as the ringleader of the riot who committed suicide when it failed. However, evidence shown in the coroner's report and death certificate clearly indicates his death was a homicide. A career soldier, Henry had served his country admirably at home and abroad, reenlisting multiple times.  
 Photo courtesy of the Harris County Archives.



showers can still be found in the underbrush surrounding Seymour Lieberman Trail, and just south of the Picnic Lane loop, the foundation of the old footbridge sits covered in graffiti by the bayou. One of the cinder roads from Camp Logan still exists on the golf course grounds. The riot is acknowledged by a small paragraph on the Camp Logan historical marker but seems otherwise forgotten. The Hogg family of Houston acquired the tract of land where Camp Logan stood. They donated the land to the city in 1924, resulting in the creation of Memorial Park to honor the soldiers who fought in Europe in World War I.

Major General John A. Hull remarked during the investigation of the riot that, "...nobody will ever know all that took place on that terrible night." This is true, but one piece of evidence remains here in Houston unmolested since the event: Sergeant Vida Henry, the "ringleader." The official version has laid out that the mutiny was led by Sergeant Henry, the same soldier who had warned Major Snow of the possibility of trouble that night. Most clearly described in Haynes's *A Night of Violence*, Henry reportedly assumed command and led the soldiers out into the city. Legend has it that after the march on the town dissipated and Henry bid farewell to his fellow soldiers, he then took his own life. Yet, his death is not listed as a suicide but as a homicide on his death certificate. At least one newspaper headline also indicated the leader was killed, and a coroner's report details a crushed skull and a stab wound by a bayonet, either of which would have been fatal. Both the embalmer and the coroner described the skull as crushed by a blunt object not blown apart as would be expected from a self-inflicted gunshot with a 30-06 military rifle.<sup>23</sup>

Sergeant Henry was buried in Houston along with Bryant Watson, the other member of the 24th infantry who was killed that night. Thanks to the work of history professor Angela Holder, their bodies have been located in unmarked plots in College Memorial Park Cemetery. Was Sergeant Henry a convenient scapegoat due to his death? Was Sergeant Henry the tragic leader of a group of angry soldiers lashing out against racial oppression? The truth likely sits somewhere in the middle of these theories; but it seems very convenient to have a dead ringleader, suitably described by historian Dr. Garna Christian, as a possible situation of "Let's blame it on the dead guy."<sup>24</sup>

Although no one is certain who lies in which grave, these two soldiers will finally receive headstones in 2017 to commemorate the Camp Logan centennial. A historical marker would also be appropriate to inform visitors about this veiled piece of Houston history. Additionally, military

*After lying in unmarked graves at College Park Cemetery for one hundred years, SGT Vida Henry and PVT Bryant Watson will have tombstones placed at their gravesites to commemorate the anniversary of their deaths on Wednesday, August 23, 2017.*



pardons for the soldiers buried at Ft. Sam Houston and listings on their headstones that show their ranks and where they served should be considered.

While the violence of the event cannot be condoned, the memory of it must be preserved. Rather than let the story of the 3/24th Infantry and Camp Logan fade into the past it should be reexamined. The incident of the night of August 23, 1917, was a reaction to racist policies and has been repeated in many forms across time. The old adage of "history repeats itself" is as pertinent as ever today as police violence is scrutinized and examined across the country.

**Matthew Crow** is a native Houstonian and served four combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan with the 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment. Following his service with the U.S. Army, Matthew enrolled at the University of Houston as a history major with a minor in business foundations.

## 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF CAMP LOGAN MUTINY

*Except where noted, the events are at the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum, 3816 Caroline Street.*

*Most events are free. For updates call 713-942-8920 or visit [www.buffalosoldiermuseum.com](http://www.buffalosoldiermuseum.com).*

### EVENT:

#### Monday, August 21

**6:00 p.m.** "Mutiny on the Bayou" Reception

**7:00 p.m.** Viewing documentary

**7:40 p.m.** Discussion with moderator Jerome Gray

#### Tuesday, August 22

Camp Logan Exhibit Opening; Curator, Prof. Angela Holder

**6:00 p.m.** Reception/book signing

**7:00-9:00 p.m.** Exhibit tours

#### Wednesday, August 23

**10:00-11:00 a.m.** Tombstone Placement Ceremony, College Park Cemetery, 3525 W. Dallas

**5:00 p.m.** Camp Logan Historical Marker Rededication

Ceremony at Memorial Park, corner of Haskell (6400 block) and Arnot

#### Friday, August 25

**6:00 p.m.** Reception

**7:00-7:30 p.m.** Excerpts from Camp Logan play

#### Saturday, August 26

**9:40 a.m.** Discussion and keynote address with Robert

Tecklenberg, Garner Christian, Paul Bentley, and Chad Williams

**12:00-1:00 p.m.** Lunch

**1:00-2:00 p.m.** Keynote address by Dr. Williams

**2:30-3:30 p.m.** Discussion with descendants of soldiers and Houston police officers killed during the mutiny