



Retired (Maj.) Cecil White, author of "Give Me My Spirit Back: The Last of the Buffalo Soldiers," talks to Wiesbaden Soldiers about his experiences of fighting in Italy during World War II.

WWII veteran: Wiesbaden military community retiree, author shares his combat, civil rights experiences

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If you ask Cecil White what his biggest contribution to the world has been in his 90 years of living, he will tell you he is "the man who changed civil rights for America and the world."

And while much of the world may not know the Selma, Ala., native and Buffalo Soldier, he declares that it should.

He was 10 years old when he got a rude introduction to inequality. After chiding a playmate for poor play in a friendly neighborhood baseball game, his brother warned him that he could not speak to a white person the way he did.

"I said, 'Why can't I?'" said White as he recalled the conversation. "He said, 'Because he's white that's why. ... He's better than we are.' I said, 'What does white have to do with anything? ... Until he can play baseball better than I play baseball, he will never be better than me.'"

White said that even at an early age he realized something

needed to be done to change that flawed thinking.

A year later White was again shocked to learn the justice system punished blacks more severely than whites even when they committed the same crimes.

"God doesn't like that, and when God does not like something, he has provided a means of dealing with it," said the son of an independent farmer, who remembered that his father advocated getting an education. "I remembered my father saying that education makes everybody better."

So White's plan was simple. He would educate himself and his family so that he would be prepared when the opportunity came to affect change.

Opportunity knocked

White went on to study at Tuskegee University, earned a pilot license by age 20 and was commissioned in the U.S. Army. When that opportunity knocked at the age of 24, White was ready to respond.

Before deploying for combat in Italy in 1945 during World War II, White was asked how to improve the morale of black Soldiers at Camp Patrick Henry in Virginia.

"We need to see right here what we will be fighting and dying for," said White, referring to the inequalities blacks faced in the United States at the time.

This remark would shortly thereafter fall upon the ears of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and ignite his civil rights activism to integrate the U.S. military. "The president accepted my answer," said White and shortly thereafter the camp was integrated.

White's next test was ahead in battle. He needed to prove that black Soldiers were as courageous and competent as whites in combat, he said.

Assigned to the Buffalo Division, and deep in his first battle by November of the same year, he was fighting his way through the Italian Alps with a machine

gun platoon looking to take a hill designated as Georgia.

"This was my first battle, and I was trying to be a good combat lieutenant," said White as he rattled off the statistics for the unfavorable mortality rate of machine gunners. His order to commence firing fell upon deaf ears three times; he then anxiously took hold of the gun

and began to fire on target.

Then the rest of his gunners got on their guns.

"They were super," he said, "I'm glad they did it like that, because when you go into battle again you got to have two plans—the one that you expect your men to follow and one when they don't do it."

Company F took the objective, and White's unit shifted fire to the next objective and broke up a counterattack by taking out some of the enemy. After 20 minutes of firing, a ceasefire order came from his executive officer. The division commander was impressed with

his unit's execution and authorized the lieutenant the choice to receive a Silver Star or a First Lieutenant Combat Badge and R and R to Rome, the executive officer informed White.

"I'll take the second part," White said he told the executive officer. "I wanted to go to Rome," said White.

Upon his return, leaders reassigned White to a first platoon. Having successfully commanded the second platoon, leaders hoped the change would inspire a better performance from the unit as it tried to breach the Gothic Line, which leaders established after the fall of Sicily in 1943.

Battle that changed the world

In 1944 American 5th Army and British 8th Army moved against the line to no avail. The 10th Mountain Brigade also met with no success after pushing against the stronghold twice.

Division staff allegedly messed up an exercise and some

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Photos by Karl Weisel

Leading the way in fight against flu

The Wiesbaden Health Clinic's Lt. Col. Chad Gooderham (above right) and Sgt. Corey Parker (left) administer influenza vaccines to the U.S. Army Garrison Wiesbaden command team, Col. Jeffrey Dill (left) and Command Sgt. Maj. Hector Prince Sept. 9. The vaccine is now available at the clinic from 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Monday to Thursday and Friday from 8-11:30 a.m. for all military community members. Vaccinations will be provided at local School Age Centers and Child Development Centers Sept. 19-27. It will also be available at the Wiesbaden Army Lodge from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Sept. 19, at Mainz-Kastel's Building 4502 Sept. 28 from 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and Main-Kastel's Building 4502 from 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Oct. 4. A team will visit Wiesbaden High School from 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Sept. 28 and Wiesbaden Middle School Oct. 19 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. The Amelia Earhart Complex will get a visit from the influenza vaccine team on Oct. 19 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

WWII veteran

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Soldiers died as a result, White said. Unfortunately, the Buffalo unit caught the blame and the news media reported it, which made it difficult for members to appeal. "But I stayed up front to protect the reputation of the black Soldiers ... and when they found out they changed it," he said.

White said he figured the coming battle to be the one that would affect the complete integration of the Armed Forces and eventually the United States.

"We got about as much a chance at winning as a snowball in hell ... but as God is on my side, I will be the first snowball in hell that never did melt," said White.

To White, the issue was clear: "The only way that I'm going to live is that I have to win," he said.

There were two lines and the defensive line was to be held at all costs, he said. Not having made any forward progress in six months, April 5, 1945, would be the day to change history. The Army put a high concentration of assets in the area to fire away at the line of hills in the Alps.

White and his company shot cover fire to give the lead company a chance to advance against the primary target. No longer able to shoot, White and his unit followed behind. The enemy moved to reinforce the position of the primary hill vacating another critically aligned hill.

White thought his lead company had gained ground, so he and his unit moved. The faulty radio

did not allow communication with the commander. Believing the commander was successful, White headed to the hill and anticipated a reunion. Swapping out his rifle for a machine gun, White moved with his men up the vacated hill, which was beyond the long held position of the Gothic parallel.

"I knew the enemy had a plan to kill all of us, not some of us," said White, keeping his eyes on the open bunkers. "They threw about eight grenades in our direction ... every grenade they threw went over our heads. That was done deliberately ... The enemy wanted all of us to hit the ground and protect ourselves from the grenade, and while we were down there he was going to come out there with that burp gun and those machine guns. That was the only way they could kill all of us.

"But I kept my eyes on that open bunker, and when they got halfway out I let them have it with my machine gun. I killed every enemy soldier that surfaced."

During the battle, however, a mine critically injured White and he was taken out of battle. His courage in battle inspired the entire Army, White said.

"A black guy doing something that all those white Soldiers couldn't do. It fired up every one of them. Every white soldier was motivated by what I had done. ... There wasn't any jealousy. I did it and made

it look easy," he said with pride as he got the news of the Allied Forces' progress while bandaged in his hospital bed. "They cut the mustard all across Italy."

In 28 days, all points in Italy were accomplished, as well as Switzerland, Austria and eventually Berlin. "And they couldn't move until I took that first objective," said White, who likens the battle to the biblical clash of David and Goliath.

"And this was that battle that motivated 400,000 Soldiers. ... This battle changed the whole world after that. It brought about the integration of the U.S. Armed Forces ... the election of President Truman ...

integration of public schools ... the Civil Rights revolution ... it brought Martin Luther King Jr. into the Civil Rights revolution.

"I believe God prepared me for this from the very beginning. There's no question about it ... he prepared me for that battle," he said.

White retired from military service in 1965, and returned to the United States where he taught high school

for one year. He then returned to Germany and has resided here since. He published the first edition of his autobiography "Give Me My Spirit Back: The Last of the Buffalo Soldier" in 2000.

He currently lives near Mainz.

"I grew up where racism was as thick as mud," he said.

"But I kept my eyes on that open bunker, and when they got halfway out I let them have it with my machine gun. I killed every enemy soldier that surfaced."