

Filling military history's gaps

Hunt chronicles the careers of 'Sergeants Major of Color'

By Kelly Kennedy
STAFF WRITER

Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Harold Hunt flipped through the pages of a book at the Center for Military History, spectacles low on his nose as he skimmed.

"You will not see any black faces," he said, randomly grabbing another book and pointing to thousands of others lining the walls and bookshelves.

"We are not in here." Pages and pages of military history seem to have been white-washed from the books — tomes filled with the stories of wars and their heroes.

Fifteen years ago, Hunt, who is black, spoke to a class at a historically black college. He told tales of Audie Murphy and other decorated soldiers. And then a student asked

what blacks had done.

"It just never came to my mind," said Hunt, who enlisted in 1961 and retired in 1991. "When you're in the military, you don't think in that context. You're thinking green.

"Those kids slam-dunked me," he said. "They shot me full of holes: 'What did we do?'"

He decided to find out more. But when he started looking at the history books, the story was missing.

"We were there," he said, "but what were we doing? All you ever hear about is Tuskegee."

The Tuskegee Airmen were the Army's first black fighter pilots, who trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field, Ala., during World War II. The group was headed by Benjamin O. Davis, a black former command sergeant major who achieved the rank of brigadier general.



SHEILA VEMMER/STAFF

To answer the question the students had raised, Hunt found "100 Sergeants Major of Color" — which became the title of the book he eventually wrote — who had made significant contributions, and he detailed their careers. He asked them which units they had served with, why they joined the Army and what message they would like

to leave for soldiers who followed. "The stories were amazing," Hunt said, describing family mementos that appeared in his mailbox and the family reunions sons and daughters invited him to so they could learn about their mothers and fathers. "I just started digging deeper and deeper."

He started taking every Friday off from his job as an emergency management specialist for the Coast Guard to find out more.

He learned the first black command sergeant major was abolitionist Frederick Douglass' son Lewis.

He found Command Sgt. Maj. Edward Crook, who boxed Muhammad Ali and won Olympic gold in 1960, yet remained in the Army.

And he researched women's history and discovered Mildred Kelly, the first female black sergeant major.

"I interviewed countless soldiers," Hunt said. "It brings tears to your eyes what they went through."

Douglass never saw equality. Crook served two tours in Vietnam, the first war in which blacks and whites officially fought together.

And Kelly became the first female command sergeant major — black or white. But it took her 27 years.

9,000 soldiers

Then Hunt heard, "But, Sergeant Major, I won't ever be in your book because I haven't won a Medal of Honor."

He decided to find every last black sergeant major and write about him or her. There are 9,000 of them — but he couldn't get names from the Army because the request violated privacy rules.

To get the 9,000 figure, he literally dug through all the old yearbooks at the Sergeants Major Academy and looked for brown faces. To celebrate their accomplishments, he's putting the finishing touches on a hard-bound version of "100 Sergeants Major of Color" that will include all of them. It will be available in February.

Hunt checks the shelves of the history center at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C. A new version of his book will include the names of 9,000 sergeants major of color.

When people learned about his research, they began contacting him. Widows call to hear more about the men they loved. Funeral directors call for obituary notices. Soldiers themselves call with information about their careers — everybody wants to be in the book.

Hunt's son, also named Harold, turned down West Point when he received an acceptance letter.

"He wanted to be a command sergeant major," Hunt explained. "He said, 'Dad, I just want to be in the book.'"

Command Sgt. Maj. Harold Hunt Jr. is in the book — and so is his wife, Command Sgt. Maj. Shirley Hunt.

The senior Hunt dedicated his first book to Command Sgt. Maj. Louis C. Perry. When Hunt was a soldier with the 101st Airborne in 1963, he hurt himself on a jump and was assigned to the training room. Then-1st Sgt. Perry told him to write down everything he saw.

"I did what I was told," Hunt said. "I wrote down everything I saw." That led to Hunt's first book, "A Soldier's Journal."

Perry became the first black command sergeant major in the 101st.

But just because Hunt finished "100 Sergeants Major of Color" doesn't mean he's done with the story. He takes every February off to talk about black history. He answers his 40 to 50 daily phone messages. And he tends his flock.

Eighty to 90 of the black sergeants major die every year, he said.

"I call them to see if they're getting everything they need — meds and all that — and to make sure they're comfortable," he said. "I feel like a big squad leader for these 9,000 people." □

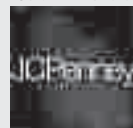


more convenience,
more styles &
more sizes

shop
jcp.com

for the latest in fashions and home merchandise for you and your family

it's all inside.



jcp.com