

"Triple Nickles"
555TH Parachute Infantry Association
Bust Dedication Ceremony, Buffalo Soldier Monument
7 September 2006
LTG David H. Petraeus

Good morning, and thanks to all of you for being here on this beautiful morning in America's Heartland.

And, Chaplain, as our Liaison Officer to the "Big Jumpmaster in the Sky," please convey our thanks for such an absolutely gorgeous day for this event.

This morning we're gathered at a special place on this historic post, a place that will become even more special today. It's a spot that is framed wonderfully: across the lake to your front, by the historic Funston and McNair Halls, the buildings that from 1931 to 1940 housed the 10th Cavalry Regiment – one of the two Regiments originally comprised of the Buffalo Soldiers; on the high ground behind you, by the magnificent monument to the Buffalo Soldiers; and, to your left, by the bust of the late General Roscoe Robinson, a great airborne leader and the first African American Army 4-star general. This sacred piece of ground thus celebrates the contributions and achievements of American soldiers of African American descent. And today, we add another important monument to this area as we honor a group of African American paratroopers – the Triple Nickles, the men of the Five Hundred Fifty-Fifth Parachute Infantry Battalion who earned their place among our country's most elite forces during the closing days of World War II. These men were physically and mentally tough, troopers of extraordinary determination, quiet pride, and exceptional ability. Like the Buffalo Soldiers, the Golden Thirteen – the 13 black seaman commissioned as officers in the Navy in 1944, and the Tuskegee Airmen, the "Triple Nickles" "challenged the conscience of a nation and the conscience of our Army" -- to recall General Colin Powell's stirring phrase from the 1992 dedication of the Buffalo Soldier Memorial. And they richly deserve the tribute we pay to them this morning.

Today, the Buffalo Soldier Memorial stands as a wonderful tribute to hundreds of great frontier cavalrymen and to the work of General Powell and a number of others

who helped turn the vision for such a monument into awe-inspiring reality. We're privileged to have some of those individuals here with us today.

Since the conception of the Buffalo Soldier project over 25 years ago, one man has been particularly important in guiding this endeavor – retired Navy Commander Carlton Philpot of Kansas City, the Chairman of the Buffalo Soldier Monument Committee, the organization that raised the money not just for the monument behind you, but also for the monument we are dedicating today – and for others that we will dedicate here in the years ahead. Carlton does it all. He not only leads, he also does -- and in this case, he personally drove the Triple Nickle Monument here from the foundry in Texas and then made all the arrangements for its installation. That typifies his commitment since the beginning, and today, I ask that you join me in thanking Carlton and all the members of the Buffalo Soldier Monument Committee for the wonderful work they have done!

There is, however, only so much that men of vision can do – because at the end of the day, every deep thinker needs a great artist to bring his vision to life. It is an honor today to have just such an artist with us – the artist, the sculptor, in fact, of each of the monuments in this park, Mr. Eddie Dixon – a man of exceptional talent, and, very fittingly, a former paratrooper with the great 101st Airborne Division, with which he served a year in Vietnam, earning the Combat Infantryman's Badge and a Purple Heart before becoming a very successful futures trader in Chicago and then discovering his exceptional talent as a sculptor. And we want to thank you today, Eddie, for your service with the "Screaming Eagles" and for bringing the individuals and units captured by these beautiful bronze sculptures to such vivid life as you have.

It's an honor and a personal privilege to share the unveiling ceremony this morning with Mr. Joe Murchison, a man I've known and respected since we first met over ten years ago at the Home of the Airborne -- Fort Bragg -- and the man who has served for over 16 years as the president of the "Triple Nickle" Association. Joe is as impressive at the helm of this special Association as he was when he was ramrodding paratroopers as a Noncommissioned Officer in the 82nd Airborne Division and in the 11th Airborne Division – in each of which he helped carry out the integration of two historically black battalions. He was – together with Commander Philpot and Mr. Dixon

– the key to completing this project in four months. Joe, thanks for all that you have done – in uniform, as the President of the Triple Nickle Association, and in this latest mission.

It's also great to see my old wingman, Ranger Mark Jones, with whom I was privileged to serve in the Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff -- and in the sky above Raeford Drop Zone -- and who is now not only a very successful businessman but is also engaged in a number of philanthropic activities for our Soldiers and their families, including service on the Fisher Foundation Board and with the Tillman Foundation. It's a pleasure to see you here today, Ranger; one more than you, big guy!

We're honored, as so often, to have LTG Bob Arter, Civilian Aide to the Secretary of the Army, another veteran of the 101st Airborne Division and a driving force behind the CGSC Foundation, with us this morning, and I'm delighted to see Mayor Laura Gasbarre of Leavenworth and a number of other officials from the surrounding community in the audience as well. Thanks to each of you for being here.

Now, one last item before proceeding further: I'd like to recognize and thank everyone on the Garrison, CAC, and Installation Staffs involved in this effort for their hard work and keen eye for detail during the past few weeks of preparation for this event. The post, the monuments, and the grounds look terrific, and I think all who had a hand in this endeavor deserve a round of applause.

Well, distinguished guests, citizens of Fort Leavenworth and surrounding communities, fellow soldiers, and most especially, members of the Triple Nickle Association and your friends and family members, it is a distinct honor to host today's ceremony -- and to share in an occasion that recalls for us the time when our Nation was engaged in the Second World War.

Tom Brokaw captured the essence of that period and of those who served during it in his best-selling book The Greatest Generation, noting that "The World War II years will forever be testimony to America's collective and individual resistance to tyranny, its awesome and ingenious industrial machinery, and what may be its greatest strength, the common values of its richly varied population when faced with a common threat." However, as he also pointed out, celebrations of America's common values during the World War II years needed to be tempered by recollections of the discrimination that

was a feature of those times. Some of those in uniform then were not only fighting for their country, they were also struggling to ensure their individual rights and dignity.

Among them were Native Americans like Sergeant Luis Armijo who served with honor as an Apache “Code Talker” after being told that Indians were not smart enough to become a pilot. There were Japanese Americans like Nao Takasugi, later a California legislator, who spent the war years with his family in an internment camp in America’s Southwest. And, of course, there were countless African Americans, like the members of the Five Hundred Fifty-Fifth Parachute Infantry Battalion, who were banned from the same post exchange facilities that were open to German and Italian prisoners of war, but who still proudly served their country.

The black soldiers of WW II followed trails blazed by the Buffalo Soldiers, whose regimental mottos, “We Can, We Will,” and “Ready Forward,” echoed encouragement from decades past. And the troopers of the Five Hundred Fifty-Fifth Parachute Infantry Battalion showed that they could more than soldier with the best of the US Army, clearly establishing that the “Triple Nickle” Battalion deserved a prominent place in the storied history of America’s airborne units.

First Sergeant Walter Morris, the first of the troopers to be assigned to the unit, is here with us today and will take part in today’s ceremony. And I’d like to tell you a little about how this unit began with the First Sergeant. Walter had been the First Sergeant of a colored service company whose soldiers were in need of a morale boost, having spent their time supporting the white paratroopers assigned to Fort Benning -- driving their trucks, running their mess halls, and so on. Such duties did not completely suit First Sergeant Morris, who could sense the effect that they were having on his men. So after watching the white paratroopers running, doing pushups, and practicing mock aircraft door exits all day, he, with a group of volunteers from his company, decided to do the same every afternoon at 4 pm, after the white soldiers had left the airborne training area.

After observing – and being impressed by – this special training for a while, the Commanding General at Fort Benning sent for First Sergeant Morris and offered him the position of First Sergeant for the newly authorized Five Hundred Fifty-Fifth

Parachute Infantry Company, a unit the orders stipulated would be comprised of “all Colored troops.” First Sergeant Morris jumped at the General’s offer.

By late 1943, 16 soldiers of a so-called “test” platoon, nicknamed “the Sweet Sixteen,” were selected. These troopers faced not only the challenges of any soldier going through basic airborne training, but also the exceptional pressure arising from a general expectation that they would fail: The “test” – by the skeptic’s definition – was to see if the platoon of black soldiers would actually jump. Well, not only did the “test platoon” members jump, all sixteen of the troopers – and First Sergeant Morris – completed all the training for airborne troopers – and, in mid-1944, they moved to Camp Mackall, NC, where, in November 1944, they were reorganized and redesignated as the first company of the newly-activated Five hundred Fifty-Fifth Parachute Infantry Battalion.

Over the next six months, the battalion’s ranks swelled, as hundreds of tough, fit, and professional young Black Americans proved they could meet the high standards of America’s paratroopers. And by May 1945, the "Triple Nickle" Battalion was ready for combat. However, rather than being sent to a theater of war, the unit was sent on a classified mission to the west coast to combat forest fires ignited by Japanese balloons carrying incendiary bombs. This was obviously a very hazardous, very sensitive mission – jumping as what we now know as smoke jumpers on a mission that had to be carried out in utmost secrecy for fear of the panic that might ensue should knowledge of the Japanese actions leak. It was a mission the “Triple Nickles” performed courageously and exceedingly well.

Prior to jumping into a fire in Washington State, First Sergeant Morris, in a moment of reflection, asked himself why he was doing this. His answer is in the pages of Tom Brokaw’s other book, The Greatest Generation Speaks.

“It occurred to me,” recalled First Sergeant Morris, “that the reason I was doing it was because of my children and my children’s children. I knew... in my heart that...this country, as great as it is, would overcome the stigma of separation and prejudice... “Of course,” he continued “we’ve come so long a ways from the 1945 era. And of course we have a long ways to go. But I can see the light... I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

Let us take a moment and consider First Sergeant Morris' inspiring reflection about the actions he took over sixty years ago.

"The reason I was doing it was because of my children and my children's children" -- Well, Ladies and Gentlemen, joining us today is Captain Michael Fowles, grandson of First Sergeant Morris, the Commander of an Infantry Company at Fort Jackson, SC, and a Graduate of the United States Airborne School in 2004 -- whose airborne wings were pinned on by First Sergeant Walter Morris. And I might note that the First Sergeant told me yesterday that he intends to hang around long enough to see his 5-year-old great grandson, also here with us this morning, graduate from jump school in 13 years or so as well! He is, by the way, the youngest honorary member of the Triple Nickle Association!

"We've come so long a ways from the 1945 era," First Sergeant Morris observed, and he was right -- and looking to your left, the bust of General Roscoe Robinson illustrates this fact very clearly. Though not a "Triple Nickle" himself, General Robinson was undoubtedly treading on a path in the airborne community originally blazed by the men of the Five Hundred Fifty-Fifth Parachute Infantry Battalion -- and it was no surprise that he would treasure his honorary membership in The Triple Nickle Association, especially when he was Commander of the great 82d Airborne Division.

Finally, First Sergeant Morris concluded his thoughts noting, "Of course we have a long ways to go... but, I can see the light... I can see the light at the end of the tunnel." With those words, First Sergeant Morris tells us that he could see the day approaching when each American, regardless of his race would have an equal opportunity to serve and to contribute. Many individuals today -- First Sergeant Morris' grandson among them -- demonstrate what is possible when there is equal opportunity, and it is clear that the achievements of the "Triple Nickles" helped fan the light that First Sergeant Morris saw at the end of the tunnel into a bright beacon that many have since followed.

General Sullivan, our Army's 32nd Chief of Staff, once observed that, "A nation's monuments say a lot about what it values." What then is the message of the monument we dedicate here today -- and of the other monuments in this park? I believe it is that we honor those who served, regardless of race, creed, or color, that we do

celebrate the strength America draws from its diversity, and that we honor in particular those who served with valor, distinction, and pride. As should now be clear to all of you, those qualities clearly were the hallmarks of the men who stood to the colors of the Triple Nickle Battalion in 1945.

The “Triple Nickles” were, in short, great American soldiers who overcame prejudice, discrimination, and unequal opportunity to earn their place in the annals of America’s Airborne. These great paratroopers walked point for their race and for our country, facing down discrimination by "standing in the door" as one and jumping into our Nation's history. They showed that they could not only soldier “all the way,” as the Airborne motto proudly proclaims, but that they could, in fact, lead the way, and it is an honor and a privilege to help recognize them today. Thank you and Airborne – all the way!