

## R-E-S-P-E-C-T

*These people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.*  
*Hebrews 11:13*

It was over 90 years ago, but Ned Felder, like most men, had hopes and aspirations; he lived 16,113 troubled days; and then died in despair. On April 2, 1917, President Wilson declared war against Germany. Ned saw this as an opportunity to show patriotism and secure a place as an equal citizen. "The world must be made safe for democracy," Wilson said. Negroes thought it would be insincere, for the country to fight for democracy in Europe while they remained second-class citizens. Over one million Negroes responded; roughly 370,000 were inducted. Within a week the War Department stopped accepting Negro volunteers. Comprised entirely of white men, the draft boards began to draft Negroes into service. At 10% of the population, Negroes supplied 13% of inductees.

In January 1918 Ned was registered for military service. On the word of a white spectator, Ned is collared, kicked, jailed, and fined for "disloyal talk" towards white troops. By April, he'd entered the 92nd Infantry Division. Over 200,000 Negroes fought with the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in France. Negro units fought with the French Army; none fought alongside white American troops.

Ned's 367th Infantry was cited for bravery and awarded the distinguished French Croix de Guerre. On February 17, 1919, Negro soldiers marched up Fifth Avenue and into Harlem before some 250,000 onlookers. Overseas they learned skilled trades and hoped for better jobs; but skilled jobs were closed to Negroes. Shellshock, racism, oppression, and terrorism made life hard but is largely un-noted in post WWI narratives. Angered at the equal

treatment the French had given Negroes, white mobs nationwide lynched seventy Negro veterans—many still in uniform—in the first year after the war.

***"We must not eat with them, must not shake hands with them, seek to talk to them or to meet with them outside the requirements of military service. We must not commend too highly these troops, especially in front of white Americans"***  
***—General John J. Pershing, commander of the AEF in Europe, in a communiqué concerning Negro troops sent to the French military, August 7, 1918.***

There is still little honor for these men. Little is said of the sacrifice of colored troops. After WWI Ned marries my grandmother. Their only child, my mom, remembered "we won the war, but lost the man." Records from Florida State Hospital for the Insane in Chattahoochee, Florida describe a Bi-Polar man with "Manic Depressive Psychosis." How'd this aspiring young man end up an "inmate" in a State institution?

*"Since admission he becomes upset; fights other patients or anyone with whom he comes in contact; requires restraint to control him."*  
*"When admitted, did not know anything about his family, nor cared."*  
*good physical condition; much ego."*

Bipolar or PTSD, can onset from severe stress. Those with the disorder can have a "precipitating event" that sets it off. I believe the brutality of combat, the build-up of

expectations, and returning to Jim Crow qualifies as a "precipitating event." Then called "shellshock," PTSD is a psychiatric injury. Negro troops had known equality with the French but back home they were fighting for respect. Instead of receiving proper care, Ned, like many, endured the trauma of electric shock therapy "treatments."

On 9/19/1933 he was transferred to the Tuskegee VA Medical Center. This old soldiers' home was created to provide long-term care for Negro vets and was fully staffed by whites. Imagine a Negro man being tended to by white folks in medical uniforms. Remember, Negro men were routinely hanged for "looking at a white woman" or "speaking out of turn." What healing could be expected for Ned? He died Feb. 4, 1939. His chart reads:

*"dark brown, muscular,  
5 ft 6 in tall, 140 lbs. Missing all teeth,  
unhealthy gums.  
20/20 vision.  
6th grade education,  
...exceptional for a Negro"*

Ned Felder was many things - a railroad fireman, a waiter, an auto-mechanic, a soldier and ultimately an inmate. He is buried at Bay Pines National Cemetery, in St. Petersburg, Florida. He was my grandfather. Men like Ned, did not end well. They lived lives of oppression and fought for respect. I believe they earned it. Let's show respect for fallen heroes like Ned Felder.