

Camp Logan, Houston  
8<sup>th</sup> Illinois National Guard

October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1917

Dear Mama,

I'm sorry it's been so long since my last letter. Things have been real busy down here in Camp Logan. Now that the rest of the 8<sup>th</sup> has made it down here,<sup>1</sup> I've finally got some breathing room and time to write this letter.

Last you heard from me, I'd just been sent to help out after the big riot here in Houston caused by negro soldiers from the 24<sup>th</sup> infantry.<sup>2</sup> I'm sure you read all about it already - a bunch of white folks got killed and some negroes too. It was the biggest deal since the St. Louis riot right before I left.<sup>3</sup>

Anyways, we were sent to help keep the peace, and that's what we've been trying to do since day 1. But it's not easy here in Texas. Back in Chicago we got used to being picked on some, on account of being black and living in the big city. But here it's so much worse. At first we helped barricade some streets<sup>4</sup> and round up rioters and whatnot. It was real chaotic at first, and I didn't have time to notice the racism. After things settled down a bit (relative to how it was the first few days; the tension is still thick enough you could cut it with a knife) I started to notice how bad the prejudice was. The very first day after we got here, the locals tried to demand that we be removed right along with the 24<sup>th</sup>!!<sup>5</sup> Imagine that - we came here to help protect them and make sure nothing else bad happens, and all they do is try to kick us out. I get Jim Crowed every day,<sup>6</sup> especially if I have to go out and interact with the public for some reason or another. Bus drivers, restaurant owners, even white officers around the camp seem to be a lot more prejudiced than they are back home. It's bad enough that I can't trust the white soldiers from the other National Guard divisions, but now I can't go out onto the streets alone without getting spit on. Part of it must be because the mutineers were black, and now nobody trusts any negro in a uniform. They think we're all rebels. But they should know better - I'm here to keep the peace, and I deserve a little respect for coming and helping out, just like the white soldiers and policemen. I hate to say it, but I can see what got those boys from the 24<sup>th</sup> so riled up.

Honestly, though, I hope we get reassigned soon. Sometimes I even wish that I'd joined the army and got sent to Europe. Uncle Leroy (who you'll remember is with the 371<sup>st</sup> now<sup>7</sup>) wrote to me from his post in France. He says that the French don't treat him like dirt just because he's black.<sup>8</sup> And it's not just because negroes have a reputation for being good fighters;<sup>9</sup> Leroy's helping build roads to the front and hasn't fired his gun yet.<sup>10</sup> He says that the French really appreciate the help that the American negro forces are providing over there. He says that they get confused about why the Southern white officers treat their negro soldiers so badly.<sup>11</sup>

It seems like everything is real backwards right now. We've got negroes fighting thousands of miles away to protect freedoms that we don't even have here in America. When the war's over and they come home, they'll still have to sit in the back of the bus. Certainly they can't possibly expect the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry to fight in Europe after they were driven to violence by racism at home. Every day it seems I hear about more lynching rioting. Sometimes I almost feel like joining one of those negro socialist groups<sup>12</sup> I've seen advertised on posters. What do you think I should do, mama? And how are things back home? Please write back soon.

Love,  
Henry

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<sup>1</sup> Haynes notes that the last of the 8<sup>th</sup> Illinois National Guard arrived on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1917. Robert Haynes, *A Night of Violence* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 206.

<sup>2</sup> Numerous sources contain information about the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the rebellion. See Robert Haynes, *A Night of Violence* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) or Wray Johnson, "Black American Radicalism and the First World War: The Secret Files of the Military Intelligence Division," *Armed Forces & Society* 26, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 27.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson notes the significance of the St. Louis riot in July, 1917. Wray Johnson, "Black American Radicalism and the First World War: The Secret Files of the Military Intelligence Division," *Armed Forces & Society* 26, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 27.

<sup>4</sup> Haynes describes the role of the 8<sup>th</sup> Illinois National Guard in blocking off streets during the riot. Robert Haynes, *A Night of Violence* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 168, 178.

<sup>5</sup> Haynes claims that the locals requested that the 8<sup>th</sup> Illinois be removed directly following the riot. Robert Haynes, *A Night of Violence* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 198.

<sup>6</sup> Evans devotes a chapter to the Jim Crow laws. Maurice Evans, "Grievances: the Jim Crow Car," in *Black and White In the Southern States* (New York: Longman's Green and Co., 1915), 140-146. Johnson also describes the significance of the Jim Crow laws. Wray Johnson, "Black American Radicalism and the First World War: The Secret Files of the Military Intelligence Division," *Armed Forces & Society* 26, no. 1 (Fall

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1999): 27. The term "Jim Crowed" comes from Du Bois' crisis article. W.E. Burghart Du Bois, "An Essay Towards the History of the Black Man in the Great War," *Crisis* 18 (June 1919): 64.

<sup>7</sup> Du Bois recounts the role of the 371<sup>st</sup> in World War I. W.E. Burghart Du Bois, "An Essay Towards the History of the Black Man in the Great War," *Crisis* 18 (June 1919): 78.

<sup>8</sup> Cobb describes how the French treated the black Americans. Irvin S. Cobb, "Young Black Joe," in *The Glory of the Coming* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1918), 287-297. Johnson also notes the contrast between the treatment of black Americans in France and in America. Wray Johnson, "Black American Radicalism and the First World War: The Secret Files of the Military Intelligence Division," *Armed Forces & Society* 26, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 27.

<sup>9</sup> The strong reputation of blacks as soldiers is noted in most of my sources. Notably, "The American Negro as a Fighting Man," *The American Review of Reviews* 58 (August 1918): 210-211.

<sup>10</sup> Du Bois describes the black soldier's role in non-combat situations during WWI. W.E. Burghart Du Bois, "An Essay Towards the History of the Black Man in the Great War," *Crisis* 18 (June 1919): 64-65.

<sup>11</sup> See note #8 on the French treatment of black American soldiers.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson describes the existence of black socialist groups during WWI. Wray Johnson, "Black American Radicalism and the First World War: The Secret Files of the Military Intelligence Division," *Armed Forces & Society* 26, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 27