

An Australian historian has uncovered hidden documents which reveal that African American troops used machine guns to attack their white officers in a siege on a US base in north Queensland in 1942.

Information about the Townsville mutiny has never been released to the public. But the story began to come to light when James Cook University's Ray Holyoak first began researching why US congressman Lyndon B. Johnson visited Townsville for three days back in 1942.

What he discovered was evidence detailing one of the biggest uprisings within the US military.

"For 70 years there's been a rumour in Townsville that there was a mutiny among African-American servicemen. In the last year and a half I've found the primary documentation evidence that that did occur in 1942," Mr Holyoak stated.

During World War II, Townsville was a crucial base for campaigns into the Pacific, including the Battle of the Coral Sea.

About 600 African-American troops were brought to the city to help build airfields.

Mr Holyoak says these troops, from the 96th Battalion, US Army Corps of Engineers, were stationed at a base on the city's western outskirts known as Kelso.

This was the site for a large-scale siege lasting eight hours, which was sparked by racial taunts and violence.

"After some serial abuse by two white US officers, there was several ringleaders and they decided to machine gun the tents of the white officers," Mr Holyoak said.

He has uncovered several documents hidden in the archives of the Queensland Police and Townsville Brigade detailing what happened that night.

According to the findings, the soldiers took to the machine guns and anti-aircraft weapons and fired into tents where their white counterparts were drinking. More than 700 rounds were fired. At least one person was killed and dozens severely injured, and Australian troops were called in to roadblock the rioters.

Mr Holyoak also discovered a report written by Robert Sherrod, a US journalist who was embedded with the troops.

It never made it to the press, but was handed to Lyndon B Johnson at a Townsville hotel and eventually filed away into the National Archives and Records Administration.

"I think at the time, it was certainly suppressed. Both the Australian and the US government would not have wanted the details of this coming out. The racial policies at the time really discluded [sic] people of colour," Mr Holyoak says. Both the Australian Defence Department and the Australian War Memorial say it could take months to research the incident, and say they have no details readily available for public release. But Townsville historian Dr Dorothy Gibson-Wilde says the findings validate 70-year-old rumours. "Anytime it was raised, people usually sort of said, 'Oh you know, no that can't be true. Nobody's heard about that', and in fact it must have been kept pretty quiet from the rest of the town," she said.

By August 1942, there were about 7,258 Negro servicemen based in Australia. One such Negro unit was the 96th Engineers General Services Regiment airfield construction Battalion that was based in the Upper Ross area near Townsville to construct the Upper Ross airfield (Kelso field).

On 15 April 1942, about 100 men of the 96th Battalion were involved in a fight in Townsville. They had been rounded up by white soldiers with fixed bayonets and loaded guns. General Ralph Royce's diary has an entry that indicated that he visited the negro part of the troop camp at Charters Towers on 10 April 1942. The diary entry did not indicate the reason for the visit.

On 22 May 1942 between 8 pm and 9 pm several shots could be heard coming from the Negroes camp. A riot broke out at the camp after some constant abuse of the Negroes by two of the white US officers. A number of ring-leaders amongst

the Negroes in "A" and "C" Companies decided to machine gun their white officers' tents. They were apparently upset that a Negro sergeant had died at the hands of a white US officer.

More than 700 rounds were fired during the riot. At least one person was killed and several dozen were seriously injured. The Negroes fired machine guns and anti-aircraft guns (probably heavy machine guns) into the tent lines of the US white officers who were drinking at the time.

One of the many to hear the shots that night was the late Arthur Kelso who was riding his horse on his property at Laudham Park, on Five Head Creek in the Upper Ross area just outside Townsville. He heard the initial shots and judged them to be about 1.5 miles away. The shooting continued and he could then hear Thompson sub machine guns. The firing continued until about 11pm.

Many of the locals who heard the firing thought the military were playing "war games". However all hell had broken loose at the camp. One local source suggested that the riot started when a white Captain struck a Negro soldier. Arthur Kelso indicated that drunken Negroes started to fire guns at their white officers, who then returned the fire.

Road blocks was set up by various Australian Army Units to prevent the rioting Negroes from entering Townsville. There were reports of 250 Negroes on the rampage and that they had commandeered some trucks and were heading into town. Arthur Kelso reported that he later heard that 19 coffins had been ordered to bury those killed in the riot (this is unconfirmed).

Dick Kelso, Arthur's brother, who was with the 11th Brigade was one of those who manned a road block on Ross River Road that evening after the riot. Dick said they were issued with live ammunition and Bren Guns as well. Dick reported that the rioting Negroes had been stopped and turned back at another road block near Corbeth's water hole on Ross River.

The 29th Australian Infantry Brigade War Diary No. 6 has an entry in May 1942 regarding the riot as follows:-

23 May 0205 Message from Div that 500 US tps. from an Engr unit were in revolt at Junc. of FIVE HEAD and ROSS CKS. They were armed and a rep. from Div. had gone out to contact them.

0225 Message that trouble had been settled.

The 51st Australian Infantry Battalion "War Diary or Intelligence Summary" in May 1942 had the following entries regarding the riot. Though the diary is identified as being for the 51st Australian Infantry Battalion, by that time it had been re-designated as the 31st/51st Australian Infantry Battalion:-

22 May 42 2400 Bde reported U.S. negroes had seized their own arms. 51 Bn sent 2 coys to block STUART TOWNSVILLE road to all persons

23 May 42 0022 B coy ordered to move to B. H.Q. picking up guides at ECHLIN ST. on route. Password BUCKS

0058 patrol supply by C. Coy under Lieut Smith from Bde operating along WEIR ROAD

0010 D. Coy ordered to take up position ROSS RIVER Meatworks Br. with left flank STUART TOWNSVILLE road. 1 Sec M.G.'s attached. Instructions cancelled. Coy in reserve in vicinity RISING SUN. 1 Sec Carriers with A. Coy, 1 Sc with C. Coy.

0225 Instructions from Bde. A. Coy at ROSS RIVER Br. and Sec Carriers attached to be recalled. C. Coy remain in position WEIR AREA.

0258 Message from Bde state Carriers at C. Coy. ordered by Col. Forbes to return to lines.

0344 A. Coy returned to Biv. Area

0718 Bde instructions all coys return to Biv Area

0855 Bde instructions that all messages by wireless must be passed by cipher

Private George Gnezdiloff, of the 51st Australian Infantry Battalion, was one of the Australian soldiers who established a road block on Ross River Road with his bren gun carrier. They were ordered to shoot the Negro soldiers on sight. 90 year old George from Proserpine told an ABC radio program on 10 February 2012 "We had ammo, the lot, we weren't mucking around, I can tell you."

This diary entry by Lt Beasecker is over a year after the suggested date of May 1942. Lt. Frank W. Beasecker, Co. B of the 411th Engineer Base Shop Battalion in Cairns, wrote in his diary on 6 July 1943:-

The 96th Engineers—a Negro battalion, had a mutiny a few months back and expended 30,000 rounds of machine gun ammo. Luckily no one was hurt but they were after the white officers.

Another interesting diary entry is that for Captain Sam Cutler, who was camped at Woodstock Airfield with the 39th Pursuit Squadron:-

May 23, 1942 (Saturday)

Up at 7:45 AM, kind of tired, even though I went to bed early (8:15 PM). Too many interruptions in camp for me, a light sleeper.

For example, between 8 PM and 6 AM, here's what went on nearby: Noisy poker game in officers' tent; explosive exhaust sounds from the light generator set until 11 PM; wandering cows and bulls, moving and eating grass all around us; somebody shooting 45 cal. bullets to scare them off; late-comers returning to camp making a racket; a cute Possum raiding my chocolate bars (twice) in my tent. (flashed a light on him, but he held his ground until I chased him away); officers yelling at 5 AM, to get up and go to the flight line for routine alert (pilots only); and the rest of the camp up at 6 AM to eat breakfast, etc. Just one night's interruptions. Nice and quiet in the country, eh!

I wonder if the light generator backfires that Captain Sam Cutler heard until 11 pm may have been associated with the riot that started just under 20 kilometres away. Would the heavy calibre machine gun sounds have travelled that far at night time? And could the .45 cal. shots have been associated with the group of rioters who were headed to Townsville around the rear side of Mt Stuart. The rioters probably would have travelled near the Antil Plains Airfield where the 40th Pursuit Squadron of the 35th Fighter Group was based and travelled towards the Brookhill area. The other main group of rioters were headed to Townsville via Ross River Road.

On 11 February 2012, I was told by an acquaintance that her 91 year old mother had been talking about this riot for many years. Her mother had been working at the Herbert Hotel at the time and she was told about it by a number of her American friends and a local policeman. Her recollection was that the Policeman had told her that there were 600 to 800 dead (would seem highly unlikely as

probably not that many in the unit). She also advised that some of the rioters were shot and buried near Roseneath, which is less than 5 kilometres from the Antil Plains Airfield where the 40th Pursuit Squadron of the 35th Fighter Group was based. On the same day Mel Dundas-Taylor advised me that he had been told about 40 years ago that the Negro soldiers had been buried where, or near where they were killed. These are both unsubstantiated stories that have been passed on hand to hand over the years.

Townsville Historian Ray Holyoak has discovered a report written by Robert "Bob" Sherrod, a US Reporter for Time Magazine. Sherrod's report was never published due to censorship. Sherrod had dinner at with Lyndon Baynes Johnson in Sydney on 17 June 1942 and he handed his report to LBJ with the hope that Johnson would get his report back to the States and past the local military censors.

Sherrod's report indicates that the rioters fired several hundred rounds at the tent of Captain Francis Williams of Columbus, Georgia in an attempt to kill or severely injure him. They then turned their weapons on the other white officers. Captain Williams had managed to dive into a nearby slit trench which saved his life.

Bob Sherrod had apparently learnt details of the Townsville mutiny whilst drinking with some US Officers at the US Officer's Club in the Queen's Hotel on The Strand in Townsville. Lyndon Johnson wrote a report in which he paraphrased some aspects for Bob Sherrod's report. Johnston wrote regarding the Townsville negro mutiny - "One of the biggest stories of the war which can't be written and which shouldn't be written, of course -- is the mutiny among American Negro troops which took place near Townsville on May 22."

LBJ commented that the negroes should never have been sent to Australia. "There are no women here for them, and some ugly situations have resulted."