

Cover-Up Of Townsville Mutiny: Black GIs Turned on Officers

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Black US troops mutinied in Townsville in 1942 and turned machineguns on their officers, in a secret chapter of the war in the Pacific that has come to light through the papers of the late US president Lyndon B. Johnson.

The scandal was hushed up for nearly 70 years after being described in a report given to and apparently kept by Johnson as “one of the biggest stories of the war which can’t be written, shouldn’t be written”.

The subject of rumour and speculation for decades in the north Queensland city, it has now emerged that the mutiny was probably reported at the time to the White House by Johnson, then a young and ambitious US congressman, after he visited Australia in June 1942 on a fact-finding mission for President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The report Johnson took back to Washington, written for him by US journalist Robert Sherrod, tells how 600 African-American GIs seized their base and went on the rampage, trying to kill their white officers.

Some terrorised local civilians.

Armed Australian troops were sent in at the height of the emergency on the US base.

George Gnezdiloff, then a 20-year-old private in the north Queensland-raised 51st battalion, was told to block Ross River Road with his Bren gun carrier. Other soldiers were issued with a password, Bucks, as they deployed to bottle up the Americans.

Gnezdiloff and his crew were ordered to shoot the mutineers on sight. “We had ammo, the lot,” the now 90-year-old recalled yesterday from his home in Proserpine, 300km south of Townsville.

“We weren’t mucking around, I can tell you.”

The disgruntled African-Americans were from the US 96th engineers, a labour battalion that had the thankless job of building the airfields and barracks around Townsville. Racial tensions had been simmering for months, creating a poisonous atmosphere on the base at Kelso Field, southwest of the city. On the night of May 22-23, 1942, it boiled over. The men of A and C companies took up arms against their white officers, angry at claims a black sergeant had died at the hands of a white superior.

Sherrod's report says the mutineers resolved to kill their commander, Captain Francis Williams, of Columbus, Georgia. "They fired several hundred rounds at his tent," it says.

After Williams escaped "almost certain death" by diving into a slit trench, the rebels turned a machine gun on other officers as they fled. There is no record of whether any were hit.

"No better illustration of the barrier between the races can be found than this: investigating officers must depend on a private investigation by a negro sergeant whose pipe was shot out of his mouth," the report says.

Sherrod was a well-regarded correspondent for Time and Life magazines, based in Australia during 1942, as a Japanese invasion threatened.

His interaction with Johnson in Townsville was uncovered by local researcher Ray Holyoak after he began investigating what the future US president was doing for three days in the north Queensland town in one of the bleakest periods of World War II.

Johnson had quite a time on his tour down under. He flew to Queensland from Melbourne in an ageing US Air Force bomber that almost ran out of fuel and crashed in the outback.

Frustrated by wartime censorship, Sherrod sought out the congressman on his arrival in Townsville, and at Johnson's request typed out the account of the mutiny at Kelso Field he had gathered from US officers.

The report lay among Johnson's personal papers until Holyoak, a 38-year-old heritage consultant in Townsville, approached the US National Archives for information about Johnson's Townsville stopover.

His request was passed on to the LBJ Presidential Library in Austin, Texas, which forwarded a thick file containing Sherrod's report to Johnson.

Holyoak believes LBJ passed the report off as his own when he returned to Washington and presented his findings to Roosevelt. "The copy I have suggests he tore the front and back covers off Sherrod's report and took the credit for it with Roosevelt," Holyoak told The Weekend Australian.

Further digging by Holyoak, who is applying to turn his findings into a doctoral thesis at James Cook University, revealed that about 100 of the mutineers eluded the dragnet thrown up by the Australian troops.

At midnight on May 22, 1942, the war diary of the 29th infantry brigade records that "Negroes seized their own arms" at Kelso. Two companies of the 51st Battalion, including Gnezdiloff's light armoured vehicle, were hurriedly mobilised.

The old Digger phoned in to local ABC radio yesterday, pleased to be able to tell his story at last.

“We finished up on Ross River Road and were told to stay there,” Gnezdiloff said, fleshing out the story to *The Weekend Australian*.

“We had the bren (light machine gun) set up. If any of the negro soldiers came near us, we were told to shoot them.”

Would he have fired? “I don’t know . . . that was up to my sergeant,” he said. “I was thinking about it, about what I would do.

“And I would have probably told the gunner to shoot over their heads. I didn’t mind those Americans at all . . . some of them seemed all right. And I couldn’t see the sense of shooting them when they had come over here to fight a war with us.”

Gnezdiloff was not put to the test: none of the Americans came his way, and his team was recalled at about 3am, according to the brigade war diary.

But the crisis was not over. Some of the mutineers went bush, terrorising farm families around Kelso, today a thickly populated suburb of Townsville.

According to Holyoak, the attempted rape of a local woman and other incidents were reported to police.

The mutinous A and C companies of black engineers were hurriedly packed off to New Guinea, where the Australians of the 51st Battalion were also bound, to confront the Japanese.

In a 1991 interview with the LBJ library, included as a file in the documents given to Holyoak, Sherrod said he was later told by Johnson he had destroyed the report of the Kelso mutiny because it was “too hot”. The veteran journalist died in 1994.

Holyoak doesn’t buy this. He believes Johnson used the reporter’s work to “enhance his profile with Roosevelt and improve his political ambitions”.

How else, he argues, would the supposedly destroyed account of the mutiny have turned up in the late president’s papers?

Then there’s Johnson’s personal notes. They paraphrase aspects of Sherrod’s report, suggesting he did use it without crediting the journalist.

More than 10,000 African-American servicemen were put to work in north Queensland during the war, and Holyoak says the racial violence at Kelso was not isolated. Other clashes between white and black US personnel took place at Torrens Creek, Ingham and Mt Isa in 1942.

The researcher believes Roosevelt was aware of the tensions, and this may have been a factor behind the visit of his wife, Eleanor, to Townsville in 1943, when the then first lady dropped

in on the newly established North American Services Club in Flinders Street — a “negro-only” establishment.



Black American soldiers in Queensland during World War II.