

# Veteran J.J. Corbett

## One of Three Living Triple Nickle Smokejumpers Recalls Putting Out Fires from Japan's Balloon Bombs

BY MICHAEL STONE

**P**earl Harbor stands out as the United States' biggest homeland catastrophe during World War II, of course, but afterward, other close-to-home threats persisted.

During the five-plus-years-long, tumultuous Battle of the Atlantic, German U-boats patrolled and attacked within a few miles of the East Coast, including on the night of Jan. 19, 1942, when the freighter City of Atlanta was sunk just seven miles off the edge of North Carolina. Forty-four of the 47 crew members were killed.

On Feb. 23, 1942, a Japanese sub surfaced off Santa Barbara, California, and shelled a coastal oil operation, causing only minor damage but stirring panic at the thought of invasion. In fact, the next day, artillery was sent into the skies over Los Angeles following reports of enemy aircraft — an incident that would be named “the Battle of Los Angeles,” according to the History channel.

On June 21, 1942, a different Japanese submarine attacked Fort Stevens in Oregon at the mouth of the Columbia River, which flows into the Pacific. It fired 17 shells in the base's direction but inflicted little damage, mostly hitting a nearby baseball field, the History channel says.

That September, the same sub launched a floatplane twice that dropped bombs in and around Brookings, Oregon, in hopes of starting fires — but this, too, was unsuccessful.

And then there were acts of espionage and sabotage.

And then there were the 9,000-plus balloon bombs Japan started sending across the Pacific Ocean via the jet stream in

November 1944. Set to drop after the three-day journey, only roughly 350 crossed the mainland's coast, but those that did make it occasionally drifted for great lengths, even going as far east as Michigan.

At the ready to fight the fires caused by the successful bombs were Sgt. Jordan Jerome “J.J.” Corbett and the other “smokejumpers” of the Army's 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion. Called the “Triple Nickles” (intentional spelling), the 555th was the first group of all-black paratroopers — officers and enlisted personnel — in the U.S. Armed Forces.

“Patriotism, to me, was at its highest for this country, even though things were segregated and whatnot — people wanted to prove, wanted to do,” Corbett, 93, said from his Bartow, Florida, home, his wife of 61 years, Eva, sitting close by.

“It was a good time in that respect, even though we had to

*“I had never been in a plane before. I had to go up and jump out.”*



suffer through a lot of segregated nonsenses.”

Corbett is one of only three known living smokejumpers from the 555th, which contributed 300 men total to the 2,700-person effort to put out the fires, codenamed Operation Firefly.

Like with many black soldiers across the Armed Forces during the war, the 555th was kept stateside because of the belief





A painting shows Sgt. J.J. Corbett in his service uniform next to photographs of members of the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion during World War II. (Right) A paratrooper bust sits in the living room of Corbett's Bartow home.

at the time that such men and women weren't as capable as their white counterparts.

"They wanted to see if black folks had the courage and the intelligence to jump out of an airplane and carry out a mission on the ground after they got there," Joe Murchison, president of the 555th Parachute Infantry Association who joined the battalion in 1947, said of the War Department launching what was considered an "experiment" in December 1943 with 20 black paratroopers.

(Seventeen of this "test platoon" made it through training, and one, Sgt. Clarence Beavers of New York, is still living.)

Still, even with the stateside roles, Corbett said he today reflects on the smokejumpers' actions as significant — though it took he and others of the 555th a while to realize it because of the heroics that quickly emerged from Europe, the Pacific and elsewhere.

"I didn't see it at first because most of my friends had been overseas. They'd talk about their experiences overseas," said Corbett, a member of the 555th's original company of maybe 150 that followed the test platoon. "I was just here at the homeland putting out fire. It was a long time before we talked about this."

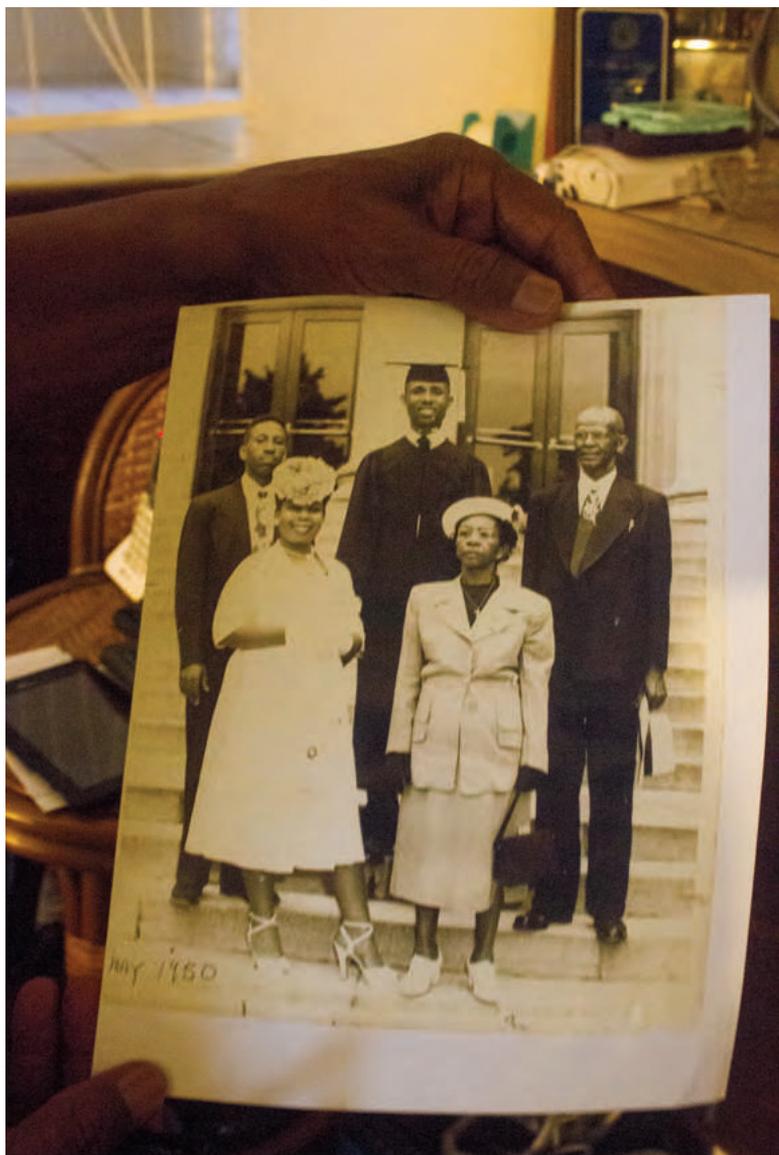
Corbett is originally from Pierce, Florida, a now-nonexistent phosphate-mining community west of Bartow in Polk County.

His dad had been a sharecropper in Rich Bay in the Panhandle but was dissatisfied with the work because, among other reasons, equipment breakdowns came out of his paychecks.

"He said, 'We'd work a whole week and make a dollar and a half,'" Corbett recalled, noting his dad had heard about phosphate mining elsewhere in Florida and decided that was



(Above) Corbett's home is lined with his trophies from his many years as a successful high school coach of football and track and field, as well as from his own time as a golfer. (Right) His family stands with him at his May 1950 graduation from North Carolina A&T. (Below) A Triple Nickle hat.



a better alternative.

“One day, he said, about noon ... he just mowed the horse all the way to the end of his line and stopped and started walking south. And [he] hoboed his way down south.”

Corbett’s dad settled into American Agricultural Chemical Company’s phosphate-mining operation in Pierce. He didn’t have to pay rent because the company owned the houses, which were divided into white and black sections, as were the two K-8 schools.

“It was still extremely racial,” Corbett said. “Some of the people, as far as the language — they didn’t refer to you as colored or black [but instead as] negroes.”

For high school, the white kids were given bus transportation to Mulberry about five miles to the north, but black students had to furnish their own to get to the black high schools farther away in Bartow or Lakeland.

But thankfully for Corbett, his first year of high school was the first for transportation for black students. So he went to the all-black Union Academy in Bartow, where he played football and basketball, and during the summer, he worked 12-hour days at the mine for 35 cents an hour.

“That was pretty good during that time,” he said of the pay.

Corbett’s football prowess proved good enough for a scholarship to play center and linebacker for the all-black college Bethune-Cookman in Daytona Beach. He started in the summer of 1942, but he didn’t stay long because, in January 1943 at age 20, he was drafted into military service.

After his first training stop at Camp Blanding near Starke, Florida, his educational level resulted in him being sent to Camp Tyson in Paris, Tennessee, to learn how to operate barrage balloons.

“So many of the guys hadn’t finished high school,” Corbett



Barrage balloons (left and top) would be sent into the air up to 5,000 feet by steel cables to deter air attacks because pilots feared running into the cables. Paratroopers then and today learn to fall by being dropped from a 250-foot tower (right) with their chutes already deployed.

said, “so within five or six months, I had gone from private to sergeant.”

Barrage balloons are the giant blimp-shaped balloons that would be sent into the air up to 5,000 feet by steel cables from land or aboard ships. The balloons deterred attacks from low-flying aircraft because of the fear of running into the cables.

“If you look at some of the [Normandy] invasion films, you’ll probably see on some of the ships ... those balloons,” Corbett said.

After finishing barrage-balloon training and starting to train others, he somehow got reassigned to Fort Bragg in North Carolina to learn artillery and then to Fort Bliss in Texas for aircraft training.

Fort Bliss is “where I saw on the wall they were looking for colored soldiers to volunteer as a paratroop,” Corbett said,

describing the poster advertising nice boots — and nice pay — which looked good to a young man. “That’s when I signed up.”

But Corbett’s roots in wanting to go airborne date farther back, all the way to his childhood, when kids would pay 50 cents for two- or three-minute fun rides in the backseat of a biplane.

“I never could raise that 50 cents. I never did get a chance to go up in one,” he said. “I always wanted to go up in a plane. I had my chance as a paratrooper.”

Yet playing the part of adult paratrooper provided little fun in the beginning.

“First of all,” Corbett said, “the physical fitness was the most difficult part than all the other parts: learning how to fall and how to roll when they fall, going through all these different exercises and jumping out these different little towers and



*“That blast, if you’re not in the right position, it shakes you up something.”*

then taking you up on the 250-foot tower.”

The towers, which continue in paratrooper training today, teach how to fall and land prior to actually jumping out of a plane, and the 250-foot one already has trainees harnessed in and chute deployed before releasing them to the ground.

Noting his first real jump, Corbett said: “That’s when I found out I wasn’t as brave as I thought I was. I had never been in a plane before. I had to go up and jump out.”

And on that jump, “I didn’t do much right,” he said, describing the jerk of the chute, which was designed to pop open by the propeller blast two or three seconds after the paratrooper jumped.

“That blast, if you’re not in the right position, it shakes you up something,” he said. “And boy, when it opened, I tell anybody, I swear I saw confetti-looking light all around me.” In other words, he saw stars. “It shook me up that hard.”

After several months of training and finishing with his wings, Corbett and the others of the 555th Parachute Infantry Company were sent to Camp Mackall in North Carolina and, on Nov. 25, 1944, were transformed into Company A of what had grown into the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion.

Thoughts among the battalion centered on being sent to

Europe or the Pacific front. But instead, they were presented with a “secret mission”: 200 from the 555th were to be sent to Pendleton, Oregon, and 100 to Chico, California, to join the U.S. Forest Service in fighting fires caused by Japan’s balloon bombs.

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Officials labeled Operation Firefly as a secret because they didn't want the public to panic — especially after one of the bombs killed Elyse Mitchell, a minister's wife, and five Sunday-school classmates, ages 11 to 14, who had come across the unexploded device while on a picnic outing near Bly in southern Oregon.

These were the only combat deaths in the contiguous 48 states during the war.

Parachuting in near the fires was preferred because it allowed the smokejumpers to reach a destination quickly amid undeveloped forests and put the fires out while they were still easily containable. Equipment was parachuted in, too, Corbett said.

Corbett remembered training with a new kind of chute, one that allowed for 360 turns for better vision in landing in the

West Coast's forests because, without clear fields, the smokejumpers had to get themselves hung up in a tree. Once caught by the tree, they'd lower themselves down with a rope.

They could still find a place to hit the ground, of course, but the terrain — with its stumps, roots, boulders and other dangers — made such a landing inadvisable. Some of those who did land like this got badly hurt, Corbett said, but the one smokejumper who died in Operation Firefly did so under different circumstances.

Despite not receiving full smokejumper training, medic Malvin Brown volunteered to replace the assigned medic, who was sick, for the Aug. 6, 1945, jump to fight a fire in Umpqua National Forest in western Oregon. Brown fell 150 feet into a ravine "from a very tall and leaning fir tree," according to the Army, and he's believed to have died instantly.



(Left) Corbett — second from right in the top photo and marked with letters and an arrow in the bottom one — with other members of the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion. (Above) Corbett and his wife, Eva, when they married in 1954. (Below) Among Corbett’s many recognition for his high school coaching career is a lifetime membership into the Florida Athletic Coaches Association.



Once on the ground, the smokejumpers assisted Forest Service rangers already there, mainly by clearing vegetation to create a fireline that would prevent the fire from spreading.

Between the Pendleton and Chico groups, the Triple Nickle smokejumpers are believed to have helped rangers fight 28 fires, including 15 that saw the soldiers reach their destination by parachuting in, according to the Army.

Corbett doesn’t remember his mission total, but he did note that “there were a lot of fires, and firefighting is dangerous.”

“All of a sudden, one area’s just like somebody poured gasoline all over everything,” he said. “And the flame was extremely hot. Our eyebrows were singed.”

He doesn’t remember seeing fire from the plane, only from the ground: “You didn’t wanna jump too close to the fire,” he said with a laugh.

Operation Firefly ended with Japan’s defeat in August 1945, and when the 82nd Airborne Division held its victory parade in New York City on Jan. 12, 1946, the 555th smokejumpers were the only black participants.

“You won’t see us on the movies,” said Corbett, who participated in the parade and was discharged from service the following month.

He immediately wanted to return to school, but the G.I. Bill flooded Florida’s black colleges, Bethune-Cookman and Florida A&M, with new students. So instead of waiting another year to enroll, Corbett found an alternative: the all-black North Carolina A&T in Greensboro, where he played center on the football team, majored in math, and minored in health and physical education.

After graduation, he returned to Union Academy to teach math and serve as offensive-line coach for the football team and head track and field coach. Several football players from his tenure at Union went onto the pros, including cornerback Ken Riley, who played 15 seasons for the

Cincinnati Bengals, and wide receiver Jerry Simmons, who put nine seasons under his belt for various teams.

At Union, Corbett met Eva, his wife, who taught home economics there.

Corbett retained his same positions at Bartow High School when it integrated with Union in 1969, though he did only one year of football at Bartow.

“The students didn’t like what was going on, but we were able — especially the black coaches — to quiet things down before they got out of control,” he said of integration. “We didn’t have any big situations like they had in some areas during the time.”

Though he had a state track championship with Union, two with Bartow, and his name in the Florida High School Athletic Hall of Fame, Corbett said none of his runners went on to be household names.

“I thought I had guys who probably could have if they’d have stayed with it,” he said. “But they didn’t stay with it.”

Corbett retired from Bartow in 1980, but two years later, he began his 12-year tenure on the Polk County school board.

“As soon as I retired, I got busy,” Corbett joked.

After the school board, he served 14 years on the board of directors for the now-defunct Citrus & Chemical Bank before really retiring in 2008.

Corbett said his Citrus & Chemical appointment came at the recommendation of another board member, Chesterfield Smith, who wanted black Americans on the board so it would “represent the community.”

As president of the American Bar Association during the Watergate scandal, Smith grabbed the national spotlight for the statement “No man is above the law” that followed President Richard Nixon firing Watergate’s special prosecutor to try to save himself.

After marrying in 1954, the Corbetts would go on to have a son, Jerome, and the whole family, which today includes two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, still lives in Polk County.

As for the 555th, the battalion was officially integrated into the 82nd Airborne Division in December 1947 as the renamed 3rd Battalion of the 505th Parachute Infantry Brigade.

Even without segregation, “to be considered as good as the white soldiers, we had to be better,” said Murchison, who was part of the integration shortly after joining in 1947 and served in the military until 1960, “and we consistently proved that when we were put up against white soldiers.”

Summing up his involvement, Corbett reiterated that he and the other Triple Nickles were ready to serve overseas — they just weren’t given the opportunity.

“We were trained to fight. We wanted to be a part of the actual fighting and whatnot, but that didn’t happen,” he said. “And it was a long time before the guys realized that they had done something kind of important.” ■



(Above) In recognition of his military, education, coaching and community service, the Polk County Board of Commissioners made Feb. 7, 2016, “J.J. Corbett Day in Polk County.” (Below) Corbett points to himself among others from the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion.

