

## Remembering the Red Ball Express

Written by R.B. Jones

Monday, 14 November 2011 11:31

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Veterans Day always brings sad feelings to me. I am not a veteran nor will I ever be. I am unable to salute the American Flag so my induction would be a troublesome issue. I believe that violence should always be the last resort in human conflict and that is a deeply un-American concept, disqualifying me from military service if I were so inclined— I am not! I am terribly frightened by this country's penchant for war. Recent actions by President Barack Obama sent chills down my spine. First, he said that the government has the right to kill an American citizen deemed a security threat without due process. He chilled me even more when he made good on his declaration and killed an American born cleric in Yemen who supposedly was a member of Al Qaida preaching jihad against the United States. His son was also killed without due process.

I should have expected as much from Obama since he chose to give a pro-war speech when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It is a strange thing that this nation, which has by far the biggest military budget in the world and enough nuclear weapons to annihilate humanity without seriously depleting its arsenal, is so driven by fear. This country is killing people on at least two continents with drone aircraft and dropping special ops troops in numerous countries around the globe and still fear dominates this nation and it can never have too many weapons of various types. The country with the most weapons of mass destruction goes around starting wars with countries that might be developing such weapons. Of course the U.S. has taught the world an unintended lesson. Those who have started development should race to finish them because those who give up their nuclear weapons programs are betrayed and attacked (Iraq and Libya) and those who complete the program remain unscathed (North Korea). If I was a leader of Iran and I was developing the atomic bomb, I would accelerate the development and thereby protect myself from attack. North Korea's government is at least as repressive as Iraq under Saddam Hussein and Libya under Gaddafi, yet the U.S. has not fired one missile. I wonder why?

I grew up around men who were veterans and so I have mixed feelings about November 11. I knew a World War I soldier Deacon William Powell of New Shiloh Baptist Church. He told me

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about the racism he encountered during what was once known as The Great War, but he did not talk about the combat actions he might have been in. He was irascible but good hearted and preached constantly about laziness and doing one's job well. I learned a lot from Mr. Powell who was a faithful custodian of the church. However, most of the veterans I knew served in World War II. Two of my favorites were my Uncle Allen Stokes and my neighbor Victor Parks. Both men served in the Red Ball Express

The Express was a system of supplying Allied troops after the Normandy Invasion in the spring and summer of 1944. The truck convoys were organized to bring supplies to Gen. Omar Bradley's 1st Army, Gen. Bernard Montgomery's 8th Army and General George Patton's 3rd Army. There were not enough supply ports and so the Express, made up of 75% black drivers, drove about 20 hours per day to keep the armies supplied. Their route covered about 400 miles. They were mostly black because the prevailing sentiment in the U.S. Military despite historical evidence to the contrary was that black men did not have the mettle to be combat soldiers. They said that blacks could not pilot planes and were not tough enough to be Marines or Army Rangers. It was a comforting lie for white men, but it enraged men like Allen and Victor who had to fight white U.S. soldiers in England.

The two men were proud of their service to their country and thought that it would make things better for black people in the U.S. They took particular pride in driving for the Red Ball Express. They did a vital job while coming under enemy attack to keep Patton and others well supplied. Victor Parks once told me that if the Germans had known how close Patton came to running out of gas and ammo they could have successfully counter-attacked. He took pride in the fact that it never happened.

When Veterans Day comes around I don't pay attention to the saber rattling rhetoric, the self-congratulation or the crocodile tears about the war dead. I pay no attention to the rhetoric about freedom and democracy. I ignore the justification for stationing American troops in hundreds of countries around the world. I think of Allen and Victor and their devotion to a country that tried mightily throughout their lives to show them their sacrifices were unappreciated. They never lost hope that full citizenship could be earned through blood sacrifice. I admire their courage and devotion to duty, but I am not optimistic enough to love a country that could never love me back.

Rest in peace Allen and Victor, part of the immortal Red Ball Express.