

Story of Willis Rice, Tank Man

(Continued From Page One) things like that and wants to go in and roll up his sleeves, too.

"I can shoot," Willis Rice said to the classification man. When a war comes along a man's got to do what he can do real good. Willis Rice used to take out his rifle and shoot around Missouri, little things—rabbits and such—but the littler a thing is the harder it is to hit.

"There's more to the army than shootin'," the classification man said.

"Guess you're right," Willis Rice admitted.

"We send a man where he'll do the most good."

"Makes sense to me," said Willis Rice.

The classification man thought a minute. Here was a nice, smart boy, standing just right—about five seven, a private chauffeur. The kid knows what makes a wheel go round and how to make it turn.

"Going to send you to Fort Knox," he said. "Going to make a tank man out of you, Willis Rice."

"Anything I got, the Army's welcome to," Willis Rice grinned. The classification man grinned right back.

"You're going to be in the only Negro tank group in the world," he said.

Fort Knox, Kentucky, was hot.

Fort Knox has a monkey cage and forty-five minutes a lot of climbing. Forty-five minutes a day he walked like a cat along those thin ladders. He hung by his hands and by his feet; he pulled himself up ropes. He snaked down the side of the monkey cage and threaded his way—through bars like a needle. At the end of the day he was dizzy.

"This monkey cage sure rocks me to sleep these nights," he said.

There wasn't much close order drill at Fort Knox. A man doesn't need it for tank stuff. But he has to carry a pack. He wears it when he's taking a motor apart, and when he's shooting on the range and when he's walking through mud on a bivouac. A man has to get used to that pack. Has to get so it's almost a part of his body.

For three weeks Willis Rice and that pack went around together almost everywhere.

The day is mighty short when there's so much to cram in your head, when there are things to learn about radial motors and diesel engines and mechanics and weapons and signal orders and map readings. A day flies like a scared duck when you're out on the range and you're learning how to shoot pistols and rifles and machine guns and 75's. A man in a tank has to do a lot of shooting.

Willis Rice was nervous when he drove a tank for the first time. "I felt like a woman getting a driving test," he said. He was bewildered when he crawled through the turret and sat at the controls, but when the motor began to roar and the tank bucked forward he felt exhilarated and full of power. Then he knew he

Rescued the Colonel's Daughter



Decorating Sgt. Dean Bredensamp (left) for bravery in the Panama Canal Zone is Maj. Gen. Davenport Johnson. Recently the two men swam for more than thirty minutes in the shark-infested waters of Panama to rescue Katherine Gaines, 11, daughter of Lt. Col. E. F. Gaines. The child was being swept to sea in a flimsy kayak. (Central Press)

was in the right business, was doing the right thing. "I didn't know" till then what I really wanted to do," he said, "but after that I didn't want to do anything else."

At Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, on June 1, Willis Rice sewed the red, yellow and blue patch of the 761st on the shoulder of his uniform. He had never been really deep South before, and the hot sun and the bayous were foreign to him. He had friends, though, and the easy camaraderie of his outfit was right up his alley. He liked Pvt. Thomas Washington, a tall boy from Birmingham, and Sgt. Louis Monks, who was in charge of the hutment where Willis Rice lives. The three are buddies.

Willis Rice gets a kick out of the impromptu conferences in the company street whenever there is a new truck or tank or jeep to be named. Tank men personalize their vehicles. It used to be that the 701st could name a vehicle any way it wanted. Now, though, the first letter of the name must be the same as that of the company. For instance "Sleepy" is a Service Company truck—"because it's so slow." "Samson" is a wrecker—"because Samson was a strong man." "Bronco" is a B Company truck—"because it bucks so much."

Willis and his fellow tankers are quick to sense injustice. In the battalion PX, staffed by Negro help, a portly old man with a peg leg was a steady fixture behind the cigarette counter. Selling cigarettes, he didn't have to walk much, and the work was light befitting his age.

One day the men found their cigarette vendor hauling and stacking heavy cases of bottled beer in the center of the floor. Immediately, the place was abuzz.

"Poor ol' man with a peg leg shouldn't be workin' like dat," was the general comment. "Ain't right."

It made no difference that the old man had gone home the night before without sweeping up, one of his regular duties. Three out of four customers that day complained audibly about the man with the peg leg juggling cases of beer. Next day, the old fellow was back behind the cigarette counter.

This sense of justice colors Rice's thinking about the Jap. The Jap has been stealing and enslaving China bit by bit for five years. Now he has soaked into the outposts of the United States—our home. Willis Rice doesn't like what that portenda. He is itching to send the Jap sprawling.

Willis Rice has an Honor Card in his pocket, and whenever his feet get that urge he can take them off to Alexandria, 20 miles from Camp Claiborne. He rarely uses his Honor Card during the week, though, because of a transportation bottleneck. Unless a full bus load can be obtained from his battalion area, he has to walk two miles to the main gate. But on Saturday night, with a pal or two, he usually ambles toward the bus stop after show. Saturday night is good time to get up and go

lot of things happen in Alexandria on Saturday night.

There's a USO on Casson street that's mighty pretty, and often you can find Willis Rice there. "Got a brand new juke box at that USO" they'll tell you around Alexandria. Rice doesn't always feel like the USO, but there's Lee Street saying "Come on in, soldier, come on in." Lee Street is full of 5 and 10¢ night clubs. A man who sells tamales walks along the curb, and the street is full of mighty tall talk.

Every night isn't Saturday, but there is always plenty to do around camp. There is, for instance, that

chance to go to O.C.S. Willis Rice can't make up his mind whether he wants to be an officer. Many of the men in his company are bucking for it, and there is never any trouble filling a quota for the Armored Force school. Generally there is a surplus of candidates.

Right now there is only one Negro officer in the 761st, Captain Robert E. Brown, a medical man from Mt. Vernon, N. Y. In a short time, though a group of Negro officers is expected to join the battalion.

The sun is hot down at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, and it's hot in East St. Louis, Missouri. Willis Rice is a long way from home, and he's doing a powerful lot of thinking. Back home his mother writes him that the family is spending ten per cent of their pay on war bonds. "That sounds good to me," says Willis Rice.

Willis Rice has come a long way from East St. Louis. He's getting in a tank right now, burning up dusty roads. One of these days he'll be going somewhere to do something big. He's five foot seven and he can drive a tank and he's got a brother Quentin out in Hawaii who's an anti-aircraft gunner. Quentin wrote a letter, ending it: "You keep 'em rolling and I'll keep 'em falling."

Willis Rice knows what his brother meant, all right. He is one of two blue stars on a door in East St. Louis, a blue star that's going some

where and that's game to go and that's going to raise hell for our side.

NO SURRENDER.

The expression "A marine never surrenders," is credited to Capt. Gilbert D. Hutfield, who refused a Nicaraguan general's request to give up with those words.



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