

Enrolled

Senate Concurrent Resolution 30

Sponsored by Senators WINTERS, BOQUIST, HANSELL, MANNING JR; Senators BAERTSCHIGER JR, BEYER, BURDICK, COURTNEY, DEBOER, DEMBROW, DEVLIN, FERRIOLI, FREDERICK, GELSER, GIROD, HASS, JOHNSON, KNOPP, KRUSE, LINTHICUM, MONNES ANDERSON, MONROE, OLSEN, PROZANSKI, RILEY, ROBLAN, STEINER HAYWARD, TAYLOR, THATCHER, THOMSEN, Representatives BYNUM, HEARD, WILSON

Whereas the World-War-II-era 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was the first African-American paratrooper unit in the United States Army; and

Whereas the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was given the nickname Triple Nickles, using an old English variant spelling; and

Whereas the unit's symbol was three buffalo nickels formed into a triangle, due to the association of nickels with the numeral 5 and many of the original members of the battalion coming from the buffalo soldiers of the 92nd Infantry Division; and

Whereas the Triple Nickles were officially activated as a company on December 30, 1943; and

Whereas earlier that year, Sergeant Walter Morris was a soldier at Fort Benning, Georgia, where he and many other African-American soldiers were assigned to a service unit that performed menial work for the fort's paratrooper training school; and

Whereas in the segregated United States military of that time, African-American soldiers were treated as though they were less capable, brave and worthy than their white counterparts; and

Whereas other inequities, such as Italian and German prisoners of war being allowed to eat and drink with the white United States soldiers at the post exchange while the African-American soldiers were not, affected the men deeply; and

Whereas Sergeant Morris recognized that the African-American soldiers felt undervalued and underutilized, and so, to raise their morale, he began to lead about 50 men in his unit in training that mimicked that of the official paratroopers; and

Whereas despite the treatment that they had received and the barriers in front of them, these soldiers went above and beyond their duties to demonstrate to themselves and others that they were capable of anything expected of white soldiers; and

Whereas the commanding general of the paratrooper school, General Ridgely Gaither, learning of the training activity, summoned Sergeant Morris to his office and rewarded Morris' initiative by making him First Sergeant of a new test platoon then being formed, which was to be composed entirely of African-American paratroopers; and

Whereas 20 men were selected for the initial training program at Fort Benning, of which 17 earned the "silver wings" of the coveted paratrooper badge, and were joined by six officers who soon also completed the paratrooper training; and

Whereas the success of the test platoon opened the doors for the army to call for enough African-American volunteers to form a company; and

Whereas due to the overwhelming response, the army chose to increase the size of the Triple Nickles from a company to a battalion of more than 400 men at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, with Sergeant Morris, who had gone on to Officer Training School and Adjutant General School and been promoted to Second Lieutenant, as Battalion Adjutant; and

Whereas after the battalion was fully trained and ready to be assigned, the members of the Triple Nickles were eager to be sent overseas to fight the Axis troops in either the European or Pacific theaters, but the battalion was still short of the full numbers required for an airborne

infantry battalion and field commanders in both theaters still held onto the misapprehension that integrated African-American and white troops would not cohere as a fighting force; and

Whereas in May 1945, the Triple Nickles felt that the opportunity to show their mettle had arrived when they were ordered westward to participate in Operation Firefly, a secret mission that the battalion assumed would send them to fight in the Pacific theater; and

Whereas the Triple Nickles arrived at Pendleton Field in northeast Oregon, expecting a brief stop, but soon learned that they were there to transform from combat paratroopers into smoke jumpers; and

Whereas Operation Firefly was revealed to be a military firefighting operation to defend the west coast of the United States from Japanese incendiary balloons; and

Whereas in November 1944, the Japanese military had begun launching hydrogen-filled incendiary balloons designed to be carried on the jet stream to the west coast of the United States in order to start fires and cause panic among the American civilian population; and

Whereas in addition to fighting fires, Operation Firefly was intended to keep the use of the balloons from being reported by the press, or being known by the general public, in order to deceive the Japanese military into believing that the balloons had been completely ineffective; and

Whereas the men of the Triple Nickles were assigned to parachute from planes to fight the fires the incendiary balloons ignited and deactivate any of the balloons' remaining unexploded bombs; and

Whereas although disappointed not to be in combat abroad, the Triple Nickles committed themselves fully to their smoke jumper training and became the first African-American smoke jumpers, which required a different set of skills and techniques than those used by paratroopers; and

Whereas some of the equipment issued to the Triple Nickles, such as parachutes with low maneuverability and drop ropes of inadequate length for climbing down from tall trees, was ill-suited to use with the new techniques and skills required of a smoke jumper, but the Triple Nickles showed ingenuity in making changes when they could, such as replacing their metal helmets with football helmets that they fitted with wire mesh to protect themselves from cinders and branches, which became the prototype for the headgear worn by smoke jumpers today; and

Whereas the Triple Nickles were assigned to two main bases, one in Pendleton, Oregon, and the other in California at the Chico Air Base, and were sent out to defend the forests of at least six western states; and

Whereas between May and October 1945, the Triple Nickles bravely located balloons, disposed of bombs and fought more than 30 large fires caused by the balloons, lightning or human carelessness; and

Whereas the Triple Nickles suffered one fatality, when on August 6, 1945, Private First Class Malvin L. Brown parachuted into a tree that hung over a steeply sloped ravine and fell more than 150 feet to his death when trying to descend with his 50-foot drop rope; and

Whereas Private First Class Brown is remembered as the first smoke jumper to perish in the line of duty and as a brave medic who volunteered to take the place of another man that day; and

Whereas on December 15, 1947, the members of the Triple Nickles stood in formation as their 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was deactivated and they were transferred into the 3rd Battalion, 505th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, simultaneously losing their Triple Nickles identity and becoming the first African-American unit to be integrated into an American combat division; and

Whereas by the time that President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948, desegregating the United States military, the members of the former Triple Nickles had been integrated for seven months; and

Whereas the members of the Triple Nickles, by their competence, initiative and bravery, had helped clear the path for integration; and

Whereas the Triple Nickles' contributions are being honored with a historical marker at the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base Museum in Cave Junction, Oregon, to be dedicated in June 2017; and

Whereas Second Lieutenant Walter Morris distilled the essence of the Triple Nickles' many achievements and contributions into one phrase, saying, "What we proved was that the color of a man had nothing to do with his ability"; now, therefore,

Be It Resolved by the Legislative Assembly of the State of Oregon:

That we, the members of the Seventy-ninth Legislative Assembly, honor the members of the 555th "Triple Nickles" Parachute Infantry Battalion for their pioneering achievements and their service to their country and this state.

Adopted by Senate June 1, 2017

Lori L. Brocker, Secretary of Senate

Peter Courtney, President of Senate

Adopted by House June 20, 2017

Tina Kotek, Speaker of House