'There is No Expiration for Valor'

A university in Missouri has taken on the task — with the support of VFW — of correcting the military records of marginalized veterans of World War I

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For the past few years, a task force at a Missouri university has made it its goal to give many Doughboys of World War I the proper recognition for their acts of valor.

A team from Park University's George S. Robb Centre for the Study of the Great War — located in Parkville, Missouri, near Kansas City, Missouri, — is working on the project with the World War I Centennial Commission, members of Congress and veterans service organizations, including the VFW.

In November 2019, VFW granted $70,000 to the group of researchers led by Timothy Westcott, director of the Robb Centre and associate professor of history at Park University.

Westcott, a Marine Corps veteran, said that 121 WWI troops have been recognized for their acts of valor, but only four Jewish Americans, two African Americans and one Hispanic American were awarded the Medal of Honor for their feats. Westcott, who served from 1980 to 1988, added that three of those veterans posthumously received the nation's highest award for valor in the past 30 years.

Westcott said that no Asian American or Native American troops were awarded the Medal of Honor in World War I. He said that there is a "national obligation" to ensure all troops are judged by their character and actions.

"Our fight on behalf of these men stands on the ideal that their strains for fairness — no matter how harsh or painful to recount — deserve examination in the most candid light," Westcott said. "There is no expiration for valor."

'GIVING A VOICE' TO VETERANS

Westcott said the inspiration for the research project came from a lecture he attended in February 2018. The speaker mentioned his decade-long work on researching Sgt. William A.

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE
200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719
info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

Butler, a black soldier whom Westcott says was denied the Medal of Honor due to his race. Butler was recommended for the Medal of Honor in the same letter that George S. Robb, the namesake of Park University's Centre for the Study of the Great War, was recommended for the top award for valor.

Officially called the Valor Medal Review Task Force, the team consists of three full-time members: Westcott, Associate Director Ashlyn Weber and Senior Military Analyst Joshua Weston, an Army veteran who served on active duty from 2008 to 2010. Additionally, Park University history undergraduates and Parkville-area high school students work with the researchers as interns.

Westcott said that the team prepares recommendation packages for either the Army or the Navy for review. The World War I Valor Medals Review Project Act, which was made into law through the National Defense Authorization Act of 2020, requires the military services to review service records of African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, Jewish American and Native American WWI troops who were awarded either a Distinguished Service Cross, a Navy Cross or received a recommendation for the Medal of Honor.

Westcott said the team is committed to "giving a voice" to those veterans who were not allowed to have one.

"The George S. Robb Centre's greatest responsibility is to tell the stories of veterans who have been ignored, diminished and cheated by their military service for over a century," Westcott said. "To allow a historical narrative that exaggerates the good while simultaneously ignoring prejudicial and oppressive acts against persons, regardless of race or creed, is no longer acceptable."

The team at Park University continues to research records and stories of WWI veterans. Westcott said the task force's work on publishing its findings is ongoing and encouraged anyone interested in learning more about the project to visit its website, gsr.park.edu, or searching "George S. Robb Centre" at on You Tube.

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