

Lincoln Bynum (1900-1977)

As a black man, Lincoln Bynum was not allowed to fight alongside fellow American soldiers who were white. But, Bynum and the rest of the all-black **370th Infantry Regiment** fought for their country beside the French and helped defeat the Germans in the First World War. For their heroic efforts, at the end of the war they were **decorated** by the American and French governments with nearly 100 medals.

Lincoln J. Bynum was born on January 22, 1900, in Bloomington, Illinois and grew up there with his seven brothers and sisters. Although he was just 17 when the United States instituted the draft in June 1917, Lincoln (or Link as he was known to some) registered along with his brother Edward. At the time he was working at the Illinois Hotel on Jefferson Street in downtown Bloomington. He was called to duty as a member of the Chicago-based Eighth Illinois Regiment.

Lincoln, Edward, and other recently **mobilized** men of the Eighth boarded the cars of the 6 o'clock **interurban** bound for Peoria from Bloomington on July 27, 1917. The interurban was a railroad linking Bloomington and a number of other Central Illinois towns. The *Pantagraph* noted that the 68 men were “full of life and the spirit of adventure.” Though most were from Bloomington, others came from Clinton, Pontiac and elsewhere. The new soldiers hung outside the windows and doors of the train to “shake hands, give kisses, and yell their final goodbyes.”

The men spent the next ten weeks in Peoria training. Then they were sent to the newly constructed Camp Logan in Houston, Texas. Tensions there were high when Link, Edward, and the members of the Eighth arrived. Recent rioting between white civilians and black soldiers had led to over 20 deaths and escalated prejudices in this deeply **segregated** community. The Eighth trained there nearly five months before leaving for Newport News, Virginia and from there to France. Upon arriving in France, the Eighth was re-designated the 370th Infantry Regiment of the segregated 93rd Infantry Division.

The Eighth, now renamed the 370th, was the only regiment in the entire U.S. Army led entirely by black officers. At that time, black and white American soldiers could not fight in the same unit. Most black soldiers were relegated to support units, that is, they did not fight but supported efforts by building, cleaning, cooking, driving, etc. However, when the 370th arrived in France, they were assigned to the French army and immediately began training with them. The French were not segregated and treated the 370th soldiers far more equitably. After six weeks training with the French, the unit was sent to the front where they experienced heavy shelling and gas attacks.

Much of the fighting of WWI was done in **trenches**, which were deep cuts dug in the ground to shelter the warring armies. Men were assigned to the trenches for weeks or months. Life could be very difficult in mud and bad weather, plus ongoing fighting. According to Edward Bynum, Lincoln displayed his sense of humor when during one skirmish some of the men started to retreat. “What is the matter with you guys,” Lincoln said. “If you are scared, you ought to join the church.”

The 370th quickly earned a reputation for being fierce fighters. The French referred to them as “Partridges” for their cockiness and pride in battle, and the enemy Germans called them the

“Black Devils.” After the **armistice** was signed on November 11, 1918, both the French and Americans honored the valor of the unit. Among the citations given were American Distinguished Service Crosses and the highest French honor, the Croix de Guerre. Twenty percent (96 men) of the 370th gave their lives in WWI.

When Lincoln and Edward Bynum and the rest of the 370th returned home to Illinois in February 1919, they were greeted by huge welcoming parties both in Chicago and Bloomington. In Bloomington, welcome events included a parade downtown, a banquet, a public program at the Coliseum, and an evening of dancing.

After the war, Lincoln found work as a janitor, car washer, jobber, even for a while as a police automobile driver. He worked for many years for Clay Dooley’s on Grove Street. His brother Edward returned to his work as a porter.

Lincoln married Laura Clark on April 9, 1922. They had two daughters, Madilyn and Bernyce, nine grandchildren, and 29 great-grandchildren. Lincoln and Edward were both members of the black American Legion post in Bloomington, the Redd-Williams Post 163. Both held offices in the organization. Despite their heroism in war, the brothers and all black veterans had returned to a country still torn by prejudice and segregation. In his own way, Lincoln fought this **bigotry**. In 1942, during another “great war,” World War II, Lincoln wrote a letter to the *Pantagraph* arguing that coverage of black tragedies did not equal that of white tragedies. “It is the small things like this, often repeated, that make the colored people of this country feel they are the forgotten part of this democracy” he said.

Outside of work and volunteer service with the post, Lincoln also enjoyed basketball. During their time at Fort Logan, the Bynum brothers had great success in the army basketball league, winning many games. After the war, Lincoln’s brother Edward managed the Bloomington Buffaloes, a local all-black basketball team that played both black and white teams in the area. Lincoln was a guard and a coach.

Lincoln Bynum died on July 31, 1977 at the age of 77. His wife, Laura, lived to be 94. They are buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: How was the treatment of black soldiers different from the treatment of white soldiers during WWI? What were/could be the effects of such treatment?