

Edward Bynum (1895-1954) and his younger brother Lincoln give real meaning to the phrase “brothers in arms” because they both served in France as fellow soldiers of Company K of the all-black 370th United States Infantry during World War I—the only unit to be completely led by black officers. Both brothers fought on the **front lines**, but lived to return home to Bloomington after the war was won.

Edward Daniel Bynum was born on September 1, 1895 to parents Edward Sr. and Mary Bynum. He was one of eight children. Not much is known about Bynum or his siblings before 1917. The family moved around a lot within Bloomington, but his father Edward worked regularly as a waiter or a janitor. Edward Jr. made his living as a **porter**.

By the time **President Woodrow Wilson** called for a **draft** of men ages 21 to 30 years old to join the war effort in May 1917, European countries had already been fighting for almost three years. Bynum registered for the draft in June and was **mobilized** as a member of Chicago-based Eighth Illinois **Regiment**, Illinois National Guard, in July. On July 27, 1917, Bynum and his fellow soldiers left Bloomington for ten weeks of training in Peoria, before heading to Houston, Texas for five more months of training. Houston was a **segregated** city and tensions were high between the white residents and the black soldiers who were already **stationed** in the city when Bynum and the rest of the soldiers arrived. Back in July, sixteen white residents and four black soldiers were killed in a riot near the military camp.

After Texas, Bynum and his unit left for Virginia before traveling to France in April 1918. The Eighth Illinois Infantry was renamed the 370th Infantry Regiment, but was still the only regiment in the U.S. army to be led by all black officers. After arriving in France, Bynum’s unit began training with French soldiers. They were given French weapons and food, and were allowed to fight in battle—unlike black soldiers in the U.S. who could only work in support positions like cooks or janitors. Overall, the French treated the men of the Eighth Illinois with more respect than they would have been given in the United States. But, this meant that Bynum, his brother Lincoln, and the rest of the soldiers had to fight on the front line in trenches until the war was won.

Trench warfare was the most common mode of fighting during World War One. Trenches were long narrow ditches where soldiers could protect themselves while shooting at the enemy. Trenches were dug up to one mile deep and were reinforced with sandbags, barbed wire, and wooden planks. Trenches were laid out in a zig-zig pattern so that enemies could not stand at one end of the trench and shoot straight down the line. Smaller communication trenches connected the main trenches so that soldiers could deliver supplies and information. The trenches were cramped, muddy, and often times filled with water. Machine gunfire gas attacks were commonplace.

Both the **allied** French and the enemy Germans had nicknames for the soldiers fighting in the 370th. The French called them “**Partridges**” for their pride in battle, but the Germans’ name for them—the “Black Devils”—became world famous. The name “Black Devils” referred to the soldiers’ courage and **ferociousness** when fighting, but calling them “devils” also made it sound as though these men were something other than human. The U.S. military was not **integrated** until 1948 and African Americans had to fight for their freedoms, civil liberties, and respect both in the military and on the **home front**.

Even in World War I, soldiers didn’t spend every single moment fighting. Bynum found time to write poetry and letters back home, and in those poems he wrote about what it was like to be an African American soldier. At least two of Bynum’s poems were published in the local paper *The Pantagraph*. One of his poems ends:

“When we’re home with vic’try won, /
You will then hear the story / What the black men have done, /
We will then salute **Old Glory**, / Until our dying day, /
As we ask and get all justice / In this grand old U.S.A.”

World War I ended on November 11, 1918, 203 days after Bynum and the 370th arrived in France. For their dedicated service, many of the men in the unit received awards and medals, including one of France’s highest honors, the **Criox de Guerre** (or “Cross of War”).

Though the war ended in November, Bynum and his fellow soldiers did not return to the United States until February of the next year. Ninety-six men, twenty percent of the unit, died in battle or as a result of injuries and never made it home. Those who did make it home, however, were treated to celebrations in Chicago and at home in Bloomington. On February 17, the Bynums’ father met them in Chicago. Nothing could have kept their father away. The soldiers paraded through the streets of the city before they traveled to Camp Grant near Rockford, IL to be **mustered out**. After that, they went home to Bloomington where there was another parade, a **banquet** at Wayman A.M.E. Church, and a dance where the mayor welcomed the men and thanked them for their service. State representative Adelbert Roberts also spoke at the event and encouraged further cooperation between white and black citizens.

Despite this warm welcome home, however, black U.S. soldiers returned to a society still built on **prejudice** and discrimination. Their service to the country was largely undervalued in comparison to the efforts of white soldiers, and black veterans were not allowed to join white veteran organizations like the local Louis E. Davis Post 56 of the **American Legion**. In response, a group of black veterans came together to form their own American Legion post—first the Stevenson-Lewis post in 1920 and then the Redd-Williams Post 163 in 1923. The Redd-Williams post was named after two fellow veterans, John Redd and Gus Williams, who died in the war. Edward Bynum served as **commander** of the post for over fifteen years. His brother Lincoln served on post committees as well. As commander, Edward helped organize Memorial Day and Veterans’ Day celebrations and fundraisers.

In addition to his work as a porter and his duties as post commander, Bynum found time to manage the Bloomington Buffaloes, a local black basketball team that played both white and black teams from Illinois. Lincoln played on the team, as well as the Bynums’ brother Eugene. The team had many winning seasons. One time, in 1922, there was a dispute between the Buffaloes and a white team from San Jose, Illinois. The San Jose Triple A’s accused the Buffaloes of cancelling a game without any notice, but the Buffaloes said they had to cancel the game because San Jose players had threatened to beat up their players after losing to the Buffaloes earlier in the season. Eventually, the two teams agreed to play each other again.

Edward Bynum died on January 22, 1954 at the Veterans Hospital in Dwight, Illinois, at the age of fifty-six. He had lost his wife Bessie—whom he married in October 1923—to heart disease twenty-one years earlier when she was just thirty-one years old. The couple did not have any children. Edward’s brothers, Eugene, Frederick, and Lincoln, were still living. Bynum is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Section 16, one of four designated military burial sections in the cemetery.

Discussion Question: Why do you think many African American men volunteered to serve a country that denied them civil rights and equality?