



Season 6, Episode 2: Red Hand Flag

Elyse Luray: Our first story investigates a curious flag that may be connected to African-American soldiers overlooked by history. April 6, 1917. The United States declares war on Germany, formally becoming part of the World War that has been raging for three years. More than two million African-American men rush to register for the draft, eager to prove their patriotism. But the army is segregated, and most of these troops are not allowed into combat. There are those, however, who won't take no for an answer...men determined to fight for the country that discriminates against them. Now Anne Clarkson from Leesville, South Carolina, has acquired a peculiar flag that may reveal a forgotten story about the war to end all wars.

Anne Clarkson: When I put my hands on the flag, the hairs on my arms just stood on end. I knew I had something special.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray, and I'm meeting with Anne to take a look at what she's found.

Anne: Hi. Come on in out of the cold.

Elyse: Thank you.

Anne: Have a seat.

Elyse: So I understand you're a veteran yourself?

Anne: Well, I was in the army for 8 ½ years. During the Cold War I was a counter terrorism officer in Germany. And then during Desert Storm I was a security officer. And now I'm a disabled veteran.

Elyse: Anne shows me her flag, and I've never seen anything quite like it.

Elyse: Oh, wow.

Anne: When I left the military, my last duty station was Fort Jackson.

Elyse : Anne explains that at her final posting at Fort Jackson in South Carolina, she learned that some eighty years earlier the Fort had trained African-American soldiers for World War One.



Elyse: What started your search for a flag?

Anne: Well, the black units were shipped overseas to France, but there was a lot of racial tension during that time, and they were not really allowed to fight with the white units.

Elyse: Anne did some research, and learned that the African-American soldiers had fought instead for the French. They were even reported to have marched under a French flag.

Anne: And this French flag was supposed to be blue, white, and red, like a normal French flag. And they had sewn a little American flag in one corner. So I started looking for this flag.

Elyse: After years of searching, she finally found this flag for sale on the internet. Well, that's not blue, white and red?

Anne: that's where the confusion comes in. It has the small American flags sewn on the top corner, which is one of the things that the units supposedly did with their flag. But other than that, I have no idea why this flag is the way it is.

Elyse: So what specifically do you want me to find out for you?

Anne: Well, one of the things I want to know is why is the flag red, white and red? And I want to know: is this a flag that they marched under?

Elyse: You've given me a lot of information to start with, more than I normally get. I'll take good care of it, and I'll get back to you and let you know what I uncover.

Anne: Thank you very much.

Elyse: It's not an area of history I know a great deal about, but the fabric certainly feels and looks period. You know, the red hand is such a striking symbol. And I've never seen anything like it on a flag before. So maybe that's something to go on. There is an American flag, and if you turn it over there's one on the other side as well. There are 48 stars and Arizona was the 48th state, which joined the Union in 1912. World War I took place 1914 to 1918. So we at least know that the flag could fall into the period of World War I. There is a date on here, it says 1918, but as an appraiser I don't really take that into consideration because the date could have been put there at any time. The first thing I want to do is confirm Anne's flag is actually old enough to be from World War I. Textile expert Maree Dowdey has spent more than 40 years conserving and restoring



antique flags and textiles. So here's my flag. I'm trying to date this flag to World War I, so the first thing I want to know is: is the fabric period?

Maree: The white fabric, the center here, is linen. The degree of hand stitching on this tells me that it's of that period in time. The hand is made from wool felt. It has been appliquéd by hand onto the white linen, and this to me is authentic to that time period.

Elyse: Maree says this American flag in the corner is cotton, and looks period as well.

Maree: Usually at parades and troops leaving the public would be waving this type of flag. The cotton flag.

Elyse: Ah, sure. So they were like souvenirs?

Maree: Yes.

Elyse: Maree tells me that the American flag on the other side may be the most important clue to uncovering the flag's origin. It's silk, and resembles other commemorative flags she's seen that were made by the French during the war.

Maree: I've worked on some very historic pieces over the years; I feel certain this was made in France.

Elyse: But did African-Americans really march under it? I'm meeting Russell Wolfe, an expert on African-American units trained for combat at Fort Jackson.

Russell: Hi, Elyse. Welcome to Fort Jackson.

Elyse: Russell, I'm investigating a flag. Can you tell me a little bit about the African-American men that served?

Russell: Over 700,000 African-Americans registered for the draft on the first day, and over two million total.

Elyse: Two million?

Russell: They wanted to show that they were loyal Americans, and also to show that they were the equal of the white Americans who were also registering for the draft.

Elyse: Russell tells me that when the United States joined the war in April of 1917, the standing U.S. army was only 127,500. But despite its urgent need, the army balked at using African-Americans in combat.



Russell: 400,000 or so were actually called up into service, but of those very few actually saw combat. At that time in the American community, many people felt that the black man was either unsuited for combat or would not fight.

Elyse: At first the men were relegated to labor units, unloading cargo ships, building railroads, and burying soldiers killed in action. But protests forced the military to change policy.

Russell: There was a backlash from the African-American community, and as a result the army was forced to form two African-American divisions: the 92nd division, and the 93rd provisional division.

Elyse: The brass does an about face. But there's a catch...although the 92nd and the 93rd were the first black units trained in combat, in Europe they're turned over to the French army.

Elyse: The U.S. army didn't need them?

Russell: The French had been fighting a grueling war for three years, and they'd recently suffered severe losses in several offences, and they needed men badly. And so the call went out to, "please send us men," and the U.S. responded with these four regiments.

Elyse: African-Americans were welcomed by the French, who were used to fighting with their own colonial troops from Africa.

Russell: I think many of the African-Americans were shocked to see that there were people that did not discriminate against them because of their race. And I think that they learned, you know, that they could be equals.

Elyse: Russell and I head into the Fort Jackson museum so I can show him Anne's flag. But he's also baffled. It's not a French flag he recognizes. Nor is it a flag associated with the U.S. army, which they also would have carried.

Russell: They would have had a standard U.S. army regimental flag with them in France, which is significantly different from this.

Elyse: Russell suggests I visit the Confederate relic room and military museum, a repository for much of South Carolina's military history. I'm meeting the Chief Curator, Sarah Wooton.



Elyse: Hi. Nice to meet you.

Sarah: Nice to meet you.

Elyse: So Sarah, first I just want to show you this flag.

Sarah: Well, I haven't seen anything like this before.

Elyse: although Sarah's never seen our flag, she says the red hand resembles something they have in their collection.

Sarah: And I can show you, if you want to go and see?

Elyse: Yeah, that would be great.

Sarah: Okay.

Elyse: And I see the red hand.

Sarah: Yes, yes. The red hand emblem is actually the emblem of the 157th French division, which served under General Mariano Goybet.

Elyse: Sarah tells me General Goybet's 157th division was on the frontlines of the struggle with German soldiers, and two African-American regiments were attached to his forces at a critical moment in 1918. This may be the connection to Anne's red hand flag.

Sarah: The African-American infantry regiments of the 371st and 372nd both served under the 157th division and would have been associated with the red hand emblem.

Elyse: Sarah says the African-American soldiers of the 371st and 372nd earned glory in the decisive final offensive in the Champagne region of France. In less than two weeks of fighting they took over 1,600 casualties, most in the first three days. But they stood up to the barrage, eventually overrunning the German positions. For their courage under fire, both regiments were awarded the Croix de Guerre, and several men received both the French Legion of Honor and the American distinguished Service Cross. As the war drew to a close, the commanding French General praised his African-American troops.



Sarah: He says, "The red hand sign of the division, thanks to you, became a bloody hand, which took the German by the throat and made him cry for mercy. You have well avenged our glorious dead."

Elyse: So we've identified the red hand on our flag. But there's a problem: Sarah confirms the flag for the French division was very different from ours.

Sarah: The divisional flag would have consisted of the standard blue, white, and red.

Elyse: And there's another potential problem: it appears the red hand symbol is officially abandoned after the war.

Sarah: Well, the men of the 371st and 372nd were very attached to this emblem. After the war, Colonel Perry Miles recommended the red hand as the emblem for the entire 93rd division. But when he recommended it, General Headquarters was horrified at the suggestion of a red hand, because to them it symbolized a hand reeking in blood, and racial tensions being what they were in America at that time, they thought it might send out the wrong idea.

Elyse: Did the red hand just disappear?

Sarah: It didn't disappear completely. We do see the red hand reappearing postwar in reunion memorabilia, such as this reunion ribbon that we have on display.

Elyse: But the flag isn't like any postwar memorabilia Sarah's familiar with. Anne's flag is not the flag of the French division...but it's not connected to the African-American regiments after the war either. I'm not sure what to make of it. My office has tracked down a descendant of the French General who led the African-American troops in combat. I've arranged to meet Henri Goybet – who is known by the honorary title "Le Chevalier Goybet" – at the Seventh Regiment Armory in New York City. As we tour the halls once walked by American Generals, Henri reads from one of his great-grandfather's last orders to his troops.

Henri: "I want to tell you as your leader and as a soldier from the bottom of my heart how grateful I am. Our friendship has been cemented in the blood of the brave, and such a link will be never destroyed. Remember your General."

Elyse: So he's very proud of these African-American men.

Henri: Yes, he was very proud of his troops, yes.



Elyse: Did you know your great-grandfather?

Henri: Unfortunately not, because he died in 1943.

Elyse: But General Goybet left behind a single work chronicling his entire family history – the Goybet family book. Wow! These are beautiful.

The general spent 40 years painstakingly illustrating this single manuscript.

Did your great-grandfather write about the African-American men under his command?

Henri: Yes, they did. In one page of the family book.

Elyse: Henri pulls out a page, and there among the intricate illustrations I see the 371st and the 372nd. The brief mention confirms these African-American regiments joined General Goybet's division.

Henri: "...division main rouge." Division main rouge, that is to say, red hand.

Elyse: So I want to show you this flag. Now have you ever seen anything like this before?

Henri: Yes.

Elyse: You have?

Henri: I know this flag. And I could show you in the family book.

Elyse: What Henri reveals on the next page brings all of the pieces of the puzzle together. Oh, look at that! I think Anne is going to be really excited by what I've learned.

The first question you had for me was, 'Was this flag from World War I?'

Anne: Yes.

Elyse: And I'm happy to tell you that the flag is period.

Anne: Oh, that's fantastic.



Elyse: It's not the flag that they marched under; that flag would have been blue, white, and red.

Anne: Oh.

Elyse: But your flag does have a unique and special connection to the men of the 371st and 372nd.

Elyse: Oh! There's the flag.

Henri: There's the flag.

Elyse: Do you know what this means?

Henri: Yes, because it was his personal flag.

Elyse: Henri tells me that in the French army the colors red, white, and red are used to identify the General commanding a First Infantry Division. Anne's flag is actually a command pennant, or fanion...a personal identifier that would have marked General Goybet's field position or command post. Even though the 371st regiment disbanded after the war, it's obvious that the red hand in this pennant remained a very powerful symbol to them throughout their lives.

Anne: Oh my god. That is fant – oh, I've got chills. Oh, that is fantastic! Oh, that is absolutely incredible.

Elyse: Anne, what you found is a really unique piece of African-American history, and it has a great story to tell.

Anne: This is, this is incredible. Now this flag means even more to me. Thank you so much for bringing me this history.

Elyse: Seven decades after World War I ended, a member of the Red Hand Division entered the history books. On September 28, 1918 – only six weeks before the end of the war – Corporal Freddie Stowers was killed in action while rallying the men of the 371st infantry in an attack on a German machinegun nest. His commanding officer nominated him for the Congressional Medal of Honor. 127 medals were awarded during the war...but none to African-Americans. But on April 24, 1991 – 73 years after his death – Freddie Stowers was posthumously honored with a long overdue medal of honor. Of the roughly 400,000 African-Americans who served in the first World War, Freddie Stowers is the only one to be presented with the Congressional Medal of Honor – America's highest award for military heroism.