Racial Killings of Black Soldiers, 1941-1942: The War at Home

CRRJ's archives include files on many soldiers who, like Felix Hall, were slain in incidents of racial violence during World War II. Many of these soldiers had been deployed abroad during World War II. Some were killed while performing their military duties, while others were slain off-duty, relaxing at their home station. While investigations were sometimes undertaken by the War Department and the Department of Justice, they rarely resulted in prosecutive action.

CRRJ investigated the lynching case of Felix Hall for several years. 

Private Felix Hall
Died February 12, 1941
Fort Benning, GA

Private Hall was from Montgomery, AL. He was stationed at Fort Benning in Georgia when he was killed. He was reported missing on February 13, 1941, but no search was undertaken. A month after he disappeared, a training army company found Private Hall’s body, still in uniform, at the bottom of a ravine, with a rope tied around his neck. His hands and feet were bound with haywire. While initially the Army asserted that the death was a suicide, it eventually revised its assessment and acknowledged that Hall was killed. Hall’s killers were never identified.

Other CRRJ investigations of soldiers killed in incidents of racial violence between 1941 and 1942 include:

Private Albert King
Died March 21, 1941
Fort Benning, GA

Private King, from Columbus, GA, was killed by a military police sergeant at Fort Benning, Georgia. The sergeant shot Private King five times. Private King was unarmed. Initially the Army declared that Private King was shot because he was attempting to escape from military police. On further investigation the Army concluded that King was “killed in the line of duty.”

Sergeant Elvyn Hergrave and Private Ned Turner
Died August, 1941
Fayetteville, NC
Sergeant Hergrave and Private Turner were killed on a bus in Fayetteville, NC in August 1941. The two soldiers were stationed at Fort Bragg. Sergeant Hergrave was a military police officer, and Private Turner was a member of the Seventh Coast Artillery unit. There were no arrests in connection with these slayings.

Private Thomas Broadus  
Died February 1, 1942  
Baltimore, MD

Private Broadus, who was from Pittsburgh, PA, was killed in Baltimore by Edward Bender, a civilian police officer. He was stationed at Fort Meade in Maryland. At the time of his death Broadus had been in the military for less than a year. On the night of his death, Broadus attempted to hire a cab driven by a black driver. Officer Bender told Broadus that because the cab was unlicensed, he had to wait for a cab driven by a white driver. But none of the white drivers would stop for the soldier and his friends. Private Broadus attempted to get into the cab he had hailed, telling the officer, “I’ll spend my money where I please.” Officer Bender and Broadus fought, and the officer struck the soldier with his nightstick and then shot him. Private Broadus died a few hours later. Charges were filed against the police shooter, but a grand jury declined to indict. Officer Bender was returned to his position. The decision of the grand jury sparked outrage in Maryland’s black community, leading thousands of protesters against police brutality to rally in Annapolis.

Sergeant Thomas Foster  
Died March 22, 1942  
Little Rock, AR

Sergeant Foster, from Zebulon, NC was killed in Little Rock, AR by civilian police officer Abner Hay. He was stationed at Camp Robinson. On the night in question, Foster had intervened to stop four Little Rock officers from assaulting a soldier. The officers descended on Sergeant Foster, beating him to the ground. As he lay on the ground, Officer Hay shot Sergeant Foster four times. William Hastie, then Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, sought an investigation by the Department of Justice. A federal grand jury declined to indict Hay. Officer Hay enlisted in the military shortly after Foster’s death.

Private James E. Martin  
Died March 28, 1942  
Camp Lee, VA

Private Martin was killed at Camp Lee in Virginia. He had been accused of stabbing a fellow soldier, and was detained in a guardhouse awaiting trial. A fight broke out in the guardhouse, and the Corporal of the Guard ordered the Sentry to fire on Private Martin. The Corporal of the Guard was court-martialed. The military’s sanction was a reduction in rank and a fine.

Corporal George Hall  
Died April 2, 1942  
Fort Dix, NJ

Corporal Hall of Conyers, GA was stationed at Fort Dix, New Jersey. On the night in question, he was at the Military Sports Palace, a privately owned bar and arcade located right off base. A fight between black soldiers and white military police officers made its way outside, and shots were fired on both sides.
Corporal Hall was shot and killed. The Army investigated and concluded the shooting was “just a brawl” that was not racially motivated. Corporal Hall’s parents wrote to President Franklin Roosevelt requesting a thorough investigation: “Our colored boys need better protection in the army. We don’t want to labor for years bringing up our children to be respectful men and them have them killed like dumb, driven cattle.”

Private Henry Williams
Died August 15, 1942
Mobile, AL

Private Williams, from Mississippi, was killed in Mobile, AL by Grover Chandler, a city bus driver. Williams was attempting to meet a curfew at the Brookley Army base near Mobile. The busdriver stopped talk with some acquaintances, and Private Williams, concerned that he would not make his curfew, asked Chandler to move along. Chandler took out his revolver and struck Private Williams several times. Private Williams attempted to flee the bus, and while he was running away, Chandler shot him in the back of the head. Chandler was never prosecuted for the slaying. Chandler enlisted in the army several months after killing Williams.

Private Raymond Carr
Died November 1, 1942
Alexandria, LA

Private Carr, from Marianna, FL was killed in Alexandria, LA by State Trooper Dalton McCullon. Private Carr was a military policeman stationed at Camp Beauregard. On the day in question, Carr was investigating a disturbance involving civilians. He was approached by state troopers, who attempted to arrest Private Carr. As an on-duty military policeman Carr was not subject to arrest by civilian state troopers. He therefore resisted the arrest and fled. Trooper McCullon shot and killed Private Carr. Military authorities concluded that Carr’s death was a “willful and wholly unjustifiable homicide.” When the State Police Headquarters in Baton Rouge received a formal request to arrest Trooper McCullon, Assistant Superintendent L.A. Newsome replied that he “would not place any state trooper in arrest for shooting a n----r.” Army Major General Richard Donovan expressed doubt that a grand jury would indict the trooper, due to “local racial sentiment.” A parish grand jury was convened but declined to return an indictment. Trooper McCullon served a one-day suspension and returned to work. Thurgood Marshall bitterly criticized the Department of Justice for its failure to intervene in the Carr matters. “While the United States Department of Justice is prosecuting individuals for so-called seditions statements against the Government,” Marshall wrote to an assistant attorney general, “it refuses to take action against a man who has demonstrated his contempt for the Federal Government by killing a uniformed soldier.”

Private Larry Stroud
Died September 12, 1942
Columbia, SC

Private Stroud was killed by Officer Steinhart, a civilian police officer, in Columbia, SC. He was stationed at Fort Jackson at the time of his death. He was shot in the back of the head by Officer Steinhart, who claimed he saw Private Stroud bend over as if to pick up a rock. The Army concluded that Private Stroud’s death was not in the line of duty, and was caused by his own misconduct. A Richland County Coroner’s jury concluded that Officer Steinhart was not legally responsible for the homicide.
Private David Wood
Died November 27, 1942
Fort Dix, NJ

Private Wood, from Chicago, IL was killed by James Greggs, a military police officer. Private Wood was stationed at Fort Dix in New Jersey in the 9th Engineer Regiment. Wood was waiting in the foyer of a theatre when Griggs told him to get in line. Private Wood explained that he did not need to be in line as a friend was buying his ticket. Private Greggs ordered Private Wood to get in line anyway, threatening that if Private Wood was not in line by the time he counted to three, he would shoot. Private Greggs counted and then shot Wood in the stomach, killing him. News of the killing quickly spread, and racial tensions flared at Fort Dix. Greggs was arrested, convicted of manslaughter in a military court, and sentenced to ten years.