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Perris Remembers African-American Veterans During Black History Month



Perris Police Explorers lead the March for Unity down D Street as part of the City's Black History Month remembrance.

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From Bunker Hill to the skies of Nazi Germany to the jungles of Vietnam and the mountains of Afghanistan, African-Americans have distinguished themselves in America's wars.

The City of Perris remembered those contributions Feb. 24 during its annual Black History Month ceremony.

"The service and sacrifice of African-Americans has helped shape the U.S. military into the world's greatest fighting force," said Craig Gibens, a historian who spoke at the Perris celebration. "They did it to gain more civil rights and freedom. African-Americans realized they would attain more freedom if they performed something of value to the ruling class."

Remembering the sacrifice of black veterans was only part of the City celebration, which also included a Unity Walk, musical performances and remarks from Mayor Michael Vargas and City Councilmembers David Starr Rabb and Rita Rogers.

Police Chief Greg Fellows and Grant Bennett, Superintendent of the Perris Union High School District and local pastor Benjamin Briggs also made the mile-walk from Mercado Park to Foss Field Park along with about 50 other people. The crowd included educators, students, ministers and residents.

Vargas said he was glad to walk and support "the heroes of our military who fought so valiantly to defend this country."

"Our Black History Month parade and celebration is another form of community engagement," Vargas said. "We want to see our community united, not affected by divisiveness."



Margaret Briggs, president of the Perris Valley African-American History Committee, presents Certificates of Appreciation to Perris City Councilwoman Rita Rogers, Mayor Michael Vargas and City Councilman David Starr Rabb. Mayor Pro-Tem Malcolm Corona and City Councilwoman Tonya Burke, who could not attend the event, also received certificates.

Vital to remember

Rabb, a Navy veteran who served as a gunner's mate in the Global War on Terror, said remembering the past is vital to the current and future generations.

"If you don't know the past you won't be able to handle the future," Rabb said. "It's important to honor our veterans all the time but during Black History Month it's particularly important to honor the contributions of black veterans over the last 240 years."

Rogers noted that Perris enjoys a rich cultural diversity. She thanked the Perris Valley African-American History Committee for organizing the Black History remembrance. Rogers said it is important for each generation to understand the sacrifices of their predecessors to create a great City and country.

"The youth of our City need to know the rich history of African-Americans who fought in many battles to defend this country," Rogers said. "As a grandmother and great-grandmother it's important to me to teach the next generations."

A cohesive community

Chief Fellows said he sees Perris as a City where people with common goals are working toward a common purpose: to make an already great community even better.



Members of the Bailey Precious Sounds of the United House of Prayer in Los Angeles performed at the City of Perris annual Black History Month celebration Feb. 24.

"The City of Perris has the most amazing relationships I've ever seen among all stakeholders," said Fellows, who has 27 years of experience as a law officer. "Cops, clergy, citizens, the City Council, business partners and City staff are all working together. It's a very special community because all the various components are all on the same team."

Pastor Briggs, a clergyman at the Greater Life Community Church voiced similar sentiments, telling the marchers that the walk "gives visible display of our togetherness."

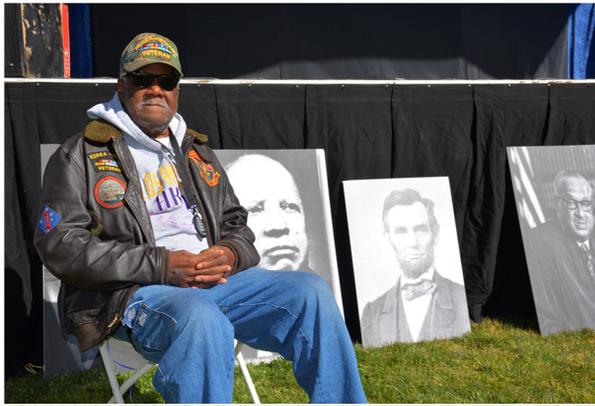
Four centuries of service

In spite of overt racial prejudice, poor equipment, segregated troop barracks, and other crushing indignities, Black Americans have valiantly served in the military of the United States for over 200 years. Black Americans fought and died for the U.S. before it declared itself independent from Great Britain. Stevedore Crispus Attucks was among five men killed in the Boston Massacre in 1770. Five years later, in the Battle of Bunker Hill, former slave Salem Poor, who bought his own freedom, distinguished himself in the heat of the fight, earning mentions from several white officers who witnessed his coolness under fire.

During the War of 1812, black troops under the British burned Washington D.C. while other African-Americans in the U.S. Army fought to save the Capitol. Blacks served under Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans. During the Civil War, the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment distinguished itself at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, a fight made famous by the movie "Glory". African-American slaves also fought with distinction for the Confederacy.

Black troops known as Buffalo Soldiers fought with Teddy Roosevelt's Roughriders and engaged in heavy fighting at the Battle of San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War. During World War I, the 369th Infantry, known as "The Harlem Hellfighters", distinguished itself at Belleau Wood and Chateau Thierry.

The Tuskegee Airmen earned fame for their aerial exploits protecting U.S. bombers over Germany in World War II. The 761st Tank Battalion distinguished itself during the Battle of the Bulge.



Retired Marine Gunnery Sgt. Royce Simon, 83, who served in Korea and Vietnam, was among the veterans honored in Perris.

Despite the hardships and obstacles African Americans faced from their own countrymen in order to serve in the military, their history of significant contributions in conflicts and World Wars could not be overlooked. These efforts enabled President Harry Truman to issue an order desegregating the U.S. military in 1948. Since then, black Americans have served in every war, from Korea to Vietnam to Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq.

One man's journey

The Perris Black History Month Celebration honored 84 African-American veterans from World War II to the present. One of those, retired Marine Gunnery Sgt. Royce Simon, 83, served in Korea and Vietnam. Simon grew up in the segregated South and was once arrested for merely walking across a park frequented by white residents.

Despite the prejudice, Simon joined the Marines and as a teen-ager found himself in forward outposts hunkered down with other Leathernecks manning a machine gun. In Vietnam, he served at Chu Lai and Tam Ky, sites of major battles.

"I was proud to serve," Simon said. "I was proud to wear the uniform."

Simon said he appreciates the accolades he and other veterans received at the Perris celebration. But it's not about folks like him.

"It's about the young kids," he said. "They need to know what we did."



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