

‘Their world upended’

Carrabelle museum chronicles stories of Black service members

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It was a time of continuous change where over 4,000 souls never found their way back home.

Archivist Lisa Keith-Lucas speaks passionately about the artifacts and stories at the Camp Gordon Johnston WWII Museum, but her words hold a different weight in today’s history-in-the-making as the worldwide pandemic rages on and the Black Lives Matter movement seeks justice for the countless Black men and women who have been killed at the hands of police brutality.

“The excitement of that time was tempered by the fear and sadness that went along with it,” says Keith-Lucas. “There are parallels of WWII to our time now where there are truly dramatic events and none of us know how this is all going to end up. Whether you’re talking about Black Lives Matter, Impeachment or the pandemic. In WWII, men and women suddenly had their world upended, and you can understand why people were living in the moment and didn’t think so much about the future.”

The Camp Gordon Johnston WWII Museum features a new exhibit each month to highlight the different ways the war impacted daily life. In December there was a display on Pearl Harbor



Soldiers from the 816th, part of Camp Gordon Johnston Museum's Special Exhibit: African American Service Members. SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

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If you go

What: Special Exhibit: African American Service Members

When: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; through Saturday, Feb. 27

Where: Camp Gordon Johnston WWII Museum, 1873 Hwy 98 W, Carrabelle

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, please call 850-697-8575 or visit <https://www.campgordonjohnston.com/>

Camp Gordon Johnston Museum highlights the contributions of African American service members who trained at the camp and served in segregated units. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Museum

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and Christmastime during the war. January featured the Nuremberg trials that brought Nazi war criminals to justice.

This month highlights the contributions of African American Service Members that trained at the camp and served in segregated units, including the 71st, 471st, 473rd, 476th, 490th, 816th, 817th, 828th, 494th, 496th Amphibious Truck companies, the 713th Medical Sanitary company and the 337th Regimental Band.

Keith-Lucas says the exhibit covers stories from all five branches of the military including those from well-known veterans like author Alex Haley who served in the U.S. Coast Guard and Officer Benjamin Davis of the Tuskegee Airmen.

The display also features lesser-known stories, like Ned Love from Quincy, Florida, who served in an engineering unit that maintained a roadway to Russia that sent supplies to the eastern front of the war. Love died from medical complications in a field hospital thousands of miles from home, and is buried in Quincy.

"It's a big job to find out what happened to these troops," says Keith-Lucas. "With Black troops it is even harder. They were relegated to the worst tasks, fighting for a country where they were not treated well or as equals, and it is hard to find public information."

No matter the digging she has to do to uncover these histories, Keith-Lucas approaches the archives with the methodical eye of a scientist. In fact, she says she was never a fan of history in school. She got grounded once for receiving a failing grade in American History. Before retiring to Carrabelle in 2012, she taught science and holds degrees in chemistry and the geosciences. However, Keith-Lucas and her husband always had personal connections to World War I and World War II history.

Whenever they traveled, they would find ships and museums to visit. For Keith-Lucas, her interest in the era stems from firsthand experience hearing her mother's stories about growing up in Bergen, Norway, during the Nazi occupation. Her married surname is a direct link back to her husband's grandfather who served and died in World



A display from the World War II exhibit on African Americans in the service at Camp Gordon Johnston in Carrabelle. SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT



Camp Gordon Johnston's WWII DUKW, military amphibious vehicle. CAMP GORDON JOHNSTON WWII MUSEUM

War I. After moving to Carrabelle, she joined the board of the museum before stepping into her current volunteer role as archivist.

"Once you get into it and learn the specifics of the stories and the people, it becomes a passion," says Keith-Lucas.

"We've been to Normandy and Great Britain and visited many war sites. Going to Normandy was an astounding 48 hours. For the people who live there, this is their life, and they keep this history alive."

Keith-Lucas says many people only think of Camp Gordon Johnston as the

place where troops trained for the historic Normandy invasion. As she has continued to delve into the archives to keep the base's history alive, she learned how the amphibious training at the camp was even more critical in battles in the Pacific Ocean.

Cataloging the museum's artifacts became her daily ritual during the early days of the pandemic. She would go into the empty museum, which was closed during lockdown, and comb through the objects and photographs that made up Camp Gordon Johnston's story. At the end of each day, she would post a photograph or artifact on the museum's social media pages.

Now, Keith-Lucas says she can tell the difference between three types of German infantry helmets. It's a different kind of classification from her scientific methodologies. However, she finds various overlaps in her skill sets and reflects back on her youthful apathy for history.

"If I had known that history was very much like science in that you can never know it all, and that delving into the details makes the story richer and more available to more people, I would have been interested in it more as a younger person," says Keith-Lucas. "What is so astounding is that people didn't know how [the war] was going to turn out. They were experiencing it with all the anxiety and fear that comes with not knowing, and that woke me up."

Keith-Lucas is still searching for stories of African American service members to expand the special exhibit and permanent collection.

She has posted her archivist email address onto many social media groups dedicated to preserving the stories of WWII service members and is also imploring anyone who has a story of a local service person to reach out with information or artifacts. Through this effort, she hopes to keep stories alive so that future visitors might see themselves in the history of this war.

"A lot of fascinating stories about these artifacts speak to you from across 75 years," says Keith-Lucas. "We have dozens of artifacts that are so personal. There's a story behind each one and a story that deserves to be told. It's the story of us."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).