

## Army Specialized Depot #829, 1942

by Sydney Lea



I take down a formal photo of my father, seated together eighty-one years ago with his so-called colored troops, backgrounded by a grim-looking fort in Alabama. For the Yankee company commander of people whom townsfolk—if they wanted to sound broad-minded—referred to as *nigras*, the place was a threatening one, especially because he now and then had groups of his soldiers in for meals or drinks. That made for local fury and once, for a cross burned outside his bungalow.

Of course, those soldiers of his had faced far greater perils—and they'd face more when they got overseas. But back to the picture: Dad's there with eighty troops and two other white officers. "We were a busted flush," he joked.

I don't need to mention that, however old I may be now, I never knew those men, but these ages later, as I contemplate their expressions, each at least outwardly stoic, I feel some odd combination of flame and lead in my guts. Is there anyone left to remember the person to whom each face in the photograph attests?

Their lives amounted to unfairness and often enough pure terror. Then anonymity. Doesn't human vileness sometimes move you to think that our species' elimination might truly be something to hope for?

There I go, as bloated with righteous indignation as any adolescent, addicted to simplification, intent on black and white. But for the love of God, there *are* certain unforgivable evils. Agreed?

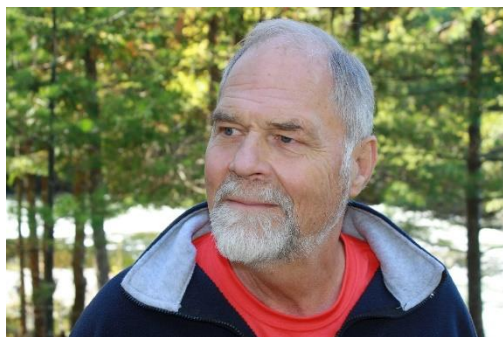
Perhaps not. Consensus these days seems almost quaint.

Here, a mid-winter blow commands each tree to salaam. A different world. No, not entirely. After the war, I would come to know my father's gentle command at home. I can replicate the sound of his laughter in mind, how he'd soothe me after some minor injury or insult, the way he'd whistle when he walked through the door from work.

What sort of work? Who knew? Who cared? He made waffles on Sunday. He hugged me. He sang, "Three Times Round Went Our Gallant, Gallant Ship." I won't forget all that and much, much more.

Outside, dark gathering, Dad's image seems almost to blend with his soldiers' in the photograph. Then they all disappear. My mother is long dead too. I have younger brothers and sisters, none young any longer, of course. Does any of them, like me, recall the very scent of this good man's sweat, or am I the last?

(Photo caption: Sydney Lea, Sr. is the white man left of center in the second row.)



A former Pulitzer finalist in poetry, **Sydney Lea** served as founding editor of *New England Review* and was Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015. In 2021, he was presented with his home state's Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. He has published twenty-four books: a novel, five volumes of personal and three of critical essays, and sixteen poetry collections, most recently *What Shines* (Four Way Books, NYC, 2023). His sixth book of personal essays, *Such Dancing as We Can*, is due in early 2024, and his second novel, *Now Look*, in spring.