

He said Black men were told they had to register with the government before they could get a job there. Walter, and others like him, “signed up” so they could get a job at the ordnance plant. After they “registered,” they were drafted and shipped off to the war. Walter was one of the first 15 people drafted from Madison County in early February of 1941, and “the Army didn’t have camps to keep them in” [Black soldiers were quartered and trained separately from White soldiers] when he was drafted. He was 19 years old and had completed two years at A&M University.

When the researcher later interviewed a White man who was contemporary to Walter in age, she told him what she’d heard about Black men being told that they had to “register” in order to get a job on the arsenal and then being drafted after they did so. (She sought the White perspective.) He said no Blacks were hired initially because there was no way to accommodate them, i.e., their hiring would require separate restrooms, etc. The history of the Ordnance Plant shows the policies on the hiring of both Blacks and women changed as manpower shortages grew more severe during the war, but the history of the ordnance plant and Huntsville Arsenal is not a story to be told here.

Walter served in Europe during World War II. He received five combat stars. He was in the Battle of the Bulge. He still remembered that they had no hot food. Walter noted that one of the assignments Black soldiers in Germany were given was driving supply trucks to the troops. The German soldiers were killing the American supply truck drivers, taking their U.S. Army uniforms to wear, and driving the trucks back through the U.S. Army lines. Assigning Black soldiers as drivers solved the problem. The Germans didn’t have any viable substitutes.

His unit came back through France and ended up in Guam for eight months. He and about 19 other Black soldiers wrote a letter to the State Department asking to be allowed to give up their U.S. citizenship. They wanted to stay in Guam and start a construction company. Their commanding officer would not pass the letter on up the chain of command.

Thus, after four and one-half years in the U.S. Army, Walter returned to the U.S., finished a college degree in building construction at a University in Iowa, and then went to Virginia. There he taught school, but teaching didn’t pay a lot, so at night he worked for a contractor supervising the pouring of concrete for a high-rise dam. Then he heard about the new era at Redstone Arsenal.

The first time Walter applied for a job at the installation, it was the Huntsville Arsenal and Redstone Ordnance Plant (WW II); he’d been told he’d have to register, and the result was that he was one of the first fifteen Black men in Madison County to be drafted. When he returned to Huntsville and applied for a job many years later, times had changed. The installation had become Redstone Arsenal, and the political climate had changed to that of the Cold War era.

Walter tried once more to work on the land of his birth. It was 1951. Walter Joiner had a college education and experience. In Virginia he had worked in making aircraft modules;