The misremembered legend of a Greensboro man who went west to ride with the cavalry.

By Edward Cone

A century ago the southern border of the United States was in turmoil. Outlaws crossed the dusty line at will as rival armies squared off in revolutionary Mexico, where Pancho Villa, still on America’s friend list for the moment, had lately hijacked a trainload of silver bars to finance his División del Norte. It was time to call in the cavalry.

The elite Buffalo Soldiers of the 10th Regiment reached Fort Huachuca in Arizona by late 1913 and quickly took up station across the state’s bottom fringe. A lot had changed since the famous unit had last patrolled the border, back in the days of Geronimo. Naco, where Troop E encamped, had its own golf course, and there were plans to bridge the Colorado River for automobile traffic. (Indeed, there was now such a thing as automobile traffic.) For the troopers, though, much remained the same. The enemy was elusive, the terrain hard and dangerous.

Troop C headed for Yuma. In the ranks rode a 21-year-old private from Greensboro named Thomas Reese Alexander. With a year of rigorous training behind him and the Army’s finest mounted warriors at his side, he was as ready for trouble as an untested man could be. He did not last long.
On May 11, 1914, a telegram arrived at the barbershop on South Elm Street owned by his father, Sandy: "Your son, Thomas R. Alexander, was shot and killed here today. Do you wish remains shipped to you? If so, where? Answer at once."

The next morning’s Greensboro Daily News ran a brief story: “Greensboro Negro Trooper is Killed.”

Details were scarce, even as reports from Mexico filled the papers. The fate of writer Ambrose Bierce, who disappeared across the border to meet Villa just as the 10th arrived in Arizona, remains a celebrated mystery even today, but the death of Private Alexander inspired few questions. Reese, as people seem to have called him, was mourned as a fallen hero. His funeral, delayed for a day when the body was held up in transit, filled St. James Presbyterian Church on Forbis Street (now the downtown end of Church Street) to overflowing, with a crowd estimated at 1,000 standing in the aisles as those unable to squeeze into the building listened as best they could outside the doors and windows.

The service featured a parade of speakers, including Captain David Gilmer, Greensboro’s most famous African-American soldier. Fallen black patriots from Crispus Attucks onward were invoked. Cadets from The Agricultural and Mechanical College for the Colored Race, as North Carolina A&T was known at the time, served as pall-bearers for their former classmate; a silk flag draped the coffin and a bugler blew "Taps" at his burial. "The occasion was sad, but glorious,” said another paper, the Greensboro Daily Record. Tributes to the young man’s sacrifice did not end with the funeral.

"Private Alexander, beloved son of Mr. and Mrs. R.S. Alexander of this city, laid down his life in the line of duty in the service of his country,” wrote the Daily Record. "The name of Alexander will be enshrined in grateful and everlasting remembrance by the American people.”

His gravestone, a tall marker that stands at the northwest corner of Union Cemetery near McCulloch Street, is inscribed with the verse often reserved for fallen soldiers, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

Yet little seems to have happened as Greensboro believed. The crowd waiting downtown for the Number 38 train to bring Reese Alexander on his last ride home held vigil for a fallen warrior, but sources closer to the front tell a different tale. One brief article, buried deep inside the Arizona Sentinel and Yuma Weekly Examiner newspaper, reports that Private Alexander was on his way back to camp from a routine Monday-morning drill when he was shot and killed by another private, Jesse Britton (“both colored”). A bulletin in the Coconino Sun — it spells the shooter’s name “Britten” — adds that "Alexander died before making any statement as to what caused the trouble." The death certificate blames a single bullet from a .45-caliber pistol, long a favorite among the troopers.

It’s easy to empathize with hometown folks for lionizing one of their own, and you need think back no further than Pat Tillman’s death in Afghanistan to know that war stories get spun in convenient directions. But putting the bare facts of Private Alexander’s shooting in place still leaves many questions unanswered. What drove him to quit school and join the military? What sparked his killing? Some of the answers are still out there, and others may have eluded Alexander himself, or died with him. Sometimes the famous fog of war is just a precursor to the fog of history.
II. The 10th at peace

Reese Alexander enlisted in late 1912 at Fort Slocum, near New York City, signing up for a three-year hitch. He stood 5-feet-6 3/4-inches tall, according to his enlistment records, with brown eyes, black hair and dark skin. His occupation is recorded as "laborer," but his education (including a brief stint at A&M, near the family home on East Market Street, and time studying art in New York) would have been attractive to an outfit that prided itself on having its pick of capable men.

The regiment he joined was a storied fighting force. One of four black combat units created in the wake of the Civil War, the 10th Cavalry saw action from the start. For twenty-five years the troopers battled their way across the Great Plains and mountain West, waging the bitter winter campaign against Black Kettle’s Cheyenne in Kansas, building Fort Sill in Oklahoma and engaging hostiles from Montana to Texas. Along the way the Indians gave them the nickname of Buffalo Soldiers, perhaps in honor of their strength and persistence. (Neither the respect of their foes nor our own admiration for their bravery obscures the horrors of the ethnic cleansing for which they were deployed.) When the Indian Wars ended, they took on the Spanish in Cuba — “When negro valor shone sublime,” declaimed Greensboro poet James Ephraim McGirt — and planted the flag of empire in the Philippines. They returned from the Pacific via the Suez Canal and, having circled the globe, came ashore as heroes in New York, where they were celebrated with a parade.

By the time Reese Alexander showed up the 10th was three years into a life of unprecedented ease at Fort Ethan Allen near Burlington, Vermont. The frontier was long closed, its bloody history already repackaged as popular entertainment by the Wild West shows of Buffalo Bill Cody. The rout of Spain was old news. In The History of the Tenth Cavalry, 1866-1921, Major E.L.N. Glass chronicles decades of hard riding, impossible conditions and deadly firefights. In the section on Vermont, the action shifts to horse shows and races, and the prowess of the Machine Gun Platoon at baseball. The popular new sport of basketball brought African-American traveling teams known as "black fives" to the base, with the home side blown out on one occasion by a visiting all-star squad from New York.

They were still soldiers, though, with plenty of veterans to propagate regimental culture and plenty of orders to follow. The summer after Reese joined up, the 10th marched south for an extended run of drills in northwest Virginia. Something about this program, or Army life in general, disagreed with the young trooper, who went AWOL for a week in early June before being forcibly reunited with his unit. (This was unusual for the 10th, which had lower desertion rates than most regiments. Of course, the horsemen were susceptible to the same vices as other soldiers and civilians. Nearly everywhere they went were opportunities for them to find trouble, including The White City, a bawdyhouse near Fort Huachuca that was a locus of disciplinary violations.) The long trip culminated in October with a stunt-riding show for President Woodrow Wilson and assorted D.C. swells. Then came a train-ride back to Vermont, and, shortly afterward, orders to head to the Mexican border.

The locals hated to see them go. Relations between the black troopers and white New Englanders were tense at the start — townspeople discussed instituting Jim Crow laws when the 10th first arrived — but warmed considerably over time. This pattern was repeated in other places African-American units were stationed, including vales of homogeneity like Vernal, Utah. Unsurprisingly, large groups of armed black
men were not universally welcomed across the United States, and the battle-hardened soldiers were unlikely to back down when confronted; violent incidents occurred, including some that involved the 10th. For the troopers, prejudice from the same people they protected was infuriating. Confronted in 1893 by a would-be lynch mob in Nebraska, members of the all-black 9th Cavalry distributed a pamphlet that concluded, "If you persist . . . we will reduce your homes and firesides to ashes and send your guilty souls to hell. Signed, 500 Men With the Bullet or the Torch." Racial incidents persisted into the 20th Century, including a pair of deadly disputes in Texas that drew national attention.

For all the unpleasantness, increasingly positive relations with white Americans, along with the pride and assertiveness of the soldiers, were part of a plan. The contradictions of black men fighting for the country that had enslaved them and still held them as second-class citizens were clear to African-Americans, all the more so when it came to campaigning against Indians, Filipinos and other people of color. One scholarly paper about the brutal Philippine war cites David Gilmer, the local hero who spoke at Alexander’s funeral: "Each black soldier resolved for himself the quandary caused by service against the insurrectos. Some, like . . . Gilmer, believed their unswerving dedication would ultimately improve the lot of all black people." Military service was seen by many, up to and including W.E.B. Du Bois, as a path to securing civil rights. Young black men no doubt served for a variety of reasons, including economic need, patriotism and adventure. Like most soldiers, then and now, when the shooting started they probably fought for each other.

(As an officer, Gilmer symbolizes another path to equality blazed by the Buffalo Soldiers. Black units had only white officers in their early years — the founding commander of the 10th was Civil War veteran Benjamin Grierson, who, if Union heroes were fetishized like their Southern counterparts, would be spoken of in the same breath as J.E.B. Stuart; John J. Pershing, eventually the highest-ranking general of the 20th Century, was known, not always kindly, as "Black Jack" because he had served with the 10th. Eventually, black officers took the stage, including the 10th’s own Henry Ossian Flipper, the first African-American graduate of West Point.)
There is an irony to the embroidered legend of Reese Alexander, in that it involves a soldier of the 10th Cavalry being over-praised for valor. In reality the importance of the regiment has been chronically underplayed. The fame earned at San Juan Hill in Cuba by Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders belongs in some meaningful part to the troopers of the 10th. Think of every cavalry charge you’ve ever seen in a Western movie; now think of every time all the troopers in the scene were black. Our national myth-making machinery was programmed to elide the truth about the Buffalo Soldiers, but for some reason it reversed itself in the case of the art student from Greensboro.

III. Boomtown, with shadows

Sandy Alexander put on a stoic face when he got the news of his son’s death. I am unsure how much he knew about the actual circumstances of the shooting, or what difference any such knowledge might make to a grieving father. “Sandy said yesterday upon receiving the message that although it was a great shock it was nothing more than he expected,” reported the Daily News. He fell ill after the funeral, returning several weeks later to his barbershop beneath the Greensboro Loan and Trust Company building at 311 1/2 South Elm Street.

The shop was on a busy commercial strip in the heart of a fast-growing city. Greensboro as Reese Alexander left it was a New South boomtown, its swelling population fed by a great in-migration, black and white, from rural areas. A nascent black middle class had expanded past the borders of Warnersville, the city’s first African-American neighborhood, to build two colleges east of downtown.

The insurance industry that would gush money into the local economy for decades to come was up and running, and street cars cruised past big new houses along Summit Avenue to the mill villages north of town; an upscale golf course community, Irving Park, was planned for land occupied by the old McAdoo farm.

The Alexander family was very much a part of this epic shift in American life. Sandy and his wife, Maggie, moved north from Gaston County with Reese and his siblings around the turn of the century and assimilated quickly into the black bourgeoisie. She worked as a schoolteacher. He served as an officer of St. John’s Masonic lodge. Around them the pace of technological change was accelerating in ways we now take for granted. Humans could fly. Within a year of Reese’s enlistment the mechanized slaughter of Europe’s Great War would reveal the horse cavalry itself as an anachronism.

One difference between that era and this one could be found in Sandy Alexander’s shop: white customers sitting in the chairs. The tonsorial color line is a given across much of the county even today, but for many years black barbers with white clientele were pillars of the African-American business community. (John Merrick of Durham, founder of an important black-owned insurance company and a bank, started out cutting hair.) The atmosphere began to change as Jim Crow marched across the South in the wake of the Supreme Court’s 1896 ruling in Plessy vs. Ferguson (argued, unsuccessfully, by sometime Greensboro resident Albion Tourgee), which enshrined “separate but equal” in the law. Decades of forced segregation were on the way. Spurred by newspaper editorials that painted Wilmington’s biracial government as a symbol of “Negro Domination,” including coverage by Josephus Daniels, the Raleigh newspaper publisher who later served as Wilson’s Secretary of the Navy, an armed mob overthrew the elected government. It
was not until a decade after Sandy’s death in 1938 that Harry Truman finally integrated the armed forces, fulfilling an unspoken mission of the Buffalo Soldiers.

Maybe the changing times made it easier for Reese to leave home. Maybe he was just ready to try something new. A century later, with his army records lost in a fire and family gravestones on Summit Avenue sinking into the clay, there remains much I don’t know about this young man. And without intimate knowledge of his thoughts I’m left to sketch him from the outside in — a course of action that raises questions of its own. Who deserves to tell another person’s history? How much do you need to know before it is decent to describe a life? Would it be best to let Private Alexander rest in misremembered glory? My answer to that last one — conveniently enough for me — is that imagining him as a man in full is the truest way of paying him respect.

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