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NEWS

History Happened Here: Some go to war hoping for equality

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CHATHAM/GHENT — The men stood at attention. While still in their civilian clothes, many had already begun to assume a military air. They were all headed to Camp Upton, an army base on Long Island, and while all these young African-American men made it back to Columbia County, one man, Jacob Van Alstyne, would return a changed man.

In 1917 the United States declared war on Germany, entering a conflagration that had already been raging for three years.

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, by a Serbian radical in 1914 led to a domino effect of European countries declaring war on one another. Eventually America would join the fray.

Many African-American men stateside believed joining the war effort could help African-Americans gain the respect of white America, according to a number of sources, by proving their valor and love of country.

At the time, America was a segregated society, more so in the South with its Jim Crow laws, but in the North as well, where second-class citizenry was the norm for African-Americans.

A week after the U.S. declaration of war the quota for African-American soldiers had already been filled.

In May 1917 the U.S. government began requiring all males between 21 and 31 to sign up for the draft and soon the lottery began to fill the Army's ranks with men of all races.

While some men waited to be drafted, Van Alstyne volunteered.

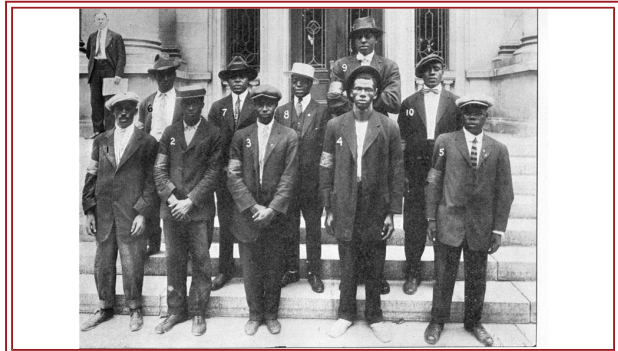
Born in Stuyvesant Falls on Feb. 2, 1876 to Robert and Sarah Van Alstyne, Jacob became a farmer, living in Old Chatham before the war, where his wife died while she was still relatively young.

Van Alstyne was inducted into the Army in Hudson on July 31, 1918. After a few months of training at Camp Upton and later at Camp Hampton, also in New York, he became part of the 547th Engineer Battalion as a private.

While there were a few African-American combat units, notably the 369th Infantry — nicknamed the "Harlem Hellfighters" — most of the men, including Van Alstyne, would serve their country in labor battalions.

These non-combat units were the backbone of the Army, keeping the supplies flowing to the front and helping to shelter and feed the men in the trenches.

Van Alstyne soon found himself at the Western Front attached to the 20th Engineers, a forestry regiment that was responsible for supplying wood for the Army.



Private Jacob Van Alstyne can be seen second from the left in the front row. (Photo courtesy of Chatham historian and archivist Fred Friedel also known as "Father Chatham")

He was there at the final great allied offensive that broke the stalemate brought on by a strategy of trench warfare. While in France's Argonne forest, scene of the French and American push against the German line that helped end the war, Van Alstyne first saw the yellow-brown gas that floated through the forest and smelled the acrid scent of mustard that burned his nostrils, then his lungs, and then his skin.

This was the first of three times he would suffer a gas attack by the enemy, along with a severe leg wound.

But even with these battle scars he would stay on in service to his country, beyond the Armistice of Nov. 11, 1918 and into the next summer.

He returned to Columbia County and to farming in the summer of 1919, settling in Ghent.

The African-American men who went to war in the hopes of finding some equality back home would have to wait for a new type of strategy, one that involved civil disobedience rather than violence to achieve its aims.

Van Alstyne's battalion was integrated beginning in 1953, two years after the Army's plan to integrate its troops began, not in the name of equality — but rather for the sake of efficiency.

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