

## Private Gus Williams (1892-1918)

Augustus “Gus” Williams was born in Jacksonville, Illinois on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1892. He was the son of Moses and Suthenie “Thenie” (Smith) Williams, who were married on December 24, 1890 in Morgan County, IL.<sup>1</sup> Moses and Thenie had six other children: Eugene, Harold, Howard, Melvin, Corrine, and Ruth.<sup>2</sup> Gus’s father was born in January of 1865 in Missouri towards the end of the United States Civil War. It is not know whether or not he was born into slavery.

Gus and his family moved to Bloomington in about 1900 and first resided at 209 West Grove Street.<sup>3</sup> A few years later the family moved to 704 South Mason Street which became their permanent residence.<sup>4</sup> As a young man, Gus worked a couple of different jobs though he did not have many possibilities for work during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century due to local racial discrimination. In 1907 he was listed in the Bloomington-Normal City Directory as working at the Continental Pork Packing Plant. By 1909 he was working as a cook at the Illinois House hotel, the finest hotel in town. The Illinois House hotel was located at 201-213 West Jefferson Street.<sup>5</sup> According to Bill Bacon who was another black cook at the Illinois House hotel, this was a good place to work.<sup>6</sup> At the Illinois House hotel, the kitchen staff was mixed but all other hotel staff, including waiters and maids, were white. Williams would not have been allowed to even enter the dining room area. He worked there for seven years until he enlisted in the Eighth Illinois Volunteer Infantry in 1917 and served during World War I.

The Eighth Illinois Infantry was made up of African American men mostly from Bloomington; however, others were added from Pontiac, Clinton, and other nearby towns. It was also the first unit of African American soldiers to be led entirely by African American officers.<sup>7</sup> Upon the outbreak of WWI, the Eighth was federalized by President Woodrow Wilson and became part of the 370<sup>th</sup> United States Infantry. The 370<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry was an all black regiment. Williams served as a private and was part of Company H. They left Bloomington for Peoria in July of 1917. They remained in Peoria for ten weeks before going to Camp Logan in Houston, Texas on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1917.

Racial tensions were high when the unit arrived in Houston. Prior to their arrival a riot had occurred between 156 African American soldiers (members of the 24<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry) stationed in Houston and the white civilians living in Houston over a rumor that an African American soldier had been killed by white police officers and against the racial discrimination the soldiers already suffered from. Four African American soldiers and fifteen white civilians were killed during the riot. All 156 African Americans soldiers were court-martialed for murder and thirteen of those convicted were hanged.<sup>8</sup> Because of this incident, the white citizens were hostile towards the members of the newly arrived Eighth and tightened the already strict Jim Crow segregation laws that existed in Houston. The members of the Eighth were not allowed to ride in streetcars and were looked down upon because they refused to respect segregated

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<sup>1</sup> Marriage Index, Illinois Regional Archives Depository, <http://www.ilsos.gov/GenealogyMWeb/MarriageSearchServlet>

<sup>2</sup> E.E. Pierson and J.L. Hasbrouch. *McLean County and The World War, 1917-1918*. (Bloomington: McLean County War Publishing Co., 1919) 107

<sup>3</sup> 1900 United States Census

<sup>4</sup> *Bloomington and Normal City Directory, 1904-1917*

<sup>5</sup> *Bloomington and Normal City Directory, 1911*, 335

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Billy Bacon by Reginald Whittaker, 1999

<sup>7</sup> Shawn SanRoman, “The Eighth Illinois Regiment,” 1998, p.8

<sup>8</sup> James Leiker, “Houston Mutiny of 1917,” <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/houston-mutiny-1917>

facilities. It was wise for the men of the Eighth to be careful during their stay in the Deep South so that they (and the other African American soldiers stationed there) would be able to avoid any further incidents and complete their training before being sent overseas.<sup>9</sup> No further incidents would occur due in fact to the very capable and disciplined African American officers that lead these soldiers. In March of 1918 the 370<sup>th</sup> Infantry went to Newport News, Virginia. They were then shipped overseas and arrived in France on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1918.<sup>10</sup>

The 370<sup>th</sup> was part of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Division, one of two all African-American divisions of troops sent to fight during the War (the other being the 92<sup>nd</sup> Division). Like the Eighth, the 370<sup>th</sup> had the distinction of being the only regiment in the entire U.S. Army that had all African American officers leading the unit.<sup>11</sup> The 370<sup>th</sup> trained with a French division until June 23<sup>rd</sup>, when they were sent to fight in the trenches located near Regonville. They endured trench warfare there for a week before they were taken to Vraincourt, in north-eastern France.

Trench warfare was the predominant method of fighting during WWI. Most soldiers who fought in the War fought in the trenches. Typical trenches were designed in a system of two to four parallel lines. All of these trenches were connected by communication trenches which not only relayed communication but also passed supplies as well. The trenches were lined with sandbags at the top and wooden planks at the bottom. At the front of the trenches were barbed wire fences and machine gun nests in concealed locations. Opposing sides would use the trenches to attack and defend with an area in between often called “no man’s land.” This land was called this because it belonged to neither side, was open to frequent artillery barrages, and was a site where many soldiers were killed.<sup>12</sup> Life in the trenches was by no means pleasant either. The trenches were cramped, muddy, and often times filled with water. Machine gunfire, mortar and gas attacks were common place.

In Vraincourt the 370<sup>th</sup> went into the trenches again, this time for ten days. On September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1918 they were sent to the front line trenches where they encountered “heavy shell fire and gas attacks.”<sup>13</sup> Sadly, Williams did not make it through the shell fire and gas attacks at Vraincourt and was killed in action on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1918 at the age of 26 and was buried in France.<sup>14</sup> A memorial service was held in his honor at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church.<sup>15</sup> It would not be until 1921 that his body was brought back to Bloomington from France and he was laid to rest in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.<sup>16</sup>

The 370<sup>th</sup>’s time at the front lines and continuous engagement of the enemy in battle earned them the nickname of “The Black Devils” by German troops. Not only did the German forces refer to them in this way because of the obvious color of their skin, but because of their fierce fighting in battle.<sup>17</sup> The French, on the other hand, referred to the men of the 370<sup>th</sup> as “Partridges” because of their cockiness and pride in battle.<sup>18</sup> Whatever nickname they went by,

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<sup>9</sup> Jim Hill, “The 370<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Chicago’s 8<sup>th</sup> Illinois National Guard in WWI,” *The Western Front Association*, <http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-on-land/75-other-war-theatres/55-370-infantry.html>

<sup>10</sup> Pierson and Hasbrouch. *McLean County and The World War, 1917-1918*, 202

<sup>11</sup> E.J. Scott, “The American Negro in the World War,” <http://www.gwpda.org/>

<sup>12</sup> Tony Ashworth. *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918, The Live and Let Live System.* (London: Pan Books, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2000) p. 2-14

<sup>13</sup> Pierson and Hasbrouch. *McLean County and The World War, 1917-1918*, 203

<sup>14</sup> Pierson and Hasbrouch. *McLean County and The World War, 1917-1918*, 203

<sup>15</sup> Pierson and Hasbrouch. *McLean County and The World War, 1917-1918*, 203

<sup>16</sup> McLean County Genealogical Society. *Illinois McLean County Cemeteries, Volume 19, Bloomington Township Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.* (Normal: McLean County Genealogical Society, 2001) 501

<sup>17</sup> SanRoman, “The Eighth Illinois Regiment,” 29

<sup>18</sup> Allison Sweeney, *History of the American Negro in the Great World War*, August 26, 2005

they clearly demonstrated their abilities as soldiers and fought valiantly in battle up until the very last day of the War.

Because of their bravery during combat, the 370<sup>th</sup> Infantry was highly praised by General Eugène Mittlhouser, the commander of the 36<sup>th</sup> division of the French Army.<sup>19</sup> Many men in the 370<sup>th</sup> received medals and awards from both the French and Americans for their distinguishable service as well. All totaled, the unit received almost 100 medals including 21 American Distinguished Service Crosses, several Croix de Guerre (France's highest honor), 68 French War Crosses, and one French Distinguished Service Medal. Many of those men who were decorated for their service gave their lives as well. Twenty percent, or 96 men, were killed in the 370<sup>th</sup>.<sup>20</sup>

Around 1922 the American Legion post for African-American veterans was founded in Bloomington by several members of the 370<sup>th</sup>. Because of racial discrimination, African Americans were barred from joining "white" American Legion posts so they formed their own post. In honor of Gus Williams and John Redd, (another fellow soldier from the 370<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry who died in France), the African American Legion post named their post the Redd-Williams Post No. 163.

By: Lisa Dretske, 2009

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<sup>19</sup> Pierson and Hasbrouch. *McLean County and The World War, 1917-1918*, 203

<sup>20</sup> Scott, "The American Negro in the World War"