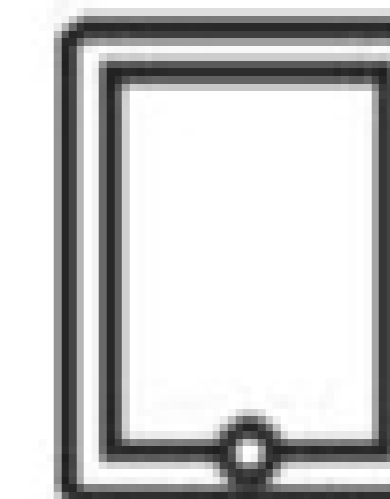
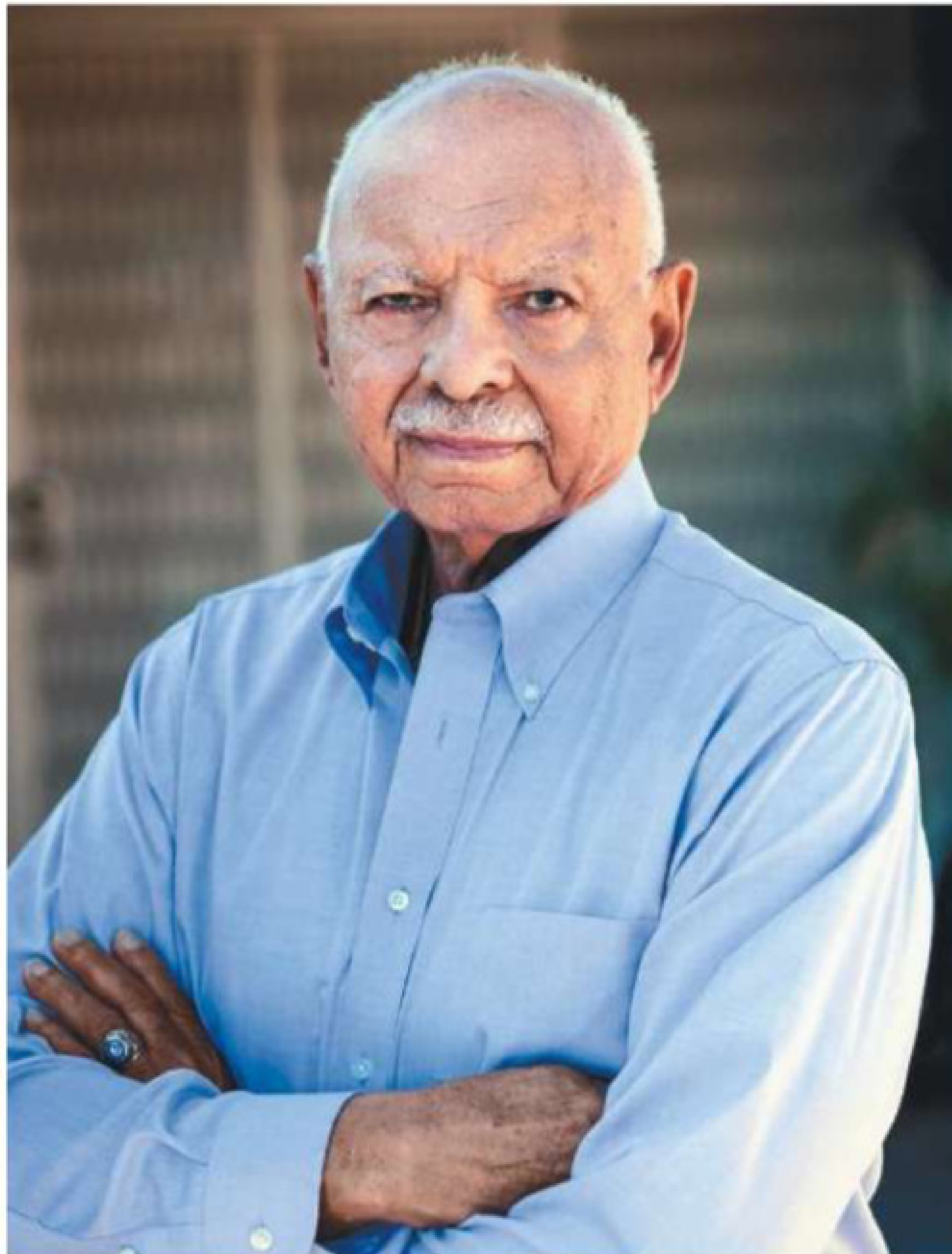


# A Buffalo Soldier's War on Two Fronts

By Gene Santoro

**"**GREW UP in a world where black people had rights and freedom," says Ivan J. Houston. "But I knew what to expect in the service: segregation." In 1943 Houston, 17, a student at integrated UC-Berkeley, joined the Enlisted Reserve Corps; in January 1944 the army called him to active duty. His induction test scores got him into the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), which sent 140,000 GIs—including 1,400 African Americans—to college. But in March the army abruptly cancelled ASTP; it needed infantrymen to make up for heavy losses. Assigned to the all-black 92nd Infantry Division ("Buffalo Soldiers"), Houston faced the bloody northern Italian campaign, racism, and insults about his division's ability and will to fight. Here Houston, the author of *Black Warriors: The Buffalo Soldiers of World War II*, speaks his mind.



FOR MORE,  
WATCH A VIDEO  
INTERVIEW  
ON OUR IPAD  
EDITION

cold. Supplies and wounded had to be brought up and down the mountains by mule or by hand. After five weeks, out of about 3,000 infantrymen, we had 263 casualties. And that doesn't include a lot of others who got sick or were otherwise injured.

**That doesn't sound unusual for such a hard fight.**

The problem was that so many of our casualties were leaders—officers and NCOs who were out in front trying to inspire the men. We had disproportionate losses of them the whole time we were there. The black officers were young guys who had some college or were college graduates. The NCOs were at least a peg or

two above the rest of the enlisted men. So right off the bat the best men were killed or wounded, which meant a significant change in the division.

**What happened at Seravezza?**

Seravezza is at the base of Mount Cauala, at the confluence of two rivers. It is only three miles from Pietrasanta, but the road was under consistent enemy fire from the hills above, so we had to use a narrow, winding mountain trail that would have been too much even for mules. It got dark and was raining in torrents. We could see virtually nothing. The sound of the Sera River on our left was a menacing roar. Men stumbled, fell, and lost equipment in the mud and darkness. Flashes of lightning blinded and confused us. It took

**Your background and level of education were rare in the 92nd.**

Aside from other ASTP men, yes. The rest...some were illiterate, some semiliterate. Many if not most were from the rural South, a totally alien culture to me. But I was able to fit in, because I could take care of myself—I was a great boxer during college—and proved it. All the men below second lieutenant were black. If I'd grown up in Alabama it might have seemed more normal.

**Was the 92nd's officer cadre all white?**

Not at first, no. I was in 3rd Battalion, Headquarters Company, of the 370th Regimental Combat Team; they culled the best men in the division for our group. Our company commander and

Company K's were white; Companies I, L, and M had black commanders. So it was a mixed bag. But pretty soon you could see the structure. When white lieutenants transferred to our units, they never served under a black officer. No black officer could command a white soldier, never mind a white officer!

**In July 1944, you landed in Naples.**

We went right to the Arno River—one of the roughest fronts. After Florence was liberated a month later, we crossed the Arno and went north into the mountains, toward the Gothic Line. The geography got much worse. So did the fighting. It became fierce as we liberated cities and villages like Ripafratta. We faced constant heavy shelling, high mountains, fierce



four hours to go just under two miles. By the time we rounded everybody up, the river had swollen and couldn't be forded, so the attack set for October 10 had to be postponed. In town we had to be very careful: the mountain dominated Seravezza, and the enemy could see everything. Medium and heavy artillery raked the buildings regularly; when men exposed themselves, small-arms fire swept the street.

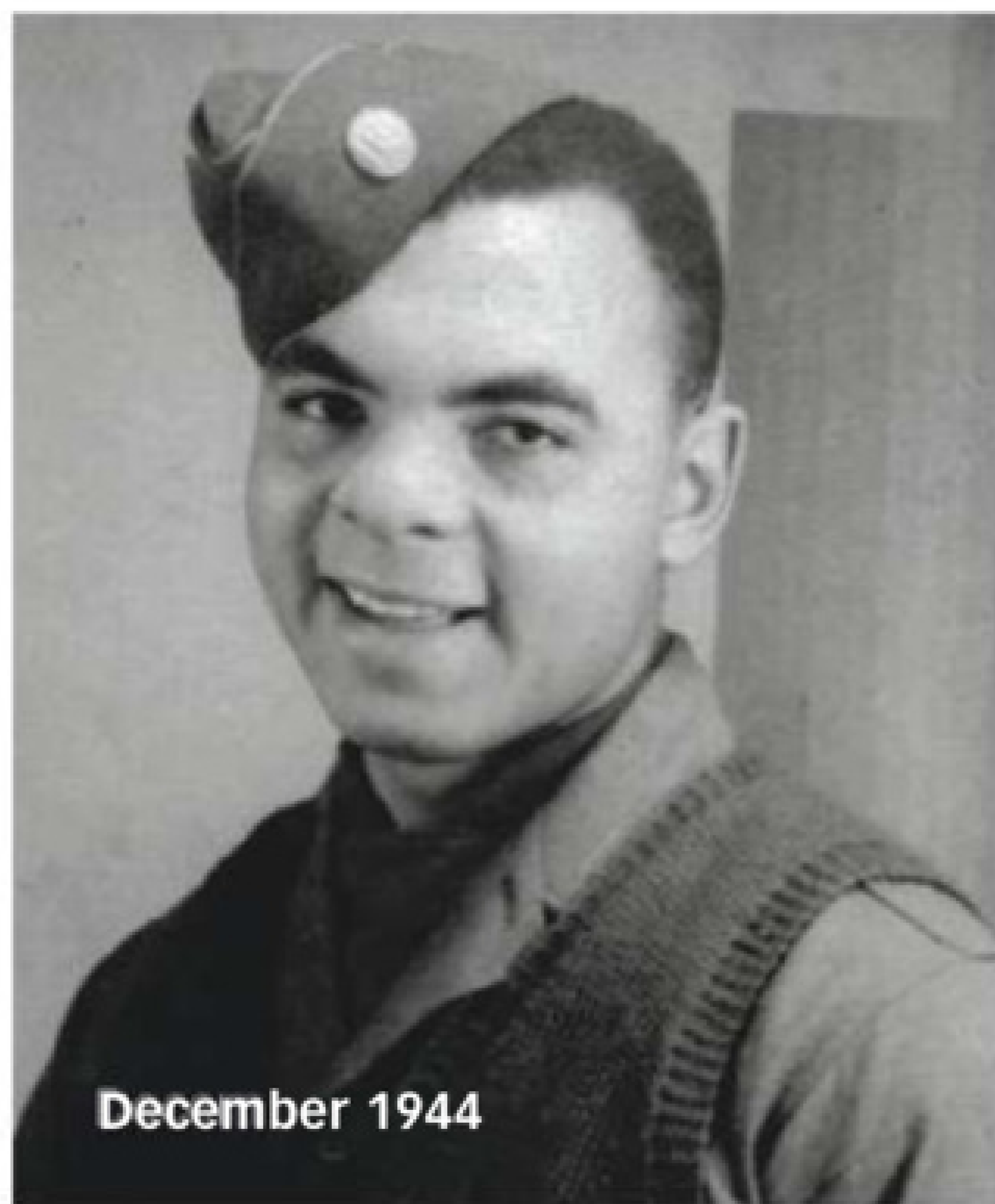
#### **How did the attack go?**

By 11:10 p.m. on the 11th, the last man slipped into the Sera's icy waters. We climbed specially constructed ladders up the mountain. Knife-edged rocks ripped clothing and tore flesh. We groped for footing in the blackness. Keeping units together was difficult. By 4:45 the morning of the 12th, K Company was on top of the mountain, but no one was sure how many men had been killed by the machine guns spattering the trails, or had slipped and plunged to the rocks below. Companies I and L joined K by 7:30 a.m.

#### **Then the Germans counterattacked.**

Terrific artillery fire lashed the command post at the foot of the mountain, so they were unaware of the plight of the men up there. Messengers couldn't get through the Germans. A dozen men, including yours truly, joined an ammunition detail, carrying a 25-pound metal box in each hand. Right away we met machine-gun fire, and took out the enemy soldiers. Halfway up we hit more machine guns and mortars. Shrapnel flew everywhere. A few guys got hit. My clothes got burned through to the skin. We had to head back downhill. Soon men from the rifle companies were coming off the hill. It became a mess. About 4 p.m., a heavy barrage of our own artillery fell short and smashed into the entrenched remnants of Companies K and L. That was more than they could take; they withdrew. We hurriedly organized defensive units and positions, but the Germans stopped short of trying to retake Seravezza.

**"It's not surprising men started to wonder if we were being sent on suicide missions."**



**What was the state of your regiment?** Demoralized. Italian boys—9, 10, 11 years old—were bringing so many bodies down the mountain they still talk about it. When your leaders get killed and wounded, and you don't have sufficient guys with the same qualities and education, you really have a problem. See, there *were* no black infantry replacements, because the army didn't train black infantry; they made blacks truck drivers and orderlies and so on. Some of our replacements came from the disciplinary barracks; they could bring down morale pretty quickly. Our division commander, a southern major general named Edward M. Almond, questioned our black officers' and NCOs' abilities and dedication. None of this was good for morale or unit cohesion.

**This was where the idea that the 92nd wouldn't or couldn't fight got started. Why?**

I never witnessed mass hysteria or panic. I think the notion started because we were black. Over 6,000 men of the 106th Division surrendered during the Battle of

the Bulge. The 36th Infantry Division had a bad time at the Rapido River. There were countless "stragglers" at Monte Cassino. But in talking about us, the term "melting away" is used, which isn't used to describe the others. I wrote the reports for my battalion, and I never used that term. I think it came from the top. General Almond thought black people were incapable of being combat troops. He was quoted as saying he would never sit down and eat with them. He had never led combat troops before. He revered the Confederacy. How could a guy like that build morale in our division? It's not surprising men started wondering if we were being sent on suicide missions.

**In early February 1945, Almond sent the 370th back to Cauala.**

That's where we lost two valiant black captains from I and L Companies; one was killed in action, the other was in a hospital suffering from shell shock. They knew we were being criticized, and I feel that as a result they probably took even more chances. I don't have any idea what General Almond was trying to do there. He put units in the worst possible positions: an attack through sand over a canal, where they were caught in a huge bombardment by German railroad guns, which decimated the front.

**Historians still debate the Buffalos' performance. What's your take?**

The Jim Crow laws that determined civilian life for black Americans during World War II had an awful lot to do with what happened to us in the army. I saw mortally wounded black officers leading their men till they dropped. We were fighting Jim Crow with one hand and fascists and Nazis with the other. That had its effects on us. I believe we fought as well as anyone. The Italians think we're heroes. Our liberation of Lucca is celebrated every year. Maybe that's because Italian civilians and the partisans who fought beside us went through what we went through. ★