



## *An American Uprising in Second World War England: Mutiny in the Duchy*

by Kate Werran.

Philadelphia: Pen and Sword, 2020. Pp. xviii, 236. ISBN 978–1–5267–5954–2.

Review by Thomas E. Hanson, US Army School of Advanced Military Studies (phd11b@msn.com).

---

British journalist and documentarian Kate Werran has made a timely contribution to a critically under-reported topic in US military history. Wherever one stands in current debates about the prevalence of institutional racism, her new book shines a welcome light on one of the most egregious racially motivated miscarriages of justice in the history of the US Army. The September 1943 shooting of two white military policemen in a quiet English village by men of the 581st Ordnance Ammunition Company (Colored), and the subsequent conviction for mutiny of fourteen members of that unit concluded their eighteen-month journey through the pipeline of an officially “Jim Crow” mobilization process.

The incident leading to the court-martial occurred in Launceston, a once thriving market town in eastern Cornwall—the “duchy” of the book’s title. In 1943 and 1944, the counties of Devon and Cornwall hosted several US Army units as part of Operation Bolero, the build-up of troops and supplies ahead of a cross-channel invasion of German-occupied France. In late 1943, those units included the 581st Ordnance Ammunition Company, billeted at the segregated Pennygillan Camp west of Launceston, and the 2d Battalion 115th Infantry Regiment of the 29th Infantry Division, based at Scarne Camp to the east. The Army’s principal interest in Cornwall lay in its topographic similarity to Normandy, which offered “ideal but tortuous training conditions” (95) to the men of the 115th, who would land at Omaha Beach the next spring. Their mission was to create an ammunition dump to support both training and the initial phases of combat during the invasion.

Black US soldiers first came to England in mid-1942 as part of the initial deployment of service units that would eventually make up the Services of Supply (SOS) of the US Army’s European Theater of Operations. These men, dubbed “black Yanks” by Britons, quickly distinguished themselves from their white countrymen by their generosity, good manners, and superior discipline. In contrast, white US soldiers often alienated their British hosts by their “drunkenness, lack of hospitality, their assumption that money buys everything, and their bad behaviour—particularly with women and young girls” (63). By mid-1943, fully two-thirds of respondents to a Ministry of Information survey harbored ambivalent or negative feelings about Americans. Werran skillfully weaves information from a multitude of sources on both sides of the Atlantic into a compelling narrative that belies traditional accounts of Anglo-American solidarity.

The Army’s importation of Jim Crow segregation into Britain created endless difficulties for British authorities, many of whom publicly condemned the imposition of a “colour bar” in English domestic life. Werran exposes the class origins of an increase in race prejudice in England after 1942, something that offended many working- and middle-class Britons in the weeks before the mutineers of the 581st faced court-martial (70 ff). She also clarifies the Army’s own role in coercing local establishments into de facto segregation even in London, the very heart of Britain’s multiracial empire (101).

About half the book details the proceedings of the three-day court-martial. Using both the official record of the proceedings<sup>1</sup> and the reporting of British and American newsmen, Werran paints a depressingly familiar picture. In an episode eerily reminiscent of both the 1906 “Brownsville Affair” and the 1917 “Camp Logan Mutiny,” she shows how the Army made a mockery of the concept of due process. Just two officers, Capt. John A. Philbin and Lt. Alvin E. Ottum, represented all fourteen defendants. Neither possessed any legal training.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, prosecutor Maj. Frank P. Eresch and his assistant, Capt. Timothy J. Mulcahy, were experienced trial attorneys.

Werran’s narrative indicates that, to the prosecutors at least, the defendants were less important as individuals than as representatives of their race. The conduct of the Army’s own investigation and prosecutorial services—as recorded in their pre-trial notes and trial testimony—shows that concern for the rights of the accused mattered far less than a perceived need to preserve the segregation of white and black soldiers. Indeed, in a post-trial order regarding army discipline in Britain, Brig. Gen. George M. Alexander, Assistant Deputy Provost Marshal for the European Theater of Operations, observed that prevention of future racial incidents required “censorship and close supervision on the part of all officers” (186). A native Virginian and former assistant commander of the 29th Infantry Division, he saw no reason to re-examine the War Department’s long-standing pretense that blacks did not exist.

The book has its shortcomings. Many readers will find its often breezy and sensationalist narrative tone off-putting. The following is typical:

American soldiers were about to be tried by an American court operating under American military law for crimes committed on Shakespeare’s “sceptred isle.” It was an extraordinary situation. A historical blip when a law other than English was to be freely practised in the home of justice vaunted and celebrated the world over. One of the biggest baits for the newsmen that day was that this court martial offered a bird’s-eye view of American military law in action. They had been given ringside seats at the enactment of one of the harshest legal codes, drawn up more than 150 years previously to guarantee strict discipline during America’s revolutionary war. (5)

This statement and many others like it throughout the book betray an ignorance of military institutions and military history. Of even greater concern to scholars is the author’s tendency to make assertions without documentary evidence, especially when seeking to attribute motive or intent to the chief villain of Werran’s story:

It was this shred of doubt that kept needling the chief prosecutor, Trial Judge Advocate Frank Eresch, as he walked in from his Paignton billet that morning .... He wondered whether he had done enough thinking and fine tuning of the case overnight .... In that brief minute of repose ... Eresch reminded himself of his knock-out line up of witnesses. (111)

Such serious and ubiquitous flaws undermine the author’s credibility and her contention that the verdict of the trial was a foregone conclusion.

Nonetheless, casual readers, professional soldiers, policy-makers, and serious scholars alike will find much of value here. For one thing, Werran’s book is among the first to ask uncomfortable questions about the “greatest generation” mythology. Sadly, it confirms the prevalence of the US military’s “baked-in” racism,<sup>3</sup> especially as regards the aftereffects of the court-martial. Werran

---

1. Preserved in the National Archives at College Park, MD.

2. They were detailed to serve as defense counsel as stipulated in *A Manual for Courts Martial, U.S. Army, 1928* (corrected to 1943), “Article 11, Appointment of Trial Judge Advocates and Counsel,” 205.

3. See, further, Andrea Mazzarino, “The US Military Also Has a Racism Problem,” *The Nation* (23 June 2020).

details the growing British criticism of “the disparity in capital sentences awarded to black and white American servicemen” (187, 217) and the US Army’s deliberate campaign to conceal rather than overcome its prejudices. Blacks who sought redress were labeled “troublemakers” and black journalists who reported racist incidents had their credentials suspended or revoked. To the end of the war, the Army’s legal system disproportionately condemned black Americans to death: convicted black soldiers received 80 percent of such sentences despite comprising just 10 percent of the Army as a whole. In the end, *An American Uprising* poses more questions than it answers, but in ways that will stimulate further discussion and scholarly research.