

B'nai B'rith Award Now Under Review

A veteran's story of WWII exploits raises questions

By Thomas Farragher and Walter V. Robinson, Globe Staff

B'nai B'rith International is questioning a prestigious award slated to be given to former Massachusetts education secretary Paul Parks for his role in liberating the Dachau concentration camp in 1945 after other veterans asserted that Parks was not there. Moreover, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who has studied records of Parks's military unit has said that Parks's account of his harrowing experiences on a Normandy beach on D-Day is also false.



Parks, who at 77 has been a major civil rights figure in Massachusetts for four decades, insisted last night that he was indeed at Dachau, and said he intends to collect the Raoul Wallenberg award from the B'nai B'rith chapter in Berlin later this month.

But Eric Rozenman, a spokesman for B'nai B'rith International, said in the face of questions from veterans who contend that Parks was not at the Dachau concentration camp in the spring of 1945, Parks's selection is under review.

"We're trying to ascertain exactly what the facts are," Rozenman said. "We're trying to find out how this particular person came to [the Berlin chapter's] attention and what criteria they use for this award."

Since 1987, Parks's public claims about his presence at Dachau have made him a sought-after speaker by Jewish groups, including Holocaust survivors. For the same reason, he was also co-chairman of the Cornerstone Project of the New England Holocaust Memorial, the six glass towers honoring Holocaust victims that are located in a small park behind Boston City Hall.

In a letter to B'nai B'rith, a copy of which was sent to the Globe, retired Army lieutenant colonel Hugh F. Foster III said that Parks's longtime claim to have been a liberator of the Dachau death camp is contradicted by military records.

And in an interview yesterday, retired brigadier general Felix L. Sparks, who as a 27-year-old lieutenant colonel led the liberation of the main camp at Dachau, said flatly that Parks was not there when the camp fell to American forces in April 1945. To buttress his assertion, Sparks said there were no black soldiers at Dachau at all.

"He's been claiming that for years," Sparks said of Parks. "It did not happen."

Parks, a member of the 365th Engineer Regiment from 1943 to 1945, said his military records were lost in a 1973 fire. But he acknowledged that his regiment was not near Dachau for its liberation.

"My outfit was never at Dachau, but I was," Parks said. "I was there by sheer accident." Parks said he was trained and ordered to activate and deactivate land mines throughout France, a special detail that led him to the concentration camp.

"I don't have the slightest idea where I was. All I know is that we went to Dachau," said Parks. "... I was a foot soldier who did what I was told."

Veterans, including Sparks, Foster, and Cranston Rogers, a 75-year-old veteran from Medway, who were among the liberators of Dachau, said they have followed for years newspaper stories about Parks's military service.

"I don't have a vendetta against him," Rogers said. "I just don't like people claiming things that are not true."

Parks said yesterday that he has never exaggerated his military record. When asked to review the discrepancies his fellow veterans cite in published accounts of his service in Normandy and, later, at Dachau, Parks declined.

"This is crazy," he said. "I'm not going to deal with it anymore."

In the letter sent to B'nai B'rith, Foster calls Parks's accounts of battlefield derring-do "outrageously false."

Critics like Foster and records obtained by the Globe raise questions about Parks' oft-told vivid accounts of his frightening experience as a black GI on Omaha Beach on D-Day, 1944.

Records at the National Personnel Records Center, which survived the 1973 fire, show that Parks's engineering unit was still in England as the allies stormed the Normandy beaches on D-Day. Parks acknowledged that his unit was in England during the invasion – although in one published interview he said his unit was part of the invasion force and suffered 60 percent casualties. Last night, Parks said he was at Normandy on D-Day after volunteering for mine detection duty.

But Parks's critics say the detail he has provided over the years cannot survive close scrutiny.

For example, in June 1994, Parks told the Globe that when he ran ashore on June 6, 1944, he could feel the breeze as bullets zipped past his head. He said he and a buddy, Robert Orr, took cover behind a concrete barrier as a German machine gun peppered them with fire. Orr, Parks said, fell over dead, a bullet in his forehead. Another comrade also died in the gunfire.

"Like anybody else who made it off that beach that day, I ask why," Parks said then. "I mean, two guys, shoulder to shoulder with me. They die and I don't. I don't have an answer."

But Foster, the retired lieutenant colonel, said the master list of World War II deaths contains the names of seven men named Robert Orr who were killed or died overseas during the war.

The only Robert Orr assigned to the 365th Engineer Regiment died in England three months before D-Day and is buried in a US military cemetery there, according to Foster's letter to the B'nai B'rith.

Yesterday, Parks said the Globe's 1994 account of Orr's death was in error. "I didn't say he was killed on D-Day. Never did," Parks said. "I said he was killed in Normandy and he was killed in Normandy."

The Globe has been aware of questions about Parks's military record for some time. Foster wrote to the newspaper's editorial page in September 1998 questioning an opinion piece by William H. Smith that criticized the film "Saving Private Ryan" for ignoring the role that Smith said black veterans like Parks had played at Normandy. Foster said in the letter that according to military records, Parks's regiment was not on the beaches at Normandy.

William Ketter, then interim editor of the opposite-editorial page and now chairman of the Boston University Journalism Department, said yesterday that he and H.D.S. Greenway, then editor of the editorial page, questioned Parks about the allegations. But they deemed the evidence insufficient to publish in the face of his claims that he was detached from his unit. Greenway, now retired, could not be reached for comment.

Parks's military records show that he was on active service from April 2, 1943, until he was discharged on Jan. 5, 1946. He was assigned to Company E, 365th Engineer Regiment, from Sept. 30, 1943, until June 25, 1945. His engineering unit arrived at Utah Beach, France, on June 30, 1944.

B'nai B'rith International said its inquiries into Parks's service record had just begun. It is not clear how, or whether, that review would affect the Wallenberg award that Parks is scheduled to receive later this month in Berlin, along with two British soldiers, two Russians and another American. Wallenberg was the Swedish diplomat who saved some 100,000 Hungarian Jews from the Nazi gas chambers.

"It's the B'nai B'rith Lodge in Berlin that's giving the award," said Rozenman, the B'nai B'rith International spokesman in Washington. "I'm not sure what criteria they used to select the nominee. Those are things that have to be checked."

Over the last four decades, Parks has been among the most prominent black leaders in Boston and Massachusetts. He was vice president of the Boston branch of the NAACP during the 1960s, Boston's first Model Cities director under Mayor Kevin H. White, state education secretary under former Governor Michael S. Dukakis, and one of the founders of the METCO program, which for 34 years has bused black children from Boston to schools in predominantly white suburbs.

Under mayors Raymond L. Flynn and Thomas M. Menino in the early 1990s, Parks was also the chairman of the appointed Boston School Committee.

Over time, Parks has sometimes told conflicting tales to reporters about his wartime experiences in Europe. In 1984, for instance, he claimed in a Globe interview that he had been wounded on D-Day, an assertion that was not reported in subsequent accounts of his service there. His military records include no Purple Heart. Parks has variously described himself as a private when he arrived at Dachau, but as a platoon sergeant when he was in England two years earlier.

Despite his twin claims about his presence at two of the war's most significant events – the D-Day landing and the liberation of a major concentration camp – a half dozen newspaper profiles of Parks during the 1960s and 1970s barely mentioned that he was a World War II veteran.

The first apparent public mention of his Dachau experience came when Parks, then state education secretary, spoke at a 1978 rally outside the German consulate demanding an extension on statutes of limitations for Nazi war criminals.

At that rally, Parks recalled helping to liberate Dachau, and said he remembered being shocked at the mountains of gold teeth piled up inside Dachau, and the stacks of bodies of victims of the death camp.

In a 1996 Globe interview, Parks said when he helped liberate the camp, and saw the survivors, "It was unbelievable. Understanding slavery in my country, I related to these people."

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Despite Questions, Parks to Get Award

By Thomas Farragher, Globe Staff, 10/19/2000

B'nai B'rith leaders in Europe said yesterday that Boston civil rights leader Paul Parks will receive a prestigious award for taking part in liberating the Dachau concentration camp despite evidence that Parks was not there when the death camp was taken from the Nazis.

"They've made their inquiries and they're satisfied that there's no reason not to give [Parks] the award," said Seymour G. Saideman, president of B'nai B'rith Europe.

Parks, a former state education secretary and Boston School Committee chairman, has claimed that special volunteer mine-clearing duties put him on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day and at the concentration camp outside Munich in 1945.

But senior US military historians say no black soldiers were present when Dachau was liberated. And a Globe review of Parks's military record shows that his unit was hundreds of miles from Dachau the day the camp was freed on April 29, 1945.

There is no evidence in the detailed daily reports from Parks's Army company that he was detached for mine duty in the days before the camp's liberation.

Saideman said B'nai B'rith conducted no independent review of Parks's military record.

Andras Kain, president of the B'nai B'rith Raoul Wallenberg Lodge in Berlin, which is hosting Sunday's awards ceremony, said his chapter relied in part on the 1998 Steven Spielberg Holocaust documentary, "The Last Days," and its companion book as evidence that Parks was a Dachau liberator.

In the book, Parks says he was at Dachau "by sheer accident" and says he never considered himself a hero.

"Several people have called me already saying that Paul Parks was never in Dachau," Kain said in a telephone interview from Berlin yesterday. "So what can I do with these? He will get the prize because I don't think we have time enough to prove, to check."

Kain said if he receives conclusive proof that Parks was not a Dachau liberator, his chapter would consider revoking the award retroactively, drawing a parallel to a triumphant Olympian later disqualified for illegal drug use.

"That's what we would do if we have positive things to show he was never in Dachau," said Kain. "But we don't have anything."

Kain said Parks left Boston last night and was to arrive in Berlin today for the Sunday night ceremony, where some of the 400 guests will be Dachau survivors.

The other American who will receive the award, William P. Donahue of Racine, Wis., disputes Parks's claims to being at Dachau and said he is considering snubbing Parks at the ceremony.

"If this man wants to accept the award, it's his problem," said Donahue, who was a 19-year-old private when he was among the first US soldiers inside Dachau.

Indeed, yesterday's B'nai B'rith announcement that Parks will receive the award named for Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who worked to save an estimated 100,000 lives during the Holocaust, enraged some of the soldiers who were there when Dachau was liberated.

"He claims to have just wandered into the liberation of Dachau," said Russel R. Weiskircher, a retired brigadier general who was with the 157th Infantry when Dachau fell. "Those assertions demean those who were there and those who died there."

Weiskircher, a member of the Georgia Commission on the Holocaust, called Parks "an enterprising opportunist."

"I feel sorry for him," Weiskircher said. "Unfortunately, we have found a significant number of people like Paul Parks."

Cranston Rogers, 75, of Medway, who was patrolling outside the camp's east wall when it was liberated, called the B'nai B'rith decision "preposterous."

"It ignores the actual persons who were there and participated in the liberation," said Rogers. "He clearly was not even present, much less had anything to do with the liberation of the camp. It really is an insult to the veterans who were there."

But Nancy K. Kaufman, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, said she does not disagree with the B'nai B'rith decision.

"I think he deserves [the award]," Kaufman said. "Paul Parks has been a friend of the Jewish community. He's been an outspoken, passionate witness to the events of World War II. I really think he has been someone who has stood up and spoken to the horrors."

Eric Rozenman, a spokesman for B'nai B'rith International in Washington, said yesterday's decision is not the end of the organization's review into how award nominees are selected.

"Serious issues were raised and they just can't be put aside because the local unit [in Berlin] goes ahead and carries out a program that was already planned," said Rozenman.

He said if Parks's claim to be a Dachau liberator is proven false, "we'll have to make sure that the process by which local units make these selections is upgraded."

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, who presided for 25 years at Temple Beth El in Sudbury and is now rabbi-in-residence at Hebrew Union College in New York, said it is important to determine whether Parks has manufactured parts of his military record.

"If the allegations were to be proven true, it would be more than just a swindle," Kushner said. "It would be a defamation of the extraordinary and often life-risking courageous efforts of those who did put their lives on the line to save Jews during the war.

"That's what makes it so potentially disturbing."