

Fort Leavenworth Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony

19 MAY 2009

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

Remarks by CSM Philip F. Johndrow

Sir, thank you for the opportunity to address such a distinguished audience this morning. As the CG mentioned, 2009 is the “Year of the NCO” and it is an honor to speak with you. Thanks to everyone for coming today – what a great crowd. It’s especially great to see all the students in the audience who volunteered to be here.

Everything that I am today is a result of great noncommissioned officers like SGM McBryar and CSM Smith who took the time to train and mentor me over the years. Sir Isaac Newton is attributed as saying “If I have seen farther it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Our achievements are based on the work of others... We see farther because of them. We certainly see farther....and serve in a more professional Army today because of the service of SGM William McBryar and CSM Larry Smith.

Today we’re going to induct two amazing noncommissioned officers into the Fort Leavenworth Hall of Fame - Our Army’s Noncommissioned Officer Corps is the backbone of our Army – our NCOs are the standard bearers....the tactical and technical experts....no one is more professional.

And it has always been that way.....SGM McBryar’s career covered about 20 years, but his legacy has lived on.....for over a hundred years now. Many of you know that I served in combat in Iraq with the CAV, and the legacy of our predecessors, Soldiers like William McBryar, make up a critical part of our lore and esprit de corps – it is a proud heritage, and it was an honor to be a part of that legacy.....his legacy.

As we researched SGM McBryar for this speech, we marveled at his selflessness and desire to serve. His perseverance and unrelenting resolve to succeed are still inspiring today.

SGM William McBryar’s career was a distinguished one....and a frustrating one. He entered our Army a century before anyone recognized the term “equal opportunity,” and he had to overcome incredible adversity and inequality as he strove to serve his country and become a commissioned officer.

However, McBryar's efforts were not futile – his dreams are now a reality. McBryar's legacy is reflected in our amazingly diverse Army today. The leaders in our Army are part of a team regardless of creed, color, or religion. As Colin Powell so aptly stated in his memoir My American Journey, "Skin color is a benign, nonbehavioral characteristic." Unfortunately, this was not always the case in our Army, and McBryar served during a period of time when everyone was not treated equally.

McBryar enlisted in 1887, a young African American with three years of college, who desired to serve his country and live the American dream.....he applied for a commission in the black Third North Carolina Volunteer Infantry Regiment, but was denied.....he continued to serve with distinction, earning a Medal of Honor for bravery while fighting Apache Indians in 1890.

In 1898, after returning from service in Cuba, he was given a commission as a lieutenant in the Eighth Volunteer Infantry....only to have the Eighth mustered out in March 1899 which forced him out of the Army. He then reenlisted as a private in the Twenty-Fifth, and soon rose to the rank of Sergeant Major – fighting in the Philippines.

By November 1899, he had an appointment as a 2LT in the Forty Ninth U.S. Voluntary Infantry where he again saw action in the Philippines, even commanding a company for a short time....only to have his unit mustered out of the Army in June 1901; once more he was out of the Army. In 1905, he again joined the Army as a private – this time at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in the 9th Cavalry, but was medically discharged less than a year later. In 1914, he again tried to enter the Army at the age of 53, but he was refused. In 1941, this distinguished Soldier was laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery.

The difference between history's boldest accomplishments and its most staggering failures is often, simply, the diligent will to persevere. As famous African American poet, Langston Hughes, once said, "I have discovered in life that there are ways of getting almost anywhere you want to go, if you really want to go."

SGM McBryar must have had a similar little mantra he said to himself when the going got tough. While the eight years he served with the 10th Cavalry were distinguished....there's no doubt it must have been FRUSTRATING at times.

But he NEVER QUIT. He never gave in to self-pity or cynicism.....and his desire to serve regardless of the obstacles he faced, allowed him to help write some of the most memorable pages of our Nation's history. SGM McBryar chased Geronimo, secured the frontier from Indian attack, lived in harsh outposts on the very edge of the Nation's westward expansion, repelled the Spanish in Cuba alongside the ranks of Theodore Roosevelt, and fought insurgents in the Philippines.

How do we create leaders like SGM William McBryar? Where do we get such Soldiers? Some of you may or may not be aware that we're currently rewriting the leadership development strategy for the Army here at Fort Leavenworth. One of the imperatives is that we must develop agile, adaptable leaders who are critical, creative thinkers. What does that look like?

The more I read about SGM William McBryar, the more I began to get an idea of what an agile, adaptable leader looks like. Let me give you an example of what I mean:

SGT McBryar and his buddies from K Troop, Tenth Cavalry, chased down a group of Indian bandits for almost a week, covering over 200 miles. They finally caught up to the outlaws and cornered them in a cave, but the Indians had the Soldiers pinned down under withering fire. It seemed like an impossible situation.....a situation that would demand loss of life to root out the outlaws.....yet the ever resourceful and creative young SGT McBryar found a position where he could fire at an angle and hit the side of the cave which caused his bullets and the rock walls to splinter and pinned down the Indians until they could take no more, and they ultimately surrendered.

For his innovation and gallantry, SGT McBryar was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1890. This is precisely the kind of adaptive, creative warfighter our Army needs today. It is with his example in mind that we develop the leadership strategy for our 21st century Army.

SGM McBryar's life serves as an example to future generations. His is a message of perseverance...a message of hope and determination. Stories like his inspire others to never give up.

Many American homes proudly displayed prints of the famous charge of the colored troops up San Juan Hill, which included the 9th and 10th Cavalry and McBryar's 25th Infantry. Historian Rayford Logan later wrote, "The Soldiers were our.....Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson."

I am proud to say that nowhere in the Army is the awareness higher of what the African American Soldier has given our Nation than at Fort Leavenworth. One cannot drive on post or take their children on a walk without seeing the Buffalo Soldier Memorial to the 9th and 10th U.S. Cavalry and see the busts of great African American Army leaders.

This memorial is a lasting tribute to a selfless and bold group of Soldiers that were dedicated to protecting our Nation. It is a lasting tribute to Soldiers like SGM William McBryar.

In his now famous speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. told the Nation that he had a dream. Part of that dream was that his "four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

We are proud to say that nowhere in our Nation is Dr. King's dream more alive than in our Army. The day an African American puts on the same uniform as everybody else, they know that they have joined the most democratic institution in our Nation where they will rise or fall based on their own merit...all of this was made possible by the persistence and sacrifice of Soldiers like Sergeant Major McBryar....a selfless servant.....a pioneer.....a visionary.