POMP SCOTT

1892 – 1939, WORLD WAR I

U.S. ARMY, PRIVATE

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Pomp Scott was born in Minden, Louisiana, on September 26, 1892. For most of its history, Minden thrived as a shipping hub, transporting an estimated 30,000 bales of cotton each year over the waters of Lake Bistenau and Bayou Dorcheate. Upon the completion of the Louisiana & Arkansas Railroad, the construction of the massive Minden Lumber Company became the town's mainstay industry.

Pomp was the first or second generation of his family to be born after slavery was abolished in the United States by the 13th Amendment in 1865. The names of his parents are unknown, but Pomp's own name reflects the mark slavery left on Black American communities: Prior to the Civil War, it was fashionable for Southern slaveowners to name their enslaved persons after Roman and Greek figures, and "Pomp" is the shortened form of "Pompey"—a reference to the Roman statesman and general Pompey the Great.

Historians have debated why this became a trend. Some argue that it was a means for enslavers to show off their education, while highlighting the ironic contrast between an elevated name and the low station of the enslaved person who bore it. As for Pomp Scott, the true reason will never be known. Pomp's parents were freemen and chose his name of their own accord, but may have been paying homage to family members who had held the name before.

Black troops attend a musical performance at the Knights of Columbus hall near Camp Zachary Taylor, Louisville, Kentucky, where Pomp Scott trained with the 814th Pioneer Infantry Regiment.

National Archives

Minden Lumber Company.
Library of Congress

Life in the South was hard for Black Americans during Pomp's youth. The racially motivated Coushatta Massacre of 1874 took place just 40 miles from Pomp's childhood home in Minden, and race relations had improved little in the decades since. The 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision codified racial segregation, causing a spike in anti-Black violence throughout the South, particularly in Pomp's home state of Louisiana. Tensions in the area remained high throughout the Jim Crow era.

Pomp's overall degree of formal education is unclear, but he could read and write. At age 18, Pomp married a young lady named Viola. The couple welcomed a daughter, Rose, shortly after their marriage. During this time, Pomp and Viola rented in the Crichton Heights area of Minden, and Pomp worked at the Minden Lumber Company. Owned by local railroad magnates, the Minden Lumber Company was one of the largest lumber producers in the world.

Employing up to 500 men, records estimate that Minden could process up to 250,000 board feet of lumber each day, which shipped out via the Louisiana & Arkansas Railway. Pomp worked as an "edgerman," ensuring that each board had straight edges. Pomp was still working at the Minden Lumber Company seven years later, when at age 25, he filled out his draft card.

While the American South sought to rebuild following the Civil War and Black Americans carved out a new place for themselves in a shifting social landscape, across the Atlantic Ocean continental Europe began to boil over with tension. Major powers such as France, Germany, Britain, and Russia jostled with each other for military, political, and economic supremacy on the global stage. Smaller nations like Serbia and Austria-Hungary found themselves mired in ethnic conflicts. The tension exploded on June 28, 1914, when Austria-Hungary's Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Serbia and World War I began.

The United States maintained its neutrality for several years. But on April 6, 1917, the United States Congress declared war on Imperial Germany in response to German sinkings of American ships, and the infamous "Zimmerman Telegram" which invited Mexico into an alliance with Germany. Though these events were far away from Pomp Scott's life in Webster Parish, they would affect him soon enough.

The civically minded Minden business community threw its support behind the war. On April 11, 1917, a group of the town's business leaders met at the local courthouse to arrange a public pledge drive. In solidarity, the town's banks and stores decided to close so that the population of Webster Parish could gather and discuss an increase in crop production "so as to release food for our army and our allies in the common struggle against Prussian autocracy and militarism."

By June of 1917, Webster Parish reported strong draft numbers, "divided almost equally between the races," with no overt opposition to draft registration. Several young women stepped forward to offer their clerical services to complete necessary paperwork for the draft.

Whether Pomp enlisted or was drafted is unknown. Institutional racism led to a disproportionate number of Black men being drafted compared to their White peers—34 percent of all Black men who registered were drafted as opposed to only 24 percent of White draftees. Even draft cards for Black men looked different, with a designated corner to be torn away if the draftee was Black. This torn corner excluded men from service in the U.S. Marines. When Black men were drafted, they were often assigned to manual labor, not combat roles. Nor did Black soldiers typically receive the same military training as White units.

Pomp's service began on August 21, 1918, and he was assigned to Company I of the 814th Pioneer Infantry. As with most other Black units, the 814th Pioneers were primarily confined to noncombat duties—in this case, repairing bridges, roads, and trenches near the frontlines. They cleared battlefields of debris and weapons, and sometimes carried out the difficult task of burying the dead. Historian Chad Williams notes that this latter work became important to Black servicemen despite the hard, thankless labor. Though they were not engaged directly in battle, their labor was "nevertheless close enough to provide an affirmation for many African American Pioneer infantrymen that they did deserve the title of soldier."

The 814th Pioneer Infantry trained briefly at Camp Zachary Taylor near Louisville, Kentucky. At the time, the camp was one of the largest military training facilities in the country. It was designed to house 44,000 men, but at its peak 59,000 men overflowed its hastily-constructed buildings.

Men awoke at 5:00 a.m. each morning, ate breakfast, and then spent their mornings and afternoons training and drilling. The camp had ranges for hand grenade, pistol range, and rifle drills. During their time at Camp Zachary Taylor, Pomp's unit decided to adopt the moniker "The Black Devils." This nickname was given to all Black units by German soldiers and proudly adopted by various Black regiments.

During Pomp's time at Camp Zachary Taylor, the Spanish flu swept through the facility, resulting in more than 10,000 hospitalizations and 1,500 deaths. Black troops, including the 814th, were forced to evacuate their barracks to house the large numbers of influenza patients in camp. Pomp and and his fellow soldiers slept in tents as their new temporary quarters.

Pomp and his fellow "Black Devils" departed New York City on October 6, 1918, aboard the RMS *Carmania*. Part of the famed Cunard Line, the *Carmania* served as an armed transport ship for American troops, running the Atlantic from England to New York. Constantly vigilant to the threat of German submarines in their Atlantic crossing, the British outfitted the *Carmania* with a "smoke screen apparatus" in 1917 to make it more difficult for German submarines to target the ship and other vessels in its convoys. Despite being a large target, history had already proved *Carmania* could defend herself in the right circumstances: the ship sank the German cruiser *Cap Trafalgar* in 1914.

Since the 814th was one of the last formations to cross the Atlantic, they did not make it as far as the Allied frontlines in France and Belgium. Pomp and his unit landed in Chichester, Sussex, England, only about a month before the Armistice, and were given assignments there. While most of the men in his unit were tasked with repairing railroads, Pomp and a handful of other men were assigned to Lopcombe Corner, a rural Royal Air Force airfield known locally as "Jack's Bush."

The following month, the 814th Pioneers moved to Winwulf Down in Winchester. The men remained in Winchester for only a month before boarding another passenger ship, the *Celtic,* in Liverpool and sailing home. The returning soldiers greeted the shores of America with a "yell that carried across the bay" as they came into harbor. Pomp was discharged from service on January 8, 1919, having never seen the actual theater of war.

814th Pioneer's regimental band was renowned for its skill and performance quality.

National Archives

Peace at home, at least for Black veterans, was short-lived. Black veterans returned to the United States expecting to share in the democracy that they helped secure overseas and were, instead, met with reinvigorated hostility by White Americans. This racial animosity led to violence throughout 1919 and has become known as the "Red Summer." Attacks on Black Americans erupted in 26 cities throughout the country.

Hoping to escape this violence and Jim Crow laws, thousands of Black southerners left the region and headed north seeking more opportunities. This "Great Migration" brought half a million Black southerners to northern cities. Pomp was one of these migrants, settling in the West Virginia or Pennsylvania coalfields some time in 1919.

Other more local concerns may have also motivated Pomp to leave Louisiana. During his time in the Army, the Minden Lumber Company sustained heavy damages in a fire. It is possible that Pomp returned home and found that his previous job was no longer available. His search for economic opportunities in West Virginia brought Pomp Scott's occupational history and military history together: in 1919, troops from Camp Zachary Taylor were dispatched to the West Virginia coalfields during labor strikes.

For the next twenty years, Pomp fades from existing records, but he did work as a coal miner for most of that time. While exact data is sparse, records do indicate his final battle with tuberculosis.

Tuberculosis, a bacterial lung infection with no real drug treatment available in the United States until the 1950s, was one of the most pervasive illnesses of the early 20th century. In addition to likely exposure to this illness, Scott labored in coalfields that offered few, if any, occupational health protections and subjected miners to long-term exposure to dangerous coal dust.

Medical care for veterans was federalized in the post-World War I years with the establishment of the Veterans Bureau—and later the Veterans Administration—the predecessors of the present-day U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs—in 1921. Tuberculosis, however, was one of the conditions for which Black soldiers received proportionately less treatment than their White counterparts. When he was admitted to a veterans hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1937, Pomp reported that he last worked in 1936, perhaps due to the disease.

Pomp died of complications from chronic tuberculosis and pneumonia at that same veterans hospital on November 7, 1939, at the age of 47. He was interred in Grafton National Cemetery on November 10, 1939.

PLACE OF INTERMENT:
Grafton National Cemetery
SECTION F
SITE 1374

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As home to one of the nation's first national cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

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SOURCES AND COPYRIGHT

For readability, bibliographies have been omitted from this publication. Student research for these biographies relies heavily on primary sources—census records, city directories, draft cards, muster rolls, and more—made available digitally through Ancestry and Fold3. Yearbook repositories and the digitized collections of many universities and archives have been invaluable resources. Most newspaper research was conducted digitally via Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchives, and the Library of Congress's *Chronicling America* database.

Servicemembers' Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) and Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs) are another essential part of project research, provided free of charge in most cases by the National Archives through standard records requests.

As the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project has grown and matured, the team has found that new sources sometimes surface for veterans researched in prior project years. To better maintain a "living bibliography" of all its veterans, a single master document is kept up on the project's webpage under the "Programs" tab at **www.wvhumanities.org**.

Views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Archives of the United States, or any other federal agency. For more information about the Veterans Legacy Memorial and the Veterans Legacy Grant Program, visit **www.vlm.cem.va.gov**.

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