

VOORHIS, Major, FRANK VAN. INTERVIEW #7927

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INTERVIEW WITH MAJOR FRANK VAN VOORHIS
E. 6th Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Major Frank Van Voorhis was in charge of the National Guard troop during what was termed in 1921 the Tulsa Race Riot.

Our National Guard unit (local), of which I was Captain, was preparing to leave for state encampment at Guthrie, May 31, 1921. Suddenly someone called the armory about 9 p.m. and said, "Captain, the negroes are shooting up the town, bring the troops." I at once called Major Rooney, commanding officer. He immediately got in touch with the Governor and orders to move to scene of conflict came at once. I took an army truck and 20 men and proceeded to the police station on West Second Street. There we joined forces with the police and armed citizens. From there we went to where the Frisco Station used to be at First and Boston.

There was some firing back and forth between blacks and whites. We were not to fire until fired upon. Our idea was to drive the negroes back into

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their own district and urge them to surrender without bloodshed. At that time there were no buildings on fire. Realizing that the maddened armed whites were our worst problem, it seemed best to get between the two forces. So we marched up North Boulder around back of the Stand pipe Hill and slipped back down to First and Archer in that way getting a position between opposing forces.

A body of negro snipers had taken a position in the belfry of the African M.E. church at Greenwood and Cameron. I detailed three of my best marksmen to advance within three blocks of the snipers and open fire on them. That silenced them. After the "law" appeared there was a lull in the fighting. In the meantime Captain John McCune and his Company L, National Guard, were deployed north of my supply company on N. Detroit. I left my

company in charge of the first lieutenant and returned to check conditions at the armory. White men, maddened by the firing of negroes on whites, were besieging the armory, determined to break in and get arms

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and ammunition. Men had to be directed to guard the armory. In some respects the maddened whites were our worst problem. I commandeered a passenger car to take myself and six O.N.G. men back to the negro district. Firing was heavier and buildings were burning. Arrived at First and Archer, no soldiers in sight. On inquiry found they had gone north of Greenwood Avenue about one-half mile to brick kiln. I heard heavy firing on Wilson Hill, just north of the brick kiln. With my six men I started east on Easton Street to Greenwood, could not find troops. The negroes had banded in groups of 20 or 30, so we rounded up the groups-- disarmed them, and put a guard in charge of each group of prisoners until they could be taken to Convention Hall under guard.

~~Sniping continued from houses. So I detailed~~
men to search these houses for snipers. It was surprising the number of negroes in army attire (World War uniforms) found secreted in houses. Even wore their war

helmets, well supplied with long range Winchesters, often provided with 20 or 30 rounds of ammunition. There is no doubt but what some factions had been preparing for a revolt of some kind, but the mass of the negroes were innocent victims. Company L

continued firing from its position on Wilson Hill.

As senior officer I sent word to them to cease firing, for we were in the path of the fire as we made our way to join the supply troops. Combining both troops we moved down on scattered negro groups who were glad to surrender. Word to surrender spread and as far as the negroes were concerned they were through.

This was about 7 a. m. the next day. Though the negroes were through, gladly surrendering, the whites were in a state of frenzy. Killing negroes at random; bragging about how many they had killed and keeping up the horror by burning and plundering negro homes.

It took the troops to quiet them and drive them out of the burned and pillaged negro district. How many negroes were killed will never be known. Of the loads of wounded taken to the armory, 18 died. I did not see many dead negroes on the street in the negro

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district. After all, these years I feel that the real damage was the fire and not serious loss of life (negroes). As for the guards, one had an ear clipped; another a hat shot off his head. There were only about 35 of them in action, I had 20 and McCune had about 15.

State troops were sent in June 1st, but the riot was already quelled and quiet restored.