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BEYOND THE WORLD WAR II WE KNOW

## The Black Female Battalion That Stood Up to a White Male Army

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The unit was set up to determine the value black women brought to the military. They ultimately ran the fastest mail service in the European Theater during World War II.

By Christina Brown Fisher



In January 1945, a C-54 cargo plane carrying a group of young Army officers departed an Air Transport Command terminal in Washington for war-torn Europe. Among the passengers was a 26-year-old major named Charity Adams, who was quietly making history as the first African-American commanding officer in the Women's Army Corps to be deployed to a theater of war. As the plane ascended over the Atlantic, she still wasn't sure where she was headed or what she would be doing there. Her orders, marked "Secret," were to be unsealed in flight. When she opened the envelope, the documents revealed only that her destination was somewhere in the British Isles; she would be briefed on the particulars of the mission once on the ground.

A couple of weeks later, Adams stood on a windswept parade field in Birmingham, England, addressing a formation of hundreds of black soldiers in khaki-skirted uniforms. She had been placed in command of a battalion that would soon number 855 women. She could see that many were scared and tired, still reeling from a treacherous 11-day journey from the United States by sea spent dodging torpedoes and German U-boats. Groans rippled through the ranks as Adams explained that they would begin work immediately. As the newly created 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, their mission was neither glamorous nor particularly thrilling. The work would be grueling, the hours long, and what little sleep they were allotted would be prone to interruption by air raids. Progress would be measured by the depletion of undelivered mail they had been summoned to England to sort out. With the war now at its bloody peak, mail was indispensable for morale, but delivering it had become a towering logistical challenge. The backlog, piled haphazardly in cavernous hangars, amounted to more than 17 million letters and packages addressed to Allied military personnel scattered across Europe.



Despite her can-do attitude, Adams believed that she and her troops had been set up for failure. Before the formation of the Six Triple Eight, as the battalion was known, it was unfathomable that a unit composed entirely of black women would be posted overseas and trusted with such a monumental task. The Six Triple Eight was an experiment — a pass-fail test to determine the value black women brought to the military. Years of unyielding pressure from civil rights activists, including the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, had convinced the War Department to give them a shot, but those who strongly opposed their inclusion in the ranks expected to be validated by seeing them fail. “The eyes of the public would be upon us, waiting for one slip in our conduct or performance,” Adams later recalled in her memoir. She knew that simply getting the job done wouldn’t be enough. The Six Triple Eight would need to not only pass the test but also, as Adams wrote, prove to “be the best WAC unit ever sent into a foreign theater.”

**A pastor’s daughter** from Columbia, S.C., Adams dropped out of graduate school to join the war effort in the summer of 1942, after the newly formed Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (W.A.A.C.) announced that it was accepting 40 black women into its first officer-candidate school. Black civic leaders were calling for African- American men and women to volunteer for military service and literally fight for equal rights overseas; as Adams soon learned, however, the arbitrary constraints of Jim Crow applied even in matters of national security. At the ceremony that culminated the W.A.A.C. officer course, the candidates were commissioned as third officers, equivalent to Army second lieutenants, in alphabetical order by last name. Though Adams topped the list, she watched all the white candidates cross the stage before her name was called and she officially became the first black woman ever commissioned in the corps.



An unnamed servicewoman and Capt. Mildred D. Carter, right, who was in charge of all recreational activities for the battalion. U.S. Signal



More than 6,500 black women ultimately served in the auxiliary corps during the war, as both officers and enlisted women. They came from all over the country, many in search of opportunities unavailable to them in the civilian sector. The Six Triple Eight veteran Elizabeth Barker Johnson quit housekeeping to become a soldier. She hadn't realized that military service was even an option for her until a pamphlet for the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps landed on her doorstep in Elkin, N.C. "There was a picture of Uncle Sam, and he was pointing a finger," recalled Johnson, 100. "It said, 'Uncle Sam wants you.' So I picked it up and looked at it. I read some of the information, and after I'd finished reading, I said, 'Well, maybe you just got me.' "

Johnson completed basic training at Camp Breckinridge in Kentucky and then became a truck driver — a job not typically held by African-American women in the 1940s. But for many black servicewomen, the Army proved hardly less oppressive than the places they signed up to escape. Some commanders simply refused to allow African-Americans onto their posts, and those who did often assigned them menial tasks, like cleaning or handling supplies. Overseas postings were usually not an option, even though white servicewomen began deploying to Europe and the Pacific promptly after the corps's creation.

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With American forces stretched across multiple continents, front-line commanders were beginning to wake up to the pitfalls of institutionalized racism. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower wanted an Army that reflected the racial breakdown of the United States. "We are giving Negro troops equal status in the military field," he told reporters in London in August 1942, with numbers commensurate with their share of the total population. Eisenhower was less progressive when it came to gender, however. At that same news conference, he announced a plan to send black members of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps to England "to perform duties such as car driving and secretarial work and also to provide companionship for the thousands of Negro troops" deployed there. The W.A.A.C. director, Oveta Culp Hobby, replied with a firmly worded announcement that black women would be posted overseas to do the important wartime jobs that they'd been trained for, not to be anybody's companions.



Second Lt. Freda le Beau serving Major Adams a soda at the opening of the battalion's new snack bar in Rouen, France. National Archives



Members of the Six Triple Eight at a mess hall in England. National Archives

Plans to deploy a large unit of black servicewomen wouldn't be seriously floated again until late in 1944, more than a year after the W.A.A.C. was redesignated as the Women's Army Corps (WAC) and officially absorbed by the active-duty Army. This time, the situation was about to become even more urgent. The Germans had begun a concentrated counteroffensive on the Western Front, assaulting through the Ardennes forest in an attempt to split Allied lines. Known as the Battle of the Bulge, the fighting raged for five weeks and took a heavy toll on American forces. Some 19,000 G.I.s were killed, and many tens of thousands were wounded, captured or missing in action. Surrounded by death, soldiers in the trenches were desperate to receive word from loved ones back home — while at the same time, the chaos of the battle strained the Army's ability to deliver it.

The War Department seized the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone: get the soldiers their mail and grant black women fuller participation in the war. By that point, Adams had ascended to the rank of major and had served in various administrative and leadership roles. She was training new recruits in Fort Des Moines when her commander asked how she would feel about an assignment in Europe. She was hesitant at first, concerned that she might be out of her depth leading troops overseas. But it seems that whatever doubts she harbored vanished by the time she arrived on the ground. She was allotted six months to complete her mission. The Six Triple Eight would do it in three.

6/29/2020

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The Six Triple Eight and civilian postal employees sorting mail in France in November 1945, two months after the war ended.



Birmingham was battered and scarred in the winter of 1945. More than 1,800 tons of ordnance had been dropped on the city during the Battle of Britain. The Six Triple Eight was delivered by convoy to a bombed- damaged school on the edge of town. There was scant heat and barely any light, as the windows had been painted black to avoid detection by the Luftwaffe. In addition to serving as a barracks for the unit's more than 800 enlisted personnel, the building would also be their workplace. As for the daily mechanics of the operation, there was still a lot that needed to be figured out.

The battalion was split into four postal-directory companies, and duties were divided up. The women worked around the clock, seven days a week, in rotating eight-hour shifts. Each shift sorted and processed approximately 65,000 pieces of mail bound for troops scattered across Europe. Letters and packages were often labeled without key identifying information, like serial numbers, making it exceedingly difficult to locate the intended recipients, especially because many soldiers shared the same name. More than 7,500 Robert Smiths served in the European Theater.

But the initial shock of the workload eventually gave way to collective determination. Before long, the Six Triple Eight was operating the fastest and most reliable mail directory in the European Theater. "No mail, low morale" was their unofficial motto. Looking back years later, women who served under Adams would recount how she earned their full support by going above and beyond to safeguard the unit's integrity. Like the time an American general appeared in Birmingham for a surprise inspection. When he complained of low turnout, Adams explained that a third of the battalion was occupied with their work, while their strict scheduling required another third to be sleeping. Appalled, the general threatened to replace her. "I'm going to send a white first lieutenant down here to show you how to run this unit," he said. But Adams didn't budge. Her reply: "Over my dead body, sir." The general made moves to court-martial Adams for insubordination but ultimately he backed down, and she remained in charge.

Adams also clashed with the Red Cross after it prepared a segregated hotel specially for Six Triple Eight members on leave in London. Apparently worried about black servicewomen socializing with white soldiers and civilians in the city, the organization suggested to Adams that "colored girls would be happier if they had a hotel all to themselves." At the encouragement of Adams, nobody from the unit ever stayed there. Instead, she coordinated with black troops stationed in London to ensure her soldiers stayed only in integrated hotels. The outcome was a small but profound victory for Adams. "What we had was a large group of adult Negro women who had been victimized, in one way or another, by racial bias," she wrote in her memoir. "This was one opportunity to stand together for a common cause."

Following Germany's surrender in May 1945, the Six Triple Eight was sent to France. They had been summoned to the city of Rouen to clear another postal logjam while noncombat military operations continued in the aftermath of the war. It was there that the unit tragically lost three of its own to a motor-vehicle accident: Mary Bankston, Mary Barlow and Dolores Browne, a trio known in their company as the "three B's." Adams was determined that they receive a proper burial. A few members of the battalion had worked in a mortuary before joining the military, and they prepared the bodies. The services, paid for with money the unit raised, were held in a hospital chapel. Bankston, Barlow and Browne account for three of just four women buried at the Normandy American Cemetery.

6/29/2020

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The battalion taking part in a parade in May 1945 in honor of Joan of Arc at the marketplace in Rouen, France, where she was burned at the stake. National Archives

In December 1945, Adams and much of the Six Triple Eight sailed back to the United States. That same month, the Army promoted Adams to lieutenant colonel, making her the first African-American woman to achieve that rank. She left the service the following year to finish graduate school before working at the Veterans Administration and as a college dean. “The problems of racial harmony, black acceptance and opportunity were still unresolved,” she wrote in her memoir, “but these were problems I could still work to help solve as a civilian.” After marrying and spending a few years in Switzerland studying Jungian psychology and learning German while her husband attended medical school, Charity Adams Earley spent the rest of her life applying her talents and energies to issues of racial justice as a community leader and activist in Dayton, Ohio.

Despite the enormous sacrifices made by black soldiers overseas, the military wasn’t officially desegregated until 1948. It would take another two decades for the country as a whole to follow suit — and that process is still far from complete. Five more decades passed before the Six Triple Eight, as a unit, received any formal recognition for its contributions during World War II. In 2019, the Army awarded the battalion the Meritorious Unit Commendation. As Lena King, 97, one of the Six Triple Eight’s few still-surviving members, put it, “We were never made to feel like anything we’d done was special. We never got a parade. We just went home to our families.”

That was how the story ended for most Six Triple Eight veterans.

When Adams died in January 2002, her family requested an honor guard but was turned down by an Army stretched thin by the recent invasion of Afghanistan. Only after an Air Force general learned of Adams’s passing and offered to provide an honor guard for her funeral, as an acknowledgment of the importance of her legacy to all of the armed services, did the Army reverse its decision. Thus two honor guards — the Army’s, and one from the Air Force, composed mostly of women — helped lay to rest the commander of the Six Triple Eight and the first black woman to ever lead American troops overseas.