

Honoring the 6888th Battalion of Black WACs

Moving a monumental mountain of military mail was their mission

By Parker Philpot
Special to the Las Vegas Tribune

Black History Unites the U.S.

Southern Nevada is a multi-cultural, vastly diverse place, and February is a designated time to spotlight Black culture by recognizing the unique, far-too-often unheralded history of Black Americans and others of African descent. Black History Month is for everyone to uphold as a time to learn about and celebrate the abundant contributions of Black people locally, nationally and globally. When we understand and honor the historic and present-day sacrifices of members of any community, we grow stronger, together, understanding how irrefutably connected all our communities are.

This is first in a series of articles honoring U.S. military heroes

As we leave Black History Month and enter Women's History Month, the story of a duty-bound group of women during World War II is the Las Vegas Tribune's 2018 contribution to highlighting unheralded Black heroes in the armed forces. There is a monument-building campaign underway to honor the 800-plus veteran Black women of the 6888th. Fundraising has started with local companies and supporters engaged in a creative way, and more military history with Blacks and women in the forefront is being brought to light.

Counting the Numbers

They were known as the "Six-Triple Eight," a battalion of over 800, enlisted, all-Black women who served in the U.S. Women's Army Corps overseas during World War II. Officially, it was the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, led by Maj. Charity Adams (1918-2002). She commanded the only battalion of Black WACs to serve abroad during WWII. For their training in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, the women came from more than twenty cities.

Their mission was clear and urgent upon deployment to the European Theater of Operations, the ETO: get the backlog of millions of pieces of mail moving, and keep it flowing to soldiers eager to get a letter or care package from home.

Simple. Just sort stacks of mail that had amassed inside of large aircraft hangars, towering for over two years, and swiftly direct it to members of the United States Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard and other service personnel, as well as Red Cross volunteers and civilians.

The job entailed getting as many of the letters and larger pieces to recipients as possible. Time estimated? Six months or longer. Mission done? Yes! Amazingly, the 6888th got it done in about half that time, at a pace of sorting 65,000 each eight-hour shift, around the clock, and handled over 17 million mailed items, as recounted in the commanding officer's 1980 book.

It was not easy, according to first-hand accounts. The 6888th was tasked with figuring out where each precious piece of mail needed to go, even when insufficiently, desperately addressed, such as Joe Smith, U.S. Army, Europe. It is anyone's guess as to how much any one love letter or picture of distant children lifted a fighter from despair or gave thousands the strength to survive



BuffaloSoldiersGear.com offers items to commemorate the WWII Black WACs 6888th Battalion and raise funds for the monument campaign.

another battle.

The guiding and driving motto of the 6888th was "No Mail, Low Morale."

The 6888th was stationed in Birmingham, England on arrival, Valentine's Day 1945, and later they worked handling more mail in two other cities, Rouen and Paris, France.

Adams' book, "One Woman's Army: A Black Officer Remembers the WAC," chronicles the events, triumphs and mishaps during her time in service. She was the first Black commissioned (Fort Des Moines, Iowa, 1942) in the then-Women's Auxiliary Army Corps, established under Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt in May 1941 and later renamed Women's Army Corps in 1943.

Legislation eventually gave WACs all the "rank, privileges and benefits" as their male counterparts. Black WACs faced equal danger as their male and female non-Black counterparts at war with declared enemy nations. The 6888th had an added unequal struggle with their birth country due to baseless bias, anti-Black attitudes and harsh segregationist laws reinforced against Blacks.

"Stories Untold. Sacrifices Unrecognized. Successes Uncelebrated"

Along with celebrating the excellent and proud work of the 6888th, the statements at the dedication of the monument, scheduled for late 2018, will undoubtedly recall the lack of acknowledgement for their historic, steadfast valor and honorable service. As the proposed brochure states: Upon their arrival home, there were no parades. No reporters swarming them with questions or taking pictures. No crowd of people welcoming them home or congratulating them for a job well done. Disbandment met them at Fort Dix, New Jersey, after their successful mission ended the following year, and the women of



Charity Adams, commander of the 6888th Battalion

the 6888th dispersed. Some of them continued to serve in the military.

Each woman must have sensed the sad truth about what they were returning to in a country that considered them second-class or lower, despite their thank-worthy service. Many other Black women from across the country served in the military on home ground during the era, and at least one other group, the 404th, Black nurses, who were not WACs, also served overseas.

It was not unusual that women experienced mistreatment during or after their military service. In a tragic fatal vehicle rollover in Europe, three WACs were killed, and no funds were allocated for burial, so the 6888th took up a collection and provided mortuary services for PFC Mary H Bankston, PVT Mary J. Barlow and SGT Debres Brown. In the South, three WACs were beaten while traveling, and one, PFC Helen Smith of Syracuse, New York, was severely beaten then jailed for being in the Whites-only, inside waiting room at a public bus depot. All were in uniform and heading to base. Upon arrival, they were court-martialed after enduring scolding for seeming non-compliant with the state of Kentucky's rules governing segregation. Eventually charges were reduced to disorderly conduct. Other malicious-oriented legal cases involving WACs have

appeared in newspapers.

Though the names and the faces were different, the many sad, cruel events were similar across America. Though the times were hard, the women were tougher. This and other initiatives to honor Black women in service has that fact at heart.

The 6888th monument development committee is gathering names of the deceased and the living members of the 6888th Battalion to add to a plaque that is incorporated into the design. Among the known surviving WACs are Millie Dunn Veasey of Raleigh, North Carolina, and Lois Hooper of Houston, Texas. Available information about the 6888th is sometimes limited and even contradictory at times, which is why the monument efforts are targeted at fundraising and equally making permanent, accurate records based on verifiable sources.

"It is not who is right, but what is correct," the 6888th Fact Sheet states.

The exact numbers of the enlisted and officers assigned to the 6888th vary, according to monument coordinators, and it depends on the sources cited. The most common number is 855 (824 enlisted and 31 officers), according to the resource materials provided by the committee. The emerging information is continually updated and expanded as news of the commemorative monument spreads.

The committee and fundraisers consist of community volunteers, educators, veterans and military historians, including Carlton Philpot, director, who also led the project to build the Buffalo Soldier Monument in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The likeness of Adams will appear atop the 6888th monument to be placed in the Buffalo Soldier Military Park on the site where the 10th Cavalry was forced to camp and sleep. Other military heroes are honored with statues and historic markers there. Among them are Gen. Colin Powell, the all-Black

555th paratroopers, and Gen. Roscoe Robinson, the first Black four-star general in the U.S. Army.

The 501(c)3 nonprofit handling contributions has suggested symbolic donation amounts of \$6.88, \$16.88 and \$68.88 for individuals, families, small businesses and organizations, up to \$6,888 as a corporate donor level. The goal is \$80,000, and according to their recent release, they are halfway to that from cash, pledges and donations in kind.

Locally, one supporter is expanding his imprinted apparel line at BuffaloSoldiersGear.com to include 6888th commemorative hats and other accessories.

"For all 6888th items, 100 percent of the profits are being donated to the monument fundraiser," said Scott "Tux" Simmons, a ten-year Las Vegas resident from the Midwest. "When I heard about these women [who fixed the mail], it was monumental!"

Simmons is a rider with the Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle Club Las Vegas and says he wants to "keep the legacy alive" for all military heroes. His site is adding more commemorative designs to help "educate" youth and adults and "spark interest" about history for everyone.

For more information about the 6888th and the monument, go to WomenOfThe6888th.org and their Facebook page.

Looking for Unsung Stories

Las Vegas has a wealth of Black history of its own. With so many travelers and newcomers, it is also the retirement place for history-makers whose legacy stories took place elsewhere. Look around, ask around, and it may prove surprising how many neighbors have quite a remarkable story to tell. The Las Vegas Tribune makes a space for these stories. If you have contact information for any veterans underrepresented in the U.S. history books, or if you are a contributor who was part of a major historical military event or group, please contact the Las Vegas Tribune. Your stories are welcome. The benefit from uncovering history and discovering legacies is the pride and knowledge all can share.

(And, yes, Las Vegas Tribune is seeking information on those valiant WACs of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion who may have relocated here. There are at least two reported to have family or descendants in the Southern Nevada area. Got info? Let the Tribune know.)

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Members of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion take part in a parade ceremony in honor of Joan d'Arc at the marketplace where she was burned at the stake. (Below left) Buffalo Soldier Military Park, site of the proposed monument honoring the battalion.

