# How an all-Black Women's Army Corps battalion lifted soldier morale in World War II

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of July 1, 2024)

Flatwater Tales Storytelling is fast becoming a standard area entertainment feature with the high caliber tellers and many audience members who have gained an appreciation for excellent storytelling! This year every session nearly filled the auditorium of the Historic Grove Theater.

Carolyn Krause does her usual excellent review of the various programs. This is the first in a series where she will examine the details contained in the stories told.

On Friday evening, June 7, 2024, at the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival, Charlotte Blake Alston captivated the audience with her compelling performance relating a true story few people have heard. She talked about the Six-Triple-Eight (6888), the first all-Black Women's Army Corps (WAC) Battalion assigned to military duty in Europe during World War II.

She received a standing ovation after her riveting performance at both the 2022 National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tenn. and the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival in Oak Ridge. Here is Carolyn Krause's abbreviated version of Alston's story. Enjoy what Carolyn has prepared for us!

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Charlotte Blake Alston, her son and other family members pored over letters and other papers they had uncovered after her parents passed away. They discovered that her father was a radio operator on a B-29 bomber during World War II. Her son conducted extensive research and learned that his grandfather was a member of just "a handful of integrated flight crews before the formal integration of the U.S. armed forces," Alston said.

His and Alston's research led them to many difficult-to-find and not-well-known stories about other African Americans who served in the most devastating war in recorded history. Alston then told the following story of the Six-Triple-Eight – an important but not well-known American war story. The text in quotes below is directly from her talk.

In February 1945, an ocean liner converted to a troopship arrived in Glasgow, Scotland. American and Canadian soldiers from North America disembarked and then headed by train to various battlefronts throughout Europe. Also enduring "the stomach-churning journey on a ship zigzagging in waters to avoid German torpedoes," was the first group of Black American women soldiers "ever allowed to set foot on European soil in service to their country and to its allies." They were the women of the 6,888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, the first U.S. Women's Army Corps Battalion composed completely of Black women.

Upon arrival the Six-Triple-Eight women learned to "scramble for cover" after they heard the ominous sound of the German V-1 buzz bomb, a long-range, flying bomb. Since June 13, 1944, thousands of these guided missiles, each powered by a noisy engine and carrying a high-explosive warhead, had killed more than 6,000 people. injured nearly 18,000 more and destroyed much of London and its countryside.

Before the highly trained and skilled Black women were given their most important assignment ever in Birmingham, England, Alston said, these soldiers dedicated to serving their country had to battle racism and discrimination. They had to stand up with "dogged determination" to multiple attempts by white commanding officers "to relegate them exclusively to positions of menial labor." Many resisted commanders' orders to scrub floors, wash dishes, do laundry, wash walls and clean toilets, risking being court martialed.

The day after Pearl Harbor was bombed by Japanese airmen in December 1941, the United States and Great Britain declared war on the Empire of Japan. The following day, Japan's Axis allies, the Nazi regime of Germany and the fascist regime of Italy declared war on the United States.

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Because thousands of men were suddenly needed for battles throughout Europe and in the Pacific, Congress instituted the first peacetime draft. By 1942 white, Black, Indigenous and Japanese men between the ages of 18 and 65 had to register for the Selective Service. The government instituted rationing to discourage hoarding and to ensure an equitable distribution of resources becoming scarce because of military demands for materials.

The U.S. military commitment to the war had risen dramatically from 174,000 to 10 million men. So many men had left their jobs to go to war that a huge need arose for women to fill factory positions. Between 1940 and 1945, five million women entered the workforce, taking jobs in defense plants and the aircraft industry (and also Manhattan Project plants in Oak Ridge and elsewhere to produce fuel for atomic bombs).

American women increasingly were taking clerical positions and other military support jobs freed up by men who had to go into combat (including baking, driving and medical tasks). In May 1941, U.S. Rep. Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts introduced a bill that would establish a women's corps as an auxiliary to the Army. (At the time only women trained as nurses served in the Army.) She worked with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune, then the advisor to President Franklin Roosevelt on Negro Affairs, to draft the resolution, which was originally opposed until after the attack on Pearl Harbor six months later.

In May 1942, Roosevelt signed a new law establishing the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) for providing to national defense the skills and training of American women. The WAAC did not have official military status, so it was converted to the Women's Army Corps (WAC) after Roosevelt signed a law on July 1, 1943. The War Department stated it would admit 10 qualified Black women for every 100 qualified white women.

The African American community learned that early applicants for the WAAC were Bethune and Charity Adams, a math teacher at a high school in Columbia, S.C. who was encouraged to apply by the dean of women at Adams' alma mater, Wilberforce University. Adams, who had a bachelor's degree in mathematics and physics, had been told earlier that Black women could only be hired to work as a domestic helper, sharecropper, preacher or teacher.

In July 1942, after passing an exam, she was inducted into WAAC at Fort Des Moines, Ia. There she was shocked to learn that the Black women were assigned as a group to a separate, segregated building. Black and white women there generally received basic training together, yet the African American women, even those with college degrees, were assigned the lowest rank positions. Black women were told they would face a court-martial hearing or be charged with insubordination if they challenged their orders.

The Black women had to eat at the far end of the mess hall marked "Colored" and hear comments like the one from a white recruit from Georgia who said loudly, "I've never eaten with a Negro, I'm not going to start now." Several Black women, after filling their plates with food while in line, out of anger "upended their plates on the table and walked out."

Some of their family members informed the First Lady and Bethune about the Black WAC recruits' mistreatment, and the two influential women persuaded the chief WAC officer at Fort Des Moines to tell the white women to treat everyone with the same respect. Bethune told the Black recruits that they were not wanted by the War Department, but they would make history if they set an example by performing exceptionally well all the tasks they were assigned.

Americans reacted negatively to news about a white colonel who forced Black WAC personnel to do menial jobs and then, after they refused, sent them to be court-martialed, resulting in their being

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sentenced to hard labor. He was relieved of his duties. and commanding officers were prohibited from assigning Black WAC enlistees to menial jobs.

Then in early 1945, the U.S. Army realized that the morale of its men fighting in Europe was very low because they were not receiving mail from home. The problem was traced to a backlog of undelivered mail at warehouses and undelivered Christmas packages in airplane hangars at Birmingham, England. The reason: a shortage of qualified postal workers as a result of the need for more warfighters.

The Army had given foreign assignments to white WAC units but not Black WAC units despite pressure by African-American groups to give them the opportunity to serve in the European Theater of Operations.

Charity Adams had been promoted to major, so it was decided that she could lead more than 880 enlisted Black women, including 31 officers, in solving the problem of getting the mail flowing again from Birmingham to American soldiers in Europe. She was offered a chance to lead a Black WAC mission overseas but was not told what it was until everybody arrived there. She eagerly agreed to take the challenge.

When she and her group reached Birmingham, they learned that hundreds of sacks of mail had piled up from floor to ceiling in temporary post offices in England and in France. The job of the new 6,888th Central Postal Directory Battalion led by Major Adams was to process the backlog and restart reliable mail delivery to improve U.S. troop morale.

The only all-Black, all-female Army unit ever allowed to serve on European soil during World War II solved the backlogged mail-and-package problem in three months even though a general predicted the job would take six months.

It wasn't easy. Many of the seven million Americans in the European Theater shared common names (7500 were named Robert Smith). Because mice were living in the warehouses, packages of cookies and cakes that had sat too long were damaged, moldy and leaking sludge onto letters.

"One of the most challenging things that they had to do was to figure out how to look at a name on a package and figure out the precise soldier that package was meant for," Alston said. "Some of the mail sacks had been sitting for months, some almost a year. Six airplane hangars contained only Christmas mail. Some of the women served as censors, reading every letter; no sensitive information could be revealed to any civilian because it might reveal troop positions or battle plans.

"The warehouses were so cold the women had to keep their boots on and keep their coats on to protect themselves from rotten food and from nesting mice. The light was low, putting a strain on their eyes. On a single shift, the women would handle 65,000 pieces of mail and packages."

After completing the job in England, the Six-Triple-Eight women were sent in June 1945 to France to deal with a three-year backlog there. There, they trained German POWs and French citizens to help them with the task.

In March 1946, the remaining members of the 6888 returned to the United States but received no official recognition when they were disbanded at Fort Dix in New Jersey. In 1981 a few of the Six-Triple-Eight veterans were honored in Birmingham and Paris. In 2002, Charity Adams Earley was honored by the Smithsonian Institution's National Postal Museum. A public school in Dayton, Ohio, bears her name.

In 2009 the Six-Triple-Eight was honored at the 2009 Army commendation ceremony at the Military Women's Memorial at Arlington Cemetery.

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In 2019, 73 years after they returned home, the battalion with its surviving members in their late 90s or early 100s were recognized with a Meritorious Unit Commendation medal by the Defense Department. In 2022, legislation was passed by Congress to award a Congressional Gold Medal to the members of the 6,888th Central Postal Directory Battalion. Alston concluded:

"Though the odds were set against them, the women of the 6,888th processed millions of letters and packages during their deployment in Europe, helping to connect World War II soldiers with their loved ones back home, like my mom and dad."

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Thank you, Carolyn, for bringing us the beginning of a series on the recent Flatwater Tales Storytelling! I am looking forward to the rest of the series! What fun! However, I also know we might well learn some interesting history as well!

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Charlotte Blake Alston Courtesy of Ray Smith

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The crowd shows their appreciation! Courtesy of Ray Smith