



Retired Master Sgt. Elizabeth Helm-Frazier touches the bust made in the likeness of battalion commander Lt. Col. Charity Adams on the monument honoring the all-female, all-African American 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion 29 November 2018 in the Buffalo Soldier Commemorative Area, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Helm-Frazier, of Maryland, said she knows how important mail is to service members, and she joined the project team to help get the monument funded so that future generations will know that women in uniform also helped guarantee freedom. (Photo by Prudence Siebert, *Fort Leavenworth Lamp*)

“No Mail, Low Morale”

The 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion

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During World War II, sitting in aircraft hangars at Birmingham, England, were millions of undelivered pieces of mail and packages. Those U.S. service members in Europe took notice that no mail was being delivered and Army officials reported that a lack of reliable mail was hurting morale. It was predicted that it would take six months to clear the backlog in England, but who was up for the task?

In November 1944, African American women—824 enlisted and thirty-one officers—were recruited from the Women’s Army Corps, the Army Service Forces, and the Army Air Forces to form the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, or the “Six Triple Eight.”¹ The first and only all-female African American battalion to be deployed overseas during World War II was organized into a Headquarters Company, for administrative and service

Battalion commander Maj. Charity Adams and executive officer Capt. Abbie Noel Campbell inspect the first soldiers of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion to arrive in England 15 February 1945. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)



support, and four postal directory companies—A, B, C, and D—commanded by either a captain or a first lieutenant. The battalion would be commanded by Maj. Charity Edna Adams Earley, the first African American woman to achieve the rank of lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army.

Upon arriving in Birmingham after their initial training at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, the 6888th's mission seemed simple: clear the backlog of mail bags that filled hangars from floor

to ceiling. However, many of the letters and packages were addressed simply to "Junior," "Buster," or to soldiers who shared common names such as "Robert Smith." Also, the hangars themselves were poorly lit, unheated, and cold and damp, with rats making their homes in packages of stale cookies and cakes. The women wore long underwear and extra layers of clothing underneath their uniforms in order to stay warm. The lighting was poor due to the windows being blacked out to prevent



light from escaping and alerting enemy aircraft of their location during nighttime air raids. The late Staff Sgt. Millie L. Dunn Veasey stated that there were buzz bombs that came down. “You could see them, and then you didn’t know where they were going to land,” she said. “You had to go get into a shelter. Just drop everything, and just run.”²

With World War II raging on, the soldiers of the 6888th were given six months to sort and deliver the mail—they did it in three months. The women divided into three eight-hour shifts and worked seven days a week to sort and redirect an average of sixty-five thousand pieces of mail per day, totaling nearly seven million pieces in Birmingham alone. The mail clerks used special locator cards that contained soldiers’ names, unit numbers, and serial numbers to help ensure proper delivery; they also had the duty of returning mail addressed to those service members who had died.³ The women developed the motto “No mail, low morale,” as they were providing the support of linking service members with their loved ones back home.



Members of the 6888th sorting mail. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

Following their three months in Birmingham, the members of the 6888th were deployed to Rouen, France, to clear two to three years of backed up mail. And again, the women completed the task in just three months. While deployed to Paris, they faced new challenges: the theft of packages and items from packages to supply the populace.⁴

The battalion was transferred home and disbanded at Fort Dix, New Jersey, in 1946. There was no ceremony, no parades, no public appreciation, and no official recognition for all their accomplishments.⁵

Though there have been exhibits and educational programs about the 6888th, public events honoring the women of the battalion have been few. One of the most prominent events was a ceremony by the Women in Military Service for America Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery. Veterans received certificates, letters of appreciation from the secretary of the Army and the Army chief of staff, lapel pins, and de-

calcs.⁶ The most recent



French civilians and soldiers from the 6888th sort mail in the spring of 1945. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Womens Museum)



event to honor the 6888th was the 30 November 2018 dedication of a monument located at the Buffalo Soldier Commemorative Area on Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Five surviving members of the battalion attended: Pvt. Maybelle Rutland Tanner Campbell, Pfc. Elizabeth Barker Johnson, Cpl. Lena Derriecott Bell King, Pvt. Anna Mae Wilson Robertson, and Pfc. Deloris Ruddock.

Carlton Philpot, Buffalo Soldier Monument Committee chair and project director, said that the goal of this monument is to “make it unique enough that no one will have to look for it when they come into the park.” With the names of five hundred battalion members and a 25-inch bronze bust of its leader, Lt. Col. Charity Adams Earley, the monument is truly unique. It joins monuments dedicated to Gen. Colin Powell, 2nd Lt. Henry Flipper, the 555th Parachute Infantry Division, the Buffalo Soldier, and others in the Circle of Firsts and the Walkway of Units at the Buffalo Soldier Commemorative Area. As Earley’s son, Stanley, said, “My mother was always enormously proud of the Six Triple Eight. This monument is a statement of the responsibility, determination, and honor, and it is a gift from the recent past addressed to the future.”

Kansas Sen. Jerry Moran said, “When we unveil this monument, what we are really saying is this: Thank you for your service. We respect you and we love you.” ■

Veterans who served during World War II with the 6888th, (left to right) Pvt. Anna Mae Wilson Robertson, Pfc. Elizabeth Barker Johnson, Pfc. Deloris Ruddock, Pvt. Maybelle Rutland Tanner Campbell, and Cpl. Lena Derriecott Bell King gather around the monument honoring the battalion 29 November 2018 the day before a ceremony dedicating the monument at the Buffalo Soldier Commemorative Area, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The women, all in their nineties, are five of seven known surviving members. (Photo by Prudence Siebert, Fort Leavenworth Lamp)

Notes

1. Kathleen Fargey, “6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion (Women’s Army Corps),” U.S. Army Center of Military History, 14 February 2014, accessed 10 December 2018, <https://history.army.mil/html/topics/afam/6888thPBn/index.html>.
2. Millie L. Dunn Veasey, “Women Veterans Project at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro,” interview by Hermann Trojanowski, 25 June 2000, Raleigh, North Carolina.
3. Kevin M. Hymel, “6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion,” *On Point* (Spring 2009): 22 and 24; Fargey, “6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion (Women’s Army Corps).”
4. Fargey, “6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion (Women’s Army Corps).”
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*