



Major Charity Adams inspects the battalion

THE SIX TRIPLE EIGHT

The women who moved the mail during World War II

Mail creates a connection between sender and recipient like no other, and that's especially true during wartime. In his 1942 annual report, Postmaster General Frank C. Walker said, "The Post Office, War and Navy departments realize fully that frequent and rapid communication with parents, associates and other loved ones strengthens fortitude, enlivens patriotism, makes loneliness endurable and inspires to even greater devotion the men and women who are carrying on our fight far from home and from friends."

But by early 1945, mail to the U.S. troops stationed in the European theater of World War II had become a slog, with a massive backlog that some estimated would take up to six months to unjam. Warehouses in Birmingham, England, were filled nearly to the ceiling with letters and packages, and thousands more pieces of mail came flooding in every day. And the armed forces didn't have enough qualified postal officers to get the job done.

Into this morass, the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion arrived and got to work. But the Six Triple Eight, as

they were known, almost never came to be and then had to struggle to get the job done without interference. But with perseverance and determination, they would end up doing their duty.

During the early years of WWII, a few Black women had been serving in the Women's Army Corps (WAC). Like their white counterparts, they often served in communications and administrative roles within the armed forces. But some vocal champions called on the nation to let Black women lead their own WAC battalion. Mary McLeod Bethune, an advisor to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, pushed First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt for "a role for black women in the war overseas."

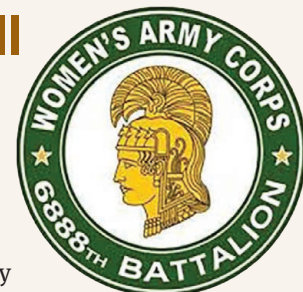
With the first lady's support, the Six Triple Eight was created and volunteers were sent to Georgia for basic training. They jumped trenches in gas masks, marched with rucksacks, and learned to identify enemy ships and aircraft. Some Black women who already were serving in the WAC joined the battalion there. By the time of deployment, 31 officers and 824 enlisted women were serving under the command of Major Charity Adams.

Maj. Adams was the first Black officer in the WACs.

As she moved up in command, because the Army was still segregated, she was placed in a company with fellow female Black officers until she was assigned the Six Triple Eight.

The battalion left the United States in February 1945, sailing on the *Ile de France*. "On the way over, because this is wartime, we were chased by a submarine, and we had to shoot out," battalion member Delores Ruddock said in 2018 at an event to honor the Six Triple Eight. They disembarked in Glasgow, Scotland, where a German V1 rocket, known as a buzz bomb, exploded near the pier, sending them running for cover.

But when the women arrived in Birmingham, "that was another life, really," Ruddock said. There, they found cold, dim warehouses, with rats nibbling on packages of spoiled food. Several warehouses were full of undelivered



Christmas packages. Some letters had been in the makeshift offices for as long as two years.

Army officials were concerned that the undelivered mail was hurting morale. Problems stemmed from several factors, including many letters and packages being addressed with only the first name of the soldier or a nickname. There even were problems where the mail had full names, such as figuring out which of the 7,500 Robert Smiths was the correct recipient. And, as noted above, there was a lack of qualified postal officers to do the job.

Other personnel had tried to fix the problem and failed. Some doubted that the Six Triple Eight would fare any better.

Maj. Adams set the women working around the clock in three eight-hour shifts. They developed cards to track individual service members, using serial numbers to distinguish those with the same names. They redirected the mail marked “undeliverable,” identifying the correct recipients of wrongly addressed mail, and returned letters and packages to the families of the fallen. Soon they were processing 65,000 pieces of mail per shift. Their motto was “No mail, low morale.”

Despite their postal prowess, the women were hampered by those who thought they knew better. When a general wanted to know why the entire battalion wasn't present for an inspection, Maj. Adams explained that the women were on their sleep shift. The general said that he'd send a white male lieutenant to show her how to run a unit. “Over my dead body, sir,” she replied.

The general threatened to court-martial her for disobeying orders, but Maj. Adams began to file charges against him for using “language stressing racial segregation” and ignoring a directive from Allied Force Headquarters. They both dropped the matter, and after seeing the women clear the



Some of the backlog of mail the 6888th found waiting for them in Birmingham, England



Members of the 6888th sort parcels in France about two months after the end of WWII.



The 6888th marching in Birmingham, England

backlog in just three months—half the expected time—the same general praised both the battalion and Maj. Adams for their work.

“They had to be the best of the best,” said retired Army Colonel Edna Cummings, who has worked to preserve the legacy of the 6888th. “Others had tried and failed to clear that backlog. They were not expected to achieve, and they overachieved.”

Maj. Adams said she believed that part of the battalion’s role was to forward the cause of desegregation. When the Red Cross tried to donate equipment for a new segregated recreation center, she refused to accept it. Her unit had been sharing the recreation center with white units and she didn’t want the opportunity to end.

She encouraged her battalion to socialize with white troops returning from the front and even the residents of the city or town where they were stationed. She wanted to create comradeship between enlisted personnel and officers and ease the tensions of racism.

Having fixed one postal logjam, the battalion was sent to France to fix the next. In May 1945, they were shipped across the English Channel and eventually reached Rouen, capital of the Normandy region. There, they found some letters that were three years old. Using the same techniques, the 6888th got the mail moving again in half the estimated time. The French people welcomed the American service members, and the Six Triple Eight was

invited to take part in a parade ceremony at the place where Joan of Arc died.

By October 1945, they were sent on to Paris, where they were housed in a luxurious hotel and received first-class treatment. But by then, the war was over and the battalion was reduced by 300 women, with 200 more discharged a few months later.

The skeleton unit returned to the United States, where it was disbanded at Fort Dix in New Jersey, and it was mostly forgotten about for years. Some of the women continued on with the military, but most returned to civilian life. Some used the G.I. Bill to further their education. Three battalion members were buried at the Normandy American Cemetery.

Adams, who by then had risen to the rank of lieutenant colonel, decided not to continue with her military career and went into academia. She earned a master’s degree in psychology from The Ohio State University, and taught at the Miller Academy of Fine Arts, Tennessee A&I College and Georgia State College. She also wrote a book about her military service.

“They did their job with dignity and respect, with dedication and commitment, even though they were faced daily with prejudices,” said retired Army Master Sergeant Elizabeth Helm-Frazier, who has worked with Cummings to preserve the battalion’s legacy. “They didn’t ask for pity. They had volunteered to come into the Army and serve their country when their country

really did not serve them, knowing that when they got out they would go back to a country that discriminated against them because of their race.”

Seventy-five years later, the Six Triple Eight is receiving new attention as the subject of an award-winning documentary. Filmmaker and military veteran Jim Theres interviewed five of the battalion’s few surviving members to create “The Six Triple Eight.” The documentary has appeared at numerous film festivals and was scheduled to appear at more before the COVID-19 pandemic caused many festivals to be canceled or postponed.

Theres was assisted by producers Cummings and Helm-Frazier, who previously had helped raise funds to build a memorial to the battalion and helped the filmmaker get in touch with surviving members. That memorial now stands at Buffalo Soldier Monument Park in Fort Leavenworth, KS.

Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS) drafted legislation to award the Six Triple Eight with the Congressional Gold Medal. The legislation unanimously passed in the Senate and a companion bill is being worked on in the House of Representatives.

“They were trailblazers,” Cummings said. “I call them ‘pioneer patriots.’”

Helm-Frazier agrees. “They paved the way,” she said. “You’ve got women going into the infantry, into the field artillery and through Ranger school all because the Six Triple Eight laid the foundation.” **PR**