

WOMEN AND WAR

Fighting on All Fronts

Facts:

- During WWII African-Americans composed approximately one-eighth of the US Armed Forces which was the same proportion as in the general population
- African-Americans were segregated and disproportionately represented in noncombatant, support positions. In 1943 at Fort Demoinés, 823 qualified black female soldiers awaited service orders as most bases refused to request them
- Major Charity Adams-Early, the highest ranking African-American woman in WWII, took 824 black enlisted women and 31 black female officers to serve in the European Theatre in Jan 1945. The 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion served in Birmingham, England and Rouen, France.

Before the Reading

- African-American soldiers, male and female, fought on many fronts during WWII—some of those fronts were at home. List their home battles.
- Why would African-Americans have enlisted proportionately to their population to serve a country that segregated them and discriminated against them?
- What kind of a character and background would Charity Adams have to enlist in the US Army and face the hurdles to assuming leadership?

Reading 1 The Mail Must Get Through

Major Charity Adams

Members of 6888th Postal Battalion came from Army installations throughout the US. While most of them were postal clerks, others plied the service and support positions that made the unit almost entirely self-sufficient. The 6888th ran its own mess halls, motor pools and supply rooms. **Major Charity Adams**, the war's highest ranking African-American woman, flew to Birmingham, England ahead of her troops to find that their base was a dimly lit, damp, former boys' school clogged with a backlog of ingoing and outgoing mail. A shortage of personnel had allowed the mail for seven million service people to accumulate. The delays in delivery threatened GI morale as the Allied armies thrust into Germany. The task of the 6888th : Get the mail through!

The ship carrying Major Adams' troops arrived in Birmingham Jan, 1945. When the doors to the school auditorium opened, the women saw floor to ceiling mail and packages—some of which had been waiting for up to two years to reach soldiers in the field. Even as the work to clear the backlog began with three eight hour shifts working around the clock, new trainloads of mail arrived. To make matters worse, the lighting was poor as the windows had been painted for war blackouts, the ventilation sub-standard and the heating so inadequate that the women wore ski pants and field jackets.

Major Adams set about refining the systems that allowed the women to re-direct the mail efficiently. She created categories for activities in each military service to trace elusive recipients, to distinguish between people with common names and to try different destinations for companies on the move. One problem, for example, was that there were 7,500 people with the name of Robert Smith. The relocation of battle casualties and the frequent re-assignment of troops were other major problems. As 6888th veteran Mary Ebo said, "The troops were moving so fast the mail couldn't keep up with them. They had a job to be done. We felt we were doing our part."¹

The poor working conditions included nightly sirens as incoming planes dropped bombs on Birmingham. Odessa Marshall, a 19 year old medical technician holding sick calls in the dispensary described how she would drop everything, grab her backpack and helmet and climb onto her cot until the sirens stopped. "Everybody was frightened. No one had been in anything like that before."² Yet, in spite of the fears, Marshall added that there was a lot of pride. The 6888th cleared the backlog in five months.

In May 1945 the 6888th was sent to Rouen, France where most of the mail in France had been held up for months. Ordered to have the backlog eliminated in six months, the members of the battalion vowed to get the job done in three. They set to work in less than ideal conditions with a strong sense of sisterhood and efficient work habits. As they anonymously processed millions of pieces of mail, there was a sense of recognition that they were improving the quality of GI life.

Few Americans did as much to set the scene for victory as the women of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion. Selfless dedication, teamwork, attention to detail and the strong leadership of Major Adams got the French mail moving. In her memoir, *One Woman's Army*, Major Adams recounted that when she later told the story of being in France during the war years, a veteran asked her what she was doing visiting Paris during the war. Her reply was, "I wasn't visiting—I was helping you win the war!"

After the Reading:

- The 6888th had good reason to be proud. List as many reasons as you can.
- What vital leadership skills did Major Adams have?
- What motivated the women of the 6888th to succeed?

Reading 2 – Odessa and Blanche

Odessa Marshall

Odessa Marshall, a young southern woman, joined the Women's Army Corps in 1942, right out of high school. For African-American females, WWII offered unprecedented opportunities to serve their country. By 1945, the 19 year old medical technician with the 6888th Postal Battalion was overseeing sick calls in a dispensary while dodging Luftwaffe bombs that fell on Birmingham. Odessa went to Rouen, France with the 6888th where she shared their pride that they got the back-logged mail moving to the GIs who had waited months, and even years, to hear from home.

Odessa married Army Quartermaster Joseph Marshall who worked for a gas company after the war. Odessa became a nurse. Together Joseph and Odessa raised nine children in South Central Los Angeles, all of whom went on to obtain at the minimum, a college level education. Odessa and Joseph worked opposite shifts so that one of them could always be home with the children.

In an interview for the "Unsung Heroes Living History Project" Odessa said that she did not experience racism in Europe. However, after WWII she was asked to get off a 'white' bench in a train station as she headed back to Fort Huachuca in Arizona. In spite of the racial epithet spit at her, Odessa simply got up and walked away.

In 2003, Odessa Marshall's son, Sergeant First Class John W. Marshall was killed in action in Iraq. When he was laid to rest in Section 60 of Arlington Cemetery, Odessa Marshall proudly wore her Women's Army Corps uniform.

Blanche Scott

Blanche Scott learned early that she had to rely on herself. When her mother failed to come home from her job in Washington, she waited for days until finally an uncle arrived to tell Blanche that their mother had been killed in a streetcar accident near the National Zoo.

On her own, Blanche completed high school, attended Howard University until money ran out and then worked first as a nurse's aide and then as a clerk at the Navy Department. Blanche enlisted in the Women's Army Corps in 1942. She took Officer Candidate training at a time when the military welcomed neither African Americans nor women.

Major Scott was assigned to the 6888th as a personnel officer. A retired Army Colonel and military historian, Pat

Jernigan, said that, "They walked into a postal system that was a disaster and they got it straightened out."³

After WWII Scott stayed on as a public affairs officer under the command of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis Jr., of the Army Air Forces. In the late 1940s when the military was integrated, Scott was among the first black officers, either male or female, to command mixed units.

With the sharp reduction of the military after the Korean War, Scott was out of a job. Since the military was the only life she'd known for a decade, she resolved to stay on. She found a way. She started again at the bottom.

The 39 year old Major Scott enlisted as a Private and went back to work in the same office at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri where she'd been a Major. She simultaneously joined the Army Reserves where she kept her Major rank. After ten years, Blanche Scott retired simultaneously as a Sergeant First Class in the regular army and as a Major in the Reserve. With 20 years of active duty, Major Scott retired with full pension.

Blanche Scott worked as a civilian employee at Fort Leonard Wood until she approached 60. Then she returned to college to complete a degree in sociology from the University of Colorado.

A diminutive woman who favoured bright dresses, Blanche was often asked to speak at gatherings of Women's Army Corps veterans. Colonel Jernigan recalled, "Blanche got up and talked extemporaneously. It was absolutely inspirational. She had some really rough times, but she was absolutely without any bitterness or rancour. She was at peace with the world."

Kate Scott, a Williams and Mary College interviewer said, "I don't think this world understands quite yet the significance of women like Major Blanche Scott and the women of the 6888th."

After the Reading

- List Odessa's and Blanche's contributions during WWII and after.
- War or no war, what makes Odessa and Blanche great?

Extensions

- Read *One Woman's Army* by Charity Adams-Early or *To Serve My Country, to Serve My Race* by Brenda L. Moore. Both write about the 6888th.
- The words below describe the American project that captured Major Blanche Scott. Create a Canadian equivalent.
- *Unsung Heroes Living History Project* is an exciting intergenerational program that teaches young people valuable 21st century job skills and the importance of service to the community, volunteerism and civic engagement. Working with adult mentors, youth producers interview veterans while incorporating computers to combine the veteran's words with images and music, creating short digital stories that are shared with schools, libraries and museums.

¹ Teichert, Nancy Weaver "Women of Color Celebrate WWII Contributions" Simply Family website www.simplyfamily.com/display.cfm?articleID=000907_WWII_women.cfm

² Louey, Sandy "Giving voice to heroes, history: Project records the role of African American veterans", *Sacramento Bee*, Mar 14, 2006

³ Schudel, Matt "Blanche L. Scott, Major, United States Army, Washington Post, April 29, 2007