

NCO Trailblazers

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Command Sgt. Maj. Mildred C. Kelly, the first female African American sergeant major, command sergeant major and the first female command sergeant major of a major Army installation, with Brig. Gen. Alvin D. Ungerleider, commander of Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, during her retirement ceremony in 1976. (Photo courtesy of Sheila Lewis)

In honor of Women's History Month and African American History Month, we celebrate the contributions of female noncommissioned officers who volunteered to serve the nation. Some of these women were the first of their race and gender to fulfill senior leadership positions and set the foundation for others to follow.

World War II

"No mail, low morale."¹

-6888th unit motto

During World War II, the Army had more than 17 million backlogged letters, packages, and posters stored in air handlers. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme allied commander, directed the 6888th

Central Directory Postal Battalion (<http://www.womenofthe6888th.org/>), the only African American World War II Women's Army Corps² unit to deploy overseas, to process the mail in six months to boost troop morale.³ The unit completed the assignment in half the allotted time.

In recognition of the 6888th CPD Battalion's efforts, a monument will be erected in the "Circle of Firsts," which recognizes trailblazing African American Soldiers, at the Buffalo Soldier Memorial Park (https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g38838-d8460206-Reviews-Buffalo_Soldier_Memorial_Park-Leavenworth_Kansas.html), Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in mid-September of 2018.

Women of the 6888th CPD Battalion

Staff Sgt. Millie Louise (Dunn) Veasey

*"It does not rain **in** the Army. It rains **on** the Army."*

-A phrase Veasey heard during reveille call in the rain⁴

In December 1942, Millie Veasey enlisted in the WAC. "Nobody was in favor. It was just a taboo, maybe, in the black community," she said. "I did feel, though, that if the Army was selecting women and if there were black Soldiers in the Army, then why not black women in the Army?"⁵

By April 1943, she was in Fort Denver, Colorado, for recruit training. After six weeks she was assigned to Fort Clark, Texas, then Camp Maxey, Texas, with a follow-on assignment for two weeks of overseas training at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. She then deployed to Birmingham, England, for four months and Rouen, France, for nine months as part of the 6888th CPDB.

The day after Victory in Europe Day, the battalion left England for Rouen, France. "We did not have any mattresses and they had put this straw, or whatever it was, into your bags," said Veasey, who was the supply sergeant for Company B during that time. "That's what we slept on. I remember I had gotten mattresses for all of my people in Company B."⁶

Related: Sweet Georgia Brown (<http://>)

Pfc. Anna Mae (Wilson) Robertson

NCOs truly made an impact in the 6888th CPD Battalion, as Pfc. Anna Mae (Wilson) Robertson remembers. They were not simply supervisors but supported and encouraged their sisters-in-arms during the early and long shifts. Lt. Col. Charity Adams Earley oversaw the WAC unit, but Robertson recalled the NCOs as the ones who interacted with Soldiers daily, provided support, and ate with them while the officers ate separately.⁷ One NCO in particular, a supervisor named Sgt. Evelyn Ross, bunked with Robertson and a relationship formed so strong that after the war they continued rooming with each other until Ross' marriage.

Related: Learn more about the 6888th CPDB (www.womenofthe6888th.org)

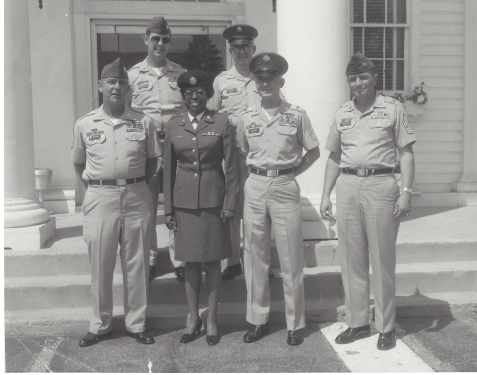
Korean and Vietnam War Era

Command Sgt. Maj. Mildred C. Kelly

"No matter how far you go, you can always look to a higher position."⁸

-Command Sgt. Maj. Mildred C. Kelly

On June 30, 1974, Mildred C. Kelly became the first African American woman to hold the rank of command sergeant major and became the first female command sergeant major of a major Army installation.⁹ She was also the first African American female to reach the rank of sergeant major.



Kelly with fellow command sergeants major during her promotion to Women's Army Corps command sergeant major. (Photo courtesy of Sheila Lewis)

Kelly enlisted in 1947 into an Army segregated by race and gender. "She was always pristine with her appearance in her uniform and out," said Janetta Kelly, the daughter of Army Capt. Frederick Kelly, Kelly's brother.¹⁰

"I was impressed with how official she looked," said Rayburn Lewis, the eldest of Kelly's nieces and nephews. "I was scared to death," he added, laughing. "She was the Army, and I knew to behave."¹¹

Rayburn often wondered why her aunt did not go to Officer Candidate School to become a commissioned officer like her brother. "She told me once she became sergeant major and command sergeant major, if she had gone back to officer training, she would have come back as a lieutenant. She said, 'I have way more power and control as the command sergeant major than I would have even as a captain.'... She felt that she had more influence, that she could be more of a role model or more in the position that she was in, and have significant influence over how her base and command ran."¹²



Kelly during her promotion to sergeant major. She was the first African American woman to hold this rank and grade in the WAC.
(Photo courtesy of Sheila Lewis)

After retiring from the Army in 1976, Kelly remained an active leader by joining boards, committees, and speaking at panels.

While on the Board of Women in Military Service for American Memorial Foundation, Inc., she helped construct the Women in Military Service for America Memorial (<https://www.womensmemorial.org/>) at the Arlington Cemetery ceremonial entrance.¹³

Kelly died in 2003 and was buried with full military honors in the Arlington National Cemetery.

"She was a proud military Soldier. It was what she did. It was who she was," said Sheila Lewis, Kelly's niece and Rayburn's younger sister. "She was honored to serve in the military and took her job very seriously."¹⁴

Sgt. Maj. Grendel Alice Howard

*"We convinced the bosses that when they didn't let us do our jobs fully, that affected our chances for promotion."*¹⁵

-Sgt. Maj. Grendel Alice Howard

In January 1968, Spc. Grendel Alice Howard, then attached to the 1st Logistical Command Headquarters, Long Binh, Vietnam, was a journalist and administrative assistant to the noncommissioned-officer-in-charge. As one of the first enlisted combat reporters, her job was to interview Soldiers and write stories.¹⁶

When she arrived in Long Binh, she had to be chaperoned by a male Soldier because at the time women were not allowed to drive or operate Army vehicles. As the only enlisted woman in the public affairs office,¹⁷ she was at a severe disadvantage. A friend of hers, Doris "Lucki" Allen, assigned to military intelligence, experienced similar issues. Frustrated, they approached their superiors.

"We convinced the bosses that when they didn't let us do our jobs fully, that affected our chances for promotion," she said. "We did make that little breakthrough for women over there. We never did break through the one about having weapons."¹⁸

The WAC company did have weapons, but they were kept in a supply room and not issued, unless the barracks were under attack. Howard described how much it bothered her being weaponless in a war zone: "Every time a rocket started coming in, I wanted [a weapon] right then," she said, laughing. "I wasn't waiting until we got attacked."¹⁹

Howard served three consecutive tours in Vietnam and, by the end of the war, she was a sergeant first class and the public affairs office NCOIC. Once she returned to the U. S., she was sent to videography school to film Soldiers for Army TV commercials and contributed to the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. She retired from the Army as a sergeant major in 1985.

Thirty-three years after her retirement, she remarked that during her time in military service, it seemed

that Soldiers were encouraged to be independent and the Army today encourages Soldiers to help each other.²⁰

Operations Southern Watch and Iraqi Freedom

Command Sgt. Maj. Evelyn Hollis

"I believe that leaders are the single most important asset that any organization has."²¹

-Command Sgt. Maj. Evelyn Hollis

On September 16, 1979, retired Command Sgt. Maj. Evelyn Hollis, a 2018 U.S. Army Women's Foundation Hall of Fame (<https://www.awfdn.org/hall-of-fame/>) inductee and an associate professor at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas, joined the Army with the mindset "to be all she [could] be."²² At that time, women were expected to do "women" jobs, and so for the first five years of her service, Hollis was a 71L administrative assistant.²³ However, she wanted to make the rank of sergeant and typing at a desk while brewing the office coffee was not going to make that happen.

"I was like, 'Oh no, no, no. I want to get out of here. I don't just want to do this,'" she said. "I felt that I could be a good sergeant. I felt like I really had the best interests of my little squad, my subordinates."²⁴

When Hollis enlisted, there were two promotion tracks: hard stripe NCOs and specialists ranks. Seeing that she was in the specialist or technical side, she knew that she would never be a sergeant. As a result, she changed her military occupational specialty to a job in Air Defense Artillery and was promoted to sergeant.

When she achieved the rank of command sergeant major, Hollis was both excited and nervous to be the first African American woman to be appointed to a combat unit. Though she was often the only female during meetings, she never let the gender difference get the best of her and instead focused on being the leader she wanted to be.

"I was really looking forward to looking at how I could better the organization and how I could empower my subordinates so we would always be successful. I was just looking forward to that type of experience in the organization," Hollis said.²⁵

Hollis discussed challenges women faced in the Army, such as the fact that men were given respect, whereas women had to work to gain the same level of acceptance. Other issues, like misconceptions about men being better leaders than females, led to misconduct, stripped liberties, and sexual harassment.

A major change in the Army that helped to alleviate these issues, Hollis noted, was the introduction of the Army values. Leaders were not addressing questionable behavior before the introduction of the values, and though she pointed out that there may still be problems with sexual harassment today, the values emphasized the importance of cracking down on such behavior in the Army and instilling them in Soldiers.

"There was a lot of questionable behavior that leaders were lenient with because they did not

understand how to operate with and work with women in other than traditional roles," Hollis said. "I think that male Soldiers, male officers, male employees—anybody—had to get used to seeing women in the workplace, not necessarily as a secretary and not necessarily in [non-leadership] jobs."²⁶

After retiring in 2007, Hollis earned a Master of Arts degree in Human Resources and a Doctorate of Management. She specifically pursued these degrees to continue leading and developing subordinates.

"I think that my experience, skills, and knowledge, as a retired CSM, really upholds the legacy of the noncommissioned officer as the backbone of the Army..." Hollis said. "As a leader, I try to work every day to appreciate what others bring to the table, knowing that everyone is a valuable member of the team."²⁷

In Closing

From the earliest days of Army service, female African American Soldiers have proven their dedication, leadership, and commitment to duty. They play a vital role in the Army's ongoing mission.

Each of these trailblazers faced challenges in breaking down barriers with bravery and determination. Though perhaps not as well-known as their male counterparts, their accomplishments and willingness to shed traditional roles established a path and built a legacy for other Soldiers to succeed.

Related

Unsung Heroes: The Story of America's Female Patriots Part 1 (<http://www.pbs.org/video/mpt-presents-unsung-heroes-story-americas-female-patriots-part1/>) & Part 2 (<http://www.pbs.org/video/mpt-presents-unsung-heroes-story-americas-female-patriots-part2/>)

For Love of Liberty: The Story of America's Black Patriots (<https://www.amazon.com/Love-Liberty-Story-Americas-Patriots/dp/B00GOC7538>) documentary

Military Women on Land, at Sea and in the Air (<http://userpages.aug.com/captbarb/news.html>)

Other Firsts

Command Sgt. Maj. Michele S. Jones

Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Jones was the first female African American command sergeant major of the Army Reserve, the first woman to serve as a division command sergeant major, the first woman to be selected as the top NCO in the Reserve, and the first female to be chosen as the senior NCO in any of the Army's components.²⁸ She was also the first female USASMA president.²⁹

Profiles of Bravery - African Americans in the U.S. Army
(<https://www.army.mil/africanamericans/profiles/jones.html>)

Where is she now? (<https://civilityms.com/michele-s-jones/>)

Command Sgt. Maj. Teresa King

Retired Command Sgt. Maj. King was the first woman to serve as commandant of the U.S. Army Drill

Sergeant School.³⁰ From 1997 to 2001, she was also the first female sergeant to serve in the 18th Airborne Corps.³¹

First female commandant takes reins at Drill Sergeant School (First%20female commandant takes reins at Drill Sergeant School)

Sgt. Danyell E. Wilson

On January 22, 1997, Sgt. Wilson became the first female African American Sentinel at the Tomb of the Unknowns. She was the second woman ever to receive this honor.

First black woman guards tomb (https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1997/01/23/first-black-woman-guards-tomb/06062ba6-a9c2-4035-94ee-1c19dd8df311/?utm_term=.d18e4ef109a8)

Command Sgt. Maj. Lynell Sullivan

Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Sullivan became the first female of her rank and grade to serve as an enlisted advisor to a two-star general, Maj. Gen. James Monroe, on February 22, 1996.³²

NCO History (http://ncohistory.com/files/CSM_Sullivan.jpg)

Interesting Fact

There is only one female recipient of the Medal of Honor. On November 11, 1865, Mary Edwards Walker, a Union surgeon during the Civil War, was awarded the nation's highest medal for valor for her work in caring for the wounded.³³ It was rescinded in 1911, because she was not a commissioned officer, but the medal was restored posthumously in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter.³⁴

Meet Dr. Mary Walker: The only female Medal of Honor recipient

(https://www.army.mil/article/183800/meet_dr_mary_walker_the_only_female_medal_of_honor_recipient)

Notes

1. Kathleen Fargey "6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion (Women's Army Corps)," Center of Military History website, February 2014, accessed 13 February 2018, <https://history.army.mil/html/topics/afam/6888thPBn/index.html> (<https://history.army.mil/html/topics/afam/6888thPBn/index.html>).
2. The Army had a separate corps for women, known as the Women's Army Corps, from May 15, 1942, until October 20, 1978, when President Jimmy Carter signed Public Law 95584, which integrated the WAC units into the U.S. Army.
3. Kathleen Fargey "6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion (Women's Army Corps)."; Krewasky A. Salter I, *The Story of Black Military Officers, 1861-1948* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
4. Staff Sgt. Millie L. D. Veasey, interview with Hermann Trojanowski, June 25, 2000.
5. Veasey, interview with Trojanowski.
6. Veasey, interview with Trojanowski.
7. Pfc. Anna Mae *Wilson* Robertson, phone interview with the author with the assistance of Ms. Sheeren Robertson (daughter), February 16, 2018.
8. Command Sgt. Maj. Dan K. Elder, "Remarkable Sergeants," NCO History website, edited 08 November 2008, 12, <https://www.ncohistory.com/files/RemarkableSgts.pdf> (<https://www.ncohistory.com/files/RemarkableSgts.pdf>).
9. Elder, "Remarkable Sergeants," 12.
10. Sheila Lewis, Rayburn Lewis, and Janetta Kelly, phone interview with the author, February 18, 2018.
11. Sheila, Rayburn, and Janetta, interview with the author.
12. Sheila, Rayburn, and Janetta, interview with the author.
13. "Command Sgt. Maj. Mildred Kelly," Army Women's Foundation website, accessed 23 February 2018, <https://www.awfdn.org/trailblazers/command-sgt-maj-mildred-kelly/> (<https://www.awfdn.org/trailblazers/command-sgt-maj-mildred-kelly/>)

<https://www.military.granddads.com/maj-mildred-kelly/> (<https://www.military.granddads.com/maj-mildred-kelly/>).

14. Sheila, Rayburn, and Janetta, interview with the author.
15. Sgt. Maj. Grendel Alice Howard, phone interview with the author, February 8, 2018.
16. N.A. "Mother is a Sergeant," *Ebony*, N.A. (October 1974): 161; Howard, interview with the author.
17. According to Howard, there were other females, who were officers, but she was the only enlisted female Soldier in the PAO.
18. Howard, interview with the author.
19. Howard, interview with the author.
20. Howard, interview with the author.
21. Command Sgt. Maj. Evelyn Hollis, phone interview with the author, February 15, 2018.
22. Hollis, interview with the author.
23. Hollis, interview with the author.
24. Hollis, interview with the author.
25. Hollis, interview with the author.
26. Hollis, interview with the author.
27. Hollis, interview with the author.
28. "Command Sgt. Maj. Michele S. Jones," Army.Mil Features website, accessed 10 February 2018, <https://www.army.mil/africanamericans/profiles/jones.html> (<https://www.army.mil/africanamericans/profiles/jones.html>).
29. "Michele S. Jones," Civility Management Services website, accessed 11 February 2018, <https://civilityms.com/michele-s-jones/> (<https://civilityms.com/michele-s-jones/>).
30. Jessie Carney Smith, *Black Firsts: 4,000 Ground-Breaking and Pioneering Historical Events*, (Canton, MI: Visible Ink Press, 2013), 451.
31. Smith, 451.
32. Walter L. Hawkins, *Black American Military Leaders: A Biographical Dictionary* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company Inc., 2007), 447.
33. Jennie Cohen, "The Medal of Honor: 6 Surprising Facts," History website, 12 July 2012, accessed 13 February 2018, <http://www.history.com/news/the-medal-of-honor-6-surprising-facts> (<http://www.history.com/news/the-medal-of-honor-6-surprising-facts>).
34. Cohen, "The Medal of Honor: 6 Surprising Facts."