

# PART OF THE CHANGE: ELIZABETH ANNE HELM-FRAZIER, MASTER SERGEANT

*Above background: Members of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion take part in a parade ceremony in honor of Joan d'Arc at the marketplace where she was burned at the stake (Wikimedia Commons). Right foreground: Elizabeth at Basic Training graduation, 1981.*

*Elizabeth Anne Helm-Frazier retired from the Army as a Master Sergeant after twenty-five years, ten-months, and twenty-six days of military service. Elizabeth held a variety of high-profile positions in personnel (MOS 75-Echo) and career counseling (MOS 79-Sierra). She was US Army TRA-DOC's Career Counselor of the Year, San Antonio's Mentor of the Year, and was inducted into the Army Women's Foundation Hall of Fame. Since retiring in 2006, she has thrown herself into service. She's especially committed herself to keeping alive the legacy of the 6888th Postal Battalion. She helped raise funds to build a monument to the 6888th Battalion at Fort Leavenworth, served as a producer of the critically acclaimed documentary The Six Triple Eight, worked on gaining the unit a Congressional Gold Medal, and, most recently, got the National Archives to designate September 16 as National 6888th Battalion Day. Below, she discusses those who inspired her to become an Army changemaker in her own right.*

**M**y father never forgave me for joining the Army in 1981.

I thought he'd be proud. When my younger brother Johnnie announced he was joining right out of high school, my parents were excited for him.

Not so for me. I came home, age 20, and told my mother I'd enlisted. She shot to the telephone and started calling people, like it was a family emergency. She probably dialed twelve people in two minutes. One of them was my dad, who lived nearby.

"You need to come up here and talk to your daughter because she has joined the army."

I still didn't understand what the problem was. I thought my dad would be happy about it since he and his brother were both veterans.

"The only women who join the Army are failures in life. They either can't get married or are gay." That's what he said.

Thank goodness for my grandfather, Johnnie Davenport. He'd served in World War II as an Army cook. He came to my defense.

"Look," he said, "you're an adult. You have to make your own decisions. If you do what others want, you'll regret it."

He continued, "If you join the Army, three things will happen. You'll get smarter because you'll learn everything you can. You'll be a better person because of the experience you'll get and the people you'll meet. And, if you stay in twenty years, you'll get a government check for life."

He was right on all three counts.

Four years later at my re-enlistment ceremony at Fort Gordon, my mother said, "I'm glad you didn't let me influence you. This is the best thing you'd ever done."

My father never came around. He died in 1998 without commending my service.

But, despite his retrograde views, my dad, along with my mother, had raised me to serve. Our community of Ridgecrest in Largo, Florida, was a largely self-contained African American community with a gas station, dry cleaner, barber shops, beauty shops, grocery stores, and, of course, a Baptist Church. My parents and my grandparents were active in the community. Everybody knew each other, and I seemed to be related to half the town. We supported each other, and everyone served.

I think that's why I liked the Army so much. I found the same kind of supportive community there.

Of course, there were challenges. In Basic Training at Fort Dix in 1981, there was only one female platoon, thirty-three of us recruits. But we supported each other, and thirty of us graduated.

Our Drill Instructor, Sergeant First Class Martin Pate III, pushed us toward success.



*Members of the Women's Army Corps 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion sort packages taken from mail sacks by French civilian employees at the 17th Base Post Office in Paris, France, Nov. 7, 1945 (NARA)*

"The only person stopping you from achieving is you," he said. "All of you here have the capability, the competency, the qualifications to do whatever you want to do in the military. The Army is changing. People might say you can't do a particular job because you're a woman. Don't let that stop you."

That little speech had a huge impact on me. "I can be whatever I want to be," I said to myself. I became driven now by two things: proving my father wrong and Sergeant Pate right.

And Sergeant Pate was right. The Army was changing.

Yes, I had the n-word spat at me, and, yes, a few told me women didn't have a right to serve in the Army.

But many others not only encouraged me to grow but gave me the tools to do it.

Sergeant Bob Anderson at Fort Gordon, for example, told me I had to hone my public speaking and be able to talk with authority to all ranks, high and low. He enrolled me in Toastmasters and, then, when he saw I was ready, kicked me out of the nest for a better position at Fort Ord, California. I owe so much to Bob.

Back when I was fresh E-4, new at Fort Gordon, I thought I saw an officer out of the corner of my eye walking toward me. So, I stopped and saluted.

"Soldier, don't salute me, I'm not an officer," she said. It was First Sergeant Theola Melton. She was Black, and I was in awe.

Later, I went to her office.

"First Sergeant," I said, after introducing myself, "I want to be just like you."

"I'm honored that you want to be like me," she said, "but I want you to be better than me. The Army is changing, and you're going to be a part of that change."

It was like she was passing the torch.

"I'm old, soldier," she said. "But you are going to be able to do so much more than I was able to do. So, you be better than me."

I took that advice and modeled my career after Theola Melton.

And there's been more progress since I retired in 2006.

I saw more women, more people of color entering my field of career counseling. And now, combat arms is open to women. So is air defense and artillery. Women are in Special Forces. I got to see General Ann E. Dunwoody promoted to a four-star in 2008. Six years later, Admiral Michelle Howard received her fourth star, the first Black woman to hold that rank in the US military. The opportunities seem endless now.

And that's because of the women who came before us, like those of the 6888th Postal Battalion.

I first learned about the 6888th Battalion from that now well-known photo of Major Charity Adams reviewing a formation of soldiers in World War II. All the soldiers were Black women. I'd seen the photo during Black History Month and Women's History Month. But I never knew what the unit was or the story behind it.

I just kept the photograph because I liked it and found it inspiring.

Then, in early 2002, I saw the photo again in a newspaper obituary of Charity Adams Earley. I learned she'd been the first African American woman to be an officer in the Army WACs and commanded the first battalion of African American women to serve overseas during World War II. After the war, she worked at the VA, taught college, and devoted her life to community service.

Someone gave me her autobiography, *One Woman's Army: A Black Officer Remembers the WAC*, and I read it cover-to-cover. This was history, our history, my history.

I saw immediately that I achieved what I did in the Army because of the hardships and struggles Charity Adams and fellow Black WACs endured. They blazed the trail, and I became determined that their history wouldn't be forgotten.

I'd like to think that if my dad could know the story of the 6888th Battalion, he might see me and my service in a different light.

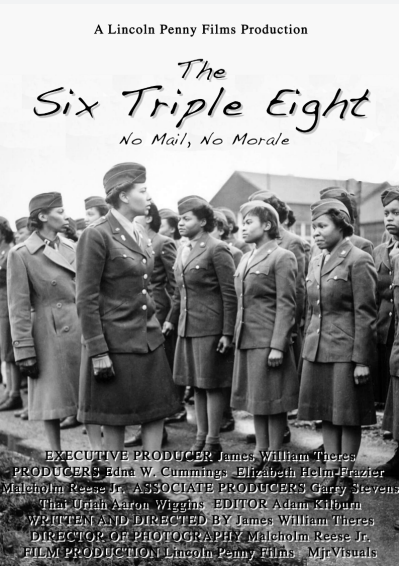
Maybe he'd even say those words I'd always longed to hear him say: "I'm proud of you."



*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 Nov. 29, 2018 in the Buffalo Soldier Commemorative Area, Fort Leavenworth, Kan. Elizabeth was on the project team to help get the monument funded so that future generations will know that women in uniform also helped guarantee freedom. (Prudence Siebert, Fort Leavenworth Lamp)*

# HONORING THE 6888TH POSTAL BATTALION ON SEPTEMBER 16

Join us on **Saturday, September 16 at 7:00pm ET (4pm PT)** to mark **National 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion Day** with a screening of the documentary *The Six Triple Eight*, followed by a conversation with filmmakers James Theres and Elizabeth Anne Helm-Frazier.



Until ten years ago, few Americans had ever heard of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, the only all-African American, all-female unit that served overseas during World War II.

Now, after James Theres' documentary, countless news articles, a Congressional Gold Medal, and a soon-to-be-released Tyler Perry-directed feature movie, *Six Triple Eight*, the story of the 855 women sent

to England and France to untangle a two-year backlog of undelivered GI mail is known and celebrated nationwide.

We have Elizabeth Anne Helm-Frazier to thank for bringing this previously unheralded Women's Army Corps unit to public awareness. Along with retired Army Colonel Edna Cummings, Elizabeth has worked for years to honor a generation of pioneering soldiers who blazed a trail for the women of color who followed.

The 6888th Battalion was born of crisis in February 1945. Seven million pieces of US mail destined for eight million GIs in Europe were stacked to the ceilings in British and French warehouses.

In the context of global war, undelivered letters and parcels don't, at first glance, rank as urgent problems. But for American troops, mail call was a lifeline, the only connection to home, and the most important factor for maintaining morale.

Commanded by Major Charity Adams, the first Black woman officer in the Army WACs, the 6888th Battalion served in a strictly segregated US Army, where facilities

were separate and unequal. The women took on their mission with inadequate resources and little equipment. All they had was the determination and ingenuity to categorize, sort, and redirect mail to its intended recipients.

The battalion sorted 65,000 pieces of mail, on average, each shift, a number made more remarkable considering many envelopes had indecipherable addresses or simply read "Robert Smith, US Army, ETO." Which of the 7,500 Robert Smiths in Europe was supposed to get this letter?

In many cases, the only solution was to open the mail, read the letter, and search for identifying information, such as hometown newspapers or local addresses, to determine the correct recipients. In such a way, the women of the "Six Triple Eight" cleared the backlog in Britain in three months. In France, with the aid of civilians and German POWs, they dispatched an even larger mountain of mail in less than six.

Veterans of the 6888th Battalion returned home to a country still dominated by Jim Crow. In 1942, the nation's largest black newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, had called upon readers to embrace a "Double V" campaign for democracy and freedom at home and abroad. This challenge to racial segregation would only bear fruit in the decades following World War II, as the modern Civil Rights Movement took hold.

But the memory of Charity Adams and her WAC soldiers would endure as inspiration for future generations of Black women soldiers, like Elizabeth, who now honor their predecessors by sharing their story.

**You can join our film screening and conversation on September 16 by going to [veteransbreakfastclub.org/events](http://veteransbreakfastclub.org/events).**

