



SIX TRIPLE EIGHT

Alone. From December 7, 1941 to September 2, 1945, over 16 million Americans were spread across Europe, the Mediterranean, Northern Africa, and the islands of the Pacific. Over the Atlantic and across the Pacific, they traversed the oceans and the skies. Alone.

No one knew how long they would be there. They did not know how long they were be there. All they knew is that they were there—sent by their country—to fight in a war thousands of miles from home, day after day.

A gunner's day is never done,
Up at dawn before the sun
With the roar of engines in his head
Wishing he could have stayed in bed.¹

How is grandmother doing? What happened on Joe's first day of school? Does Carol still think about me? Decades before the internet, these simple questions remained unanswered, and soldiers, sailors, airmen—most in their late teens or early twenties—had no choice but to sit with their thoughts and unanswered questions. Alone.

We're tired, dirty, thirsty and sore,
The sun has gone down an hour before.
First clean your guns, do it good boys
For that gun's life is mine or yours.²

As Colonel David Griffith observed, "For the morale of Soldiers in war time, only one thing counts more than somewhere to sleep or something to eat. That one thing is mail from home—holiday greetings, photographs, regular letters, and packages filled with items from relatives."³

During WWII, the issue was not a lack of letters from home. The issue was that things were a mess. In the European theater alone, millions of pieces of mail for the troops began piling up, stacked wall-to-wall in three airplane hangers.⁴ Many were missing full names: "Johnny U.S. Army" might be all a grandmother knew to write. Many were addressed to names that were too common; there were more than 7,500 men named "Robert Smith" who served in the European theaters.⁵ Plus, with troops moving all the time, it was nearly impossible to figure out how to get that letter addressed to "Robert Smith, U.S. Army" to the correct Robert Smith who was somewhere in the middle of Italy. So, the letters continued to pile up, and the troops waited. Alone.

By 1944, Charity Adams Earley had already looked impossible in the eye. She was born in 1918 in a tiny town north of Raleigh, North Carolina, two years before the 19th Amendment would give her the right to vote.⁶ She was very bright, and, after her family moved to Columbia, South Carolina, she skipped kindergarten and first grade, and went straight to second grade. Then, she passed the entrance exam for high school while she was still in elementary school.⁷ She ended up graduating as the valedictorian of Booker T. Washington High School, the largest public high school for African Americans in the state.⁸ In the 1920's and 30's, segregation still was deeply ingrained in South Carolina.

Charity went on to college, graduating at the age of twenty from Wilberforce University in Ohio with a triple major in mathematics, physics and Latin . . . and a minor in history.⁹ Despite these impressive credentials, teaching or domestic service were the only two options available for African American women in South Carolina at that time.¹⁰

But then, in 1941, the United States joined World War II, and this public school teacher from Columbia, South Carolina decided to do something different.

The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. had been created earlier that year in May 1941.¹¹ Massachusetts Representative Edith Nourse Rogers, who introduced the bill to create the WAAC, was no stranger to battlefields or battle.¹² During World War I, Edith inspected field hospitals with the Women's Overseas Service League, and in 1918, while her husband was serving in Congress, she joined the American Red Cross to work with wounded veterans as they made their way back to, Washington D.C.¹³ She was called the "Angel of Walter Reed Hospital."¹⁴

Then, her husband died. One week later, Edith announced her intention to run for her husband's seat.¹⁵ She won the highly contested election of 1925—winning 72% of the vote—and then she held that seat for the next 35 years. Representative Rogers was in her 19th year of service (9th term) when she introduced the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps Act to allow women to "volunteer" to join the U.S. Army in noncombat roles. But, that was not good enough because the Auxiliary was second class. Its "volunteers" had none of the rights or benefits afforded to soldiers. So, a year later, the Roger's Women's Army Corps Bill was passed granting official military status to the women who volunteered to serve in the Women's Army Corps. (WAC).¹⁶

Most significantly, at least for Charity, the WAC was not segregated. And so, she joined. She went through basic training at Fort Des Moines and was part of the first class of officer candidates.¹⁷ It wasn't easy. Charity recalls that, on the first day, the commanding officer called for all the "colored girls" to move to one corner and then proceeded to call every other recruit by name to assign them to their quarters.¹⁸

She was undeterred. On August 29, 1942, she was commissioned as Third Officer, and by September 1943, she had achieved the rank of Major, making her the highest-ranking female officer at the training center.¹⁹ At the end of 1944, Major Adams received her orders. She was heading to Europe to command the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion.²⁰ They were dubbed the "Six Triple Eight" -- 817 African American women—the first all-female battalion heading overseas.²¹

They spent the Georgia winter training at Fort Oglethorpe Georgia, crawling under logs wearing gas masks, jumping over trenches, marching for miles with heavy rucksacks. They learned to identify enemy ships, weapons, and aircraft. They trained for war, and then they climbed on a train to Camp Shanks, New York to catch their ship—the *Ill de France*—for Europe.²²

While thousands of soldiers waited, detached from home, little did they know that the Six Triple Eight was on its way. We will see them in October.

¹ Anonymous WWII Soldier, A Gunner's Day, available at http://world-war-2.info/poems/poems_38.php.

² *Id.*

³ Colonel David Griffith remarks, America Comes Alive, <https://americacomesalive.com/the-6888th-central-postal-directory-battalion/>, last visited Aug. 5, 2022.

⁴ Kathleen Fargey, AAMH-FPO, 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, U.S. Army Center of Military History (Feb. 14, 2014), available at <https://history.army.mil/html/topics/afam/6888thPBn/index.html>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Dr. Kelly A. Spring, Charity Adams Earley, National Women's History Museum, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/charity-earley>,