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A STAMP ON HISTORY

“It isn’t history until you do it.” That is how Lieutenant Colonel Charity Adams Early characterized her time as the Commanding Officer of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion.¹ It was December of 1944, and then Major Adams and Captain Abbie Noel Campbell strapped themselves into their bucket seats of a C-54 cargo plane, heading across the Atlantic toward somewhere in Europe, with the rest of their Battalion to follow by ship.²

Captain Campbell’s family was already making history—but nobody knew it at the time. Her father, Thomas Monroe Campbell, was the first Extension Agent appointed by the U.S. government to the Negro Extension Agent Service of Alabama.³ A graduate of Tuskegee Institute and protegee of Booker T. Washington, Mr. Campbell helped to develop a “Movable School” to take the research and education being conducted at Tuskegee Institute on the road. He spent his forty-seven year career, from 1906 to 1953, creating and overseeing the Extension Agents who traveled to the poorest and most rural areas of Alabama to teach African-American farmers about agriculture and how to improve their soil, their crops, and their families’ futures.⁴

When the U.S. entered World War II, one of Captain Campbell’s brothers, William A. “Wild Bill” Campbell, was a member of the U.S. Army Air Force’s, 99th Pursuit Squadron—now known as the Tuskegee Airmen.⁵ He was later tapped as the Commanding Officer of the 99th and earned two Distinguished Flying Crosses.⁶ Colonel Campbell later served in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. He is laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery.⁷

One of Captain Campbell’s other brothers, Thomas M. Campbell, served as the Battalion Surgeon for the 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion.⁸ His unit was in France when his sister and Major Adams boarded the C-54 in December 1944.

When they boarded the C-54, Major Adams, Captain Campbell, and the sixteen other service-members on board were handed sealed envelopes. They were all instructed not to open the envelopes until they were in the air. About forty-five minutes into the flight, someone pulled out an envelope. Then, the next person and the next. Finally, everyone had their envelopes out and for the next few minutes, the only sounds were the roar of the C-54 and ripping paper.⁹

Major Adams and Captain Campbell were headed to London. Night bombings were frequent. Racism was rampant. Some military personnel simply could not believe that African-American WAC officers even existed. Salutes were slow, and stares were frequent.¹⁰ Major Adams was reprimanded for accepting an invitation to a white Officers Club.¹¹ But, neither Adams nor Campbell had time to dwell on it. They had to get things ready for the rest of the Battalion.

On February 3, 1945, the 800 women who comprised the rest of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion boarded the *Ill de France* headed for Europe.¹² Keep in mind that this was only months after D-Day. German U-boats actively patrolled the Atlantic. Between 1939 and 1945, they sunk 3,500 Allied merchant ships and 175 Allied warships. Over 72,000 Allied troops lost their lives. Just boarding the *Ill de France* was courageous.¹³

But, there on the docks of Glasgow, Scotland were Major Adams and Captain Campbell. “Thanks to seasickness, salt water spray, and the limited personal conveniences, when they arrived after twelve days of sea, the group was a very unhappy looking lot.”¹⁴ Nightly air raids, sickness, poor accommodations, racism, and even the death of three members of the battalion in a Jeep accident did not deter them.¹⁵

You see, by February 1945, mail from the U.S. to the troops in Europe had reached a standstill. Three, unheated, dimly lit, rat-filled warehouses in Birmingham, England were filled, top to bottom, with stacks of undelivered Christmas packages and mail—stalled by the fierce

fighting in Western Europe in the fall and winter of 1944.¹⁶ Major Adams and Captain Campbell had already assessed the site and had a plan. They organized the Battalion into three units, each of which worked eight hours a day, around the clock, seven days a week.¹⁷

“No Mail, Low Morale,” was their motto, and the Battalion worked tirelessly. They created over 7,000,000 information cards, one for each service member who received mail, with name, serial number, branch and location. They processed around 65,000 pieces of mail per shift, and within three months, they cleared a backlog of mail that headquarters predicted would take at least six months.¹⁸ Millions of soldiers were no longer alone.

We’ve been up six hours, two hours to go
 Though we’re doing 200, it seems very slow.
 England at last, the tail gunners learn.
 We think of our buddies who will not return.

Then, head for your sack at nine or ten.
 A letter from home, another from her.
 “I love you,” she wrote, then you know you’ve won.
 A gunner’s day is never done.¹⁹

After accomplishing their mission three months ahead of schedule, the 6888 was shipped to Le Havre, France, shortly after V-E Day. Initially, they were tasked with assisting female French civilians and German POW’s. Then, they were assigned to clear out another backlog of mail—this one piling up for 3 years—and they managed to clear the backlog in 6 months.²⁰

The 6888th Battalion was disbanded in February 1946. It was the only African-American women’s unit to serve overseas during WWII.²¹ Major Adams was the highest-ranking African-American officer in WWII. After her return, she was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, worked for the Pentagon, and then was honorably discharged in 1946.²² A few years later, she served as the Dean of Student Services at Tennessee State University in Nashville.²³

But the Six Triple Eight’s impact was more foundational. Because of the 6888th Battalion’s remarkable service, in December 1945, the Women’s Army Corps. officially updated its training program to provide, “The national security program is the joint responsibility of all Americans irrespective of color or sex.”²⁴ By making things better for millions of servicemembers anxious for a word from home, they also brought about the first, significant policy shift away from sexism and racism. They altered history.

¹ Interview with LTC Charity Adams, Oral History, 1990, available at <https://www.womenofthe6888th.org/#:~:text=THE%206888TH%20CENTRAL%20POSTAL%20DIRECTORY%20BATTALION,-On%20May%2015&text=The%206888th%20was%20the%20first,Henderson>.

² Herb Boyd, Captain Abbie Noel Campbell, One of the First Black Women Officers in the WAC (Amsterdam News, June 10, 2021), available at <https://amsterdamnews.com/news/2021/06/10/captain-abbie-noel-campbell-among-first-black-women>.

³ Charlie Cooper, Ann Cooper, Tuskegee’s Heroes, p. 98 (MBI Publishing Co. 1996).

⁴ Auburn Univ., Photographs from the Negro Extension Service, available at <https://www.lib.auburn.edu/archive/ahy/aces/blkaces/nes.htm>.

⁵ Cooper, *supra* n. 3; Britannica, 99th Pursuit Squadron, available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/99th-Pursuit-Squadron>.

⁶ Cooper, *supra* n.3.

⁷ Arlington National Cemetery, William A. Campbell, <https://ancexplorer.army.mil/publicwvw/index.html#/search-all/results/1/CghDYW1wYmVsbBIHV2lsbGhhbQ, last>

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