

# All-Black Female WWII Unit to Receive Congressional Gold Medal

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**Sorting mail might not seem like a monumental task to most, but in war-torn Europe during World War II, it certainly was for the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion: the only all-Black Women's Army Corps unit to be stationed overseas during the conflict.**

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By 1945, roughly 7 million service members, Red Cross workers and government personnel were stationed in the European theater, and mail was the lifeline connecting them to those they had left back home. Likewise, it was the only way families could keep in touch with their loved ones on the warfront.



According to Kimberly Guise, the National WWII Museum senior curator, more than 3.3 billion pieces of mail went through military postal services to reach the front during 1945 alone. The sheer abundance of mail and a reported shortage of qualified postal officers to sort it led to a massive backlog of letters and packages, some of which were mailed up to three years prior.

*Spotlight: Commemorating World War II*

The U.S. Army needed people to sort out the backlog, and they decided the newly created 6888th was the right unit for the job.



They more than succeeded. Officials expected the unit's mission to take about six months in each location where they were assigned. Instead, it took them only three. Now, 77 years later, a measure has been signed into law that will give the unit the Congressional Gold Medal.

Unsung heroes of their time, theirs is a story of incredible postal proficiency.

## **A Historic Mission Abroad**

Of the more than 140,000 women who served in the Women's Army Corps during World War II, about 6,500 of them were Black. The Army created the 6888th in late 1944 and included five companies totaling about 850 Black women. They were commanded by Army Maj. Charity Adams, who finished the war as a lieutenant colonel, becoming the highest-ranking Black woman during the war.

While the unit wasn't heading to the frontlines, its soldiers still had to go through weeks of basic training, which included obstacle courses and gas mask drills, Guise said. Army historians said the women studied enemy aircraft, ships and weapons; they learned to board and evacuate ships and even went on long marches with rucksacks.



The battalion deployed to England in February 1945, travelling by ship in U-boat-infested waters to Glasgow, Scotland. Upon their arrival, the women immediately put their training to good use. As a German V-1 rocket exploded near the dock, they ran and took cover. The unit then took a train to Birmingham, England, where their work on the mail backlog began.

It was a daunting task. Not only were they sorting mail, but the essential foundation of their mission was to boost morale across the entirety of deployed U.S. forces. Most frontline soldiers hadn't received any mail in months, so the unit took the mission very seriously. The women worked 24 hours a day divided into three shifts to sift, sort and redirect the backlog. Since they were a self-contained unit, they also ran their own supply room, motor pool and mess hall.

## Cold, Dark & Complicated

When the 6888th arrived in Birmingham, the women quickly noticed massive piles of mail reaching the warehouse ceilings. Six of those facilities were airplane hangars full of Christmas presents, which had been returned during the Battle of the Bulge, according to an Army Combat Studies Institute publication. The facility had blacked-out windows to help protect occupants from nighttime air raids, but the dark environment had unintended side effects. Rats sought out packages of cakes and cookies, which had spoiled in the unheated and poorly lit facilities.

The job had plenty of complications. The women came across recipients with the same names. For example, reports showed there were 7,500 men named Robert Smith. The unit also had to investigate and decipher pieces of mail that only listed nicknames for the recipients or had insufficient addresses. The women often resorted to using serial and/or service numbers to figure out the correct recipient.



Since service members pushing into Germany were also constantly moving locations, many of the attempted deliveries were bounced back. The unit had to then re-sort the mail, find a new location for its recipient and try again. According to the Army Combat Studies Institute, each piece of mail was worked for 30 days. If the recipient couldn't be located in that time, the mail was marked as undeliverable and returned to the sender. When unit members discovered that an intended service-member recipient had died, they had the unenviable task of handling that return mail.

Army historians said the women processed 65,000 pieces of mail per eight-hour shift in Birmingham and cleared what was thought to be a six-month backlog in only half that time – a total of about 17 million pieces of mail.



After that job was finished, the 6888th was sent to Rouen, France, in June 1945 to continue their mission. They began their work a few weeks after victory was declared in Europe. With the help of French civilians and German prisoners of war, the unit cleared a similarly sized backlog just as quickly as it did in England.

In October 1945, the unit was sent to Paris. About 300 of their soldiers had been discharged by then due to the war's end, so the workload fluctuated, and unit morale suffered. Because of the deprivations that the French people had suffered during the war, the unit's soldiers also dealt with a slew of package thefts. The women had to investigate these thefts, working with locals to track down those packages.

## Enduring Sexism, Racism

The women of the 6888th received high praise for their work. Upon recognizing them, service members thanked them in the streets. Still, they faced discrimination due to their color and gender. According to the National Museum of the U.S. Army, several Black male service members assumed the women were sent to Europe to provide them with companionship — a notion the women of the 6888th quickly set straight. When the Red Cross denied them entry to their club and instead opened a segregated club for the women, the battalion never set foot in it to show their united disapproval of such a slight.



According to the NMUSA, some of the unit's recreational basketball players were invited to play on an Army all-star team; however, that invitation was rescinded when the Army learned the women were Black. Mixing races in units was against Army policy at the time – even for sports teams. The team dealt with the snub by winning the European theater's basketball championship that year, the museum said.

*Spotlight: Black History Month*

Furthermore, when three members of the unit died in a Jeep crash in early July 1945, the War Department didn't provide funds for their funerals. The unit gathered its own money to perform the services to bury the fallen women in Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, France.

## Long-Awaited Accolades

By March 1946, all of the women of the 6888th had returned to the U.S, and the unit was disbanded. Its members received the European African Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, the Women's Army Corps Service Medal and the World War II Victory Medal; however, there was no other official recognition of their accomplishments.

That slowly changed, though. Over the years, the surviving women of the 6888th have taken part in several reunions for Black members of the Women's Army Corps. In 1981, many of them returned to England and France, where they were honored for their wartime service.



In the past few decades, the story of the 6888th has been included in exhibits, educational programs, documentaries and public ceremonies, and many books have been published on the integral work they did. In 2018, a monument was erected in their honor at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the 6888th was given the Meritorious Unit Commendation in 2019.

On Feb. 28, the House of Representatives passed legislation to award the 6888th the Congressional Gold Medal. The Senate passed the measure last year, and President Joe Biden signed the bipartisan bill on March 14. It's not clear yet when the ceremony to honor the women will be.

Although there are only a handful of members of the 6888th still living to receive the medal, the honor will cement their place in World War II history.

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