

Mission accomplished



Philip
Dine

The November *Postal Record* contained an inspiring story by Mike Shea about the 6888 Postal Battalion, a military unit composed of African American women that played a vital role in boosting the morale of U.S. forces in World War II by resolving the backlog of mail filling warehouses in England—thereby keeping communication open between American GIs in Europe and their families back home. The women accomplished in three months what was expected to take a half-year; that success led to their deployment to France to fix mail problems there as well.

Today, we'll bring that story full circle, reporting that the Six Triple Eight, as it's called, now has become the first women's military unit in U.S. history to

receive the nation's top civilian honor—the Congressional Gold Medal—while also relating this to NALC history.

The Congressional Gold Medal has been awarded to fewer than 200 people or groups—with the first awardee being George Washington in 1776.

As this magazine goes to press, Anna Mae Robertson, 98, one of six known surviving battalion members, is to be honored on June 27 in Milwaukee, which is both her home and the birthplace of our union—the latter occurring after 60 letter carriers/Civil War veterans concerned about working conditions showed up in Milwaukee in August of 1889 and established the National Association of Letter Carriers.

Dawn Ahnen, president of the Wisconsin State Association of Letter Carriers, says the postal battalion members were pioneers on several fronts.

"This group of women, they were paving the way for women, not only in the military but also as letter carriers," says Dawn, who was elected president at Wisconsin's 70th biennial state convention in May. Also president of Beloit Branch 715, she has carried mail for 31 years and is a Marine Corps veteran, having joined the service while in high school.

"What these women did in paving the way for us in 1945 is heroic," she says. "They opened up the doors for other women like myself. So, this is truly an historic moment for the Postal Service."

At the Robertson family's request, Dawn has recruited several local letter carriers to participate in the event at the Milwaukee War Memorial.

Anna Mae is the youngest of the unit's remaining members, who range up to 102 years old. Ceremonies were recently held in Queens, NY; Las Vegas; and Mesa, AZ, with another slated for Montgomery, AL, on July 26.

Anna Mae's daughter Sheree Robertson was helpful in getting the Gold Medal bill through the House, says Edna W. Cummings, a retired Army colonel who has worked since 2018 to shepherd the legislation through Congress and now to organize the ceremonies. The measure passed the Senate last year; then Edna and Rep. Gwen Moore of Milwaukee found House co-sponsors for the bill, which passed on Feb. 28. Edna is working with the U.S. Mint to design the companion gold coin, and has submitted a proposal for a commemorative stamp to the Postal Service.

Sheree notes that, in today's hyper-partisan era, the bill had 295 House co-sponsors ("unheard of") and received the votes of 422 members ("with no nays"). She calls that level of support "just amazing."

Given the surviving battalion members' ages, rather than wait for the coin's minting Edna requested copies of the measure after its signing into law by the president on March 14, for what she calls "presentation and ceremony purposes." She then set up the local ceremonies so the women wouldn't have to travel to Washington.

Sheree, a Wisconsin state government attorney the past 39 years, calls her mother "a quiet warrior" who gave back to the community and raised seven daughters and a son while working as a health care provider, taught them good values and told them "to be grateful and appreciative for your blessings" and, though not an "overt activist," opened the eyes of her kids by taking them to open-housing demonstrations in Milwaukee.

Her mother, raised in the South, enlisted in the Women's Army Corps in 1943 at age 19, Sheree says, seeking to become self-sufficient. Sheree connects the mission of her mother's battalion with the "vital role" of letter carriers by noting the unofficial motto of the 6888: "No mail, low morale."

Robert Hansen, a member of Congresswoman Moore's staff in Milwaukee, says she was inspired by the battalion's vital role in enabling communications "from home to the frontlines" as young men "were experiencing the devastation and trauma of war," and he related that to the ongoing mission of letter carriers.

"These things matter," Robert says. "The work that these women did, the work that letter carriers do today—it's hugely important."

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