

VFW Celebrates Black History Month

VFW wishes to salute Black veterans for their integral roles in every VFW-qualifying war

Feb 16, 2024

As the nation celebrates Black History Month, VFW commemorates black veterans for their military service throughout history. Here are a few stories of black men and women who made history in the military.

MARINES NAMES FIRST BLACK FEMALE MAJOR GENERAL

In December 2022, President Joe Biden appointed Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Lorna Mahlock to the grade of major general. The appointment made Mahlock the first black woman to serve as a two-star general in the Corps.

At the National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Maryland, Mahlock is the deputy director of cybersecurity for combat support. In 2018, Mahlock was nominated to the grade of brigadier general, becoming the first black woman to achieve that rank.

Since then, she has served as the Marine Corps' chief information officer and director of command, control, communications and computers.

According to the *Marine Corps Times*, Mahlock has earned multiple degrees, including two master's degrees in strategic studies from the U.S. Army War College and the Naval Postgraduate School.

The *Marine Corps Times* also reported that only three women in the Corps' history have attained the rank of lieutenant general, and all of them are retired.

MONTFORD POINT MARINES RECOGNIZED

At 101 years old, George J. Johnson was honored last February for his service as a Montford Point Marine. He was presented with the Congressional Gold Medal at the African American Research Library and Cultural Center in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, surrounded by family and friends.

Another Montford Point Marine, Moses Williams, was posthumously awarded the

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

Congressional Gold Medal during the ceremony.

Montford Point Marines were the first black men to become Marines after President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive order in 1941 prohibiting the armed services from barring African Americans from military service.

Montford Point in Jacksonville, North Carolina, was their segregated training base. It would be eight years before the U.S. military would be fully integrated.

“They had to fight for the right to fight,” James T. Averhart, national president of the Montford Point Marines Association, said during the ceremony last February.

Pamela Y. Williams, the daughter of Moses Williams, accepted the medal on her father’s behalf. She said that while she knew her father was a Marine, she was not aware he was one of the storied Montford Marines.

“I can only imagine what types of hardships they had to go through,” Pamela said. “But I know that they had no idea that they were making history — which is exactly what they did.”

Johnson, whose health was failing at the ceremony, died in July at the age of 101. His cousin, Grace King, said that while Johnson was not able to speak much, he would get excited when someone spoke of the Montford Marines.

“When you mention Montford Point, he does light up,” King told the *Marine Corps Times* at the ceremony. “It’s almost like (Johnson) was a star because everybody wanted to take a picture with him.”

When Montford Point closed in 1949, about 20,000 men had served there. Nearly 2,000 of them saw combat in the 1945 Battle of Okinawa alone.

OTHERS HAD TRIED, ‘BUT DIDN’T SUCCEED’

Now-retired Army Master Sgt. Andrea Motley Crabtree made history in 1982 when she became the Army’s first female deep-sea diver, and the first black female deep-sea diver across all U.S. military branches.

According to the *Army Times*, Crabtree was the only black person and the only woman among eight soldiers, and more than 20 others, in her 1982 class at the U.S. Navy Deep Sea Diving and Salvage Training Center at Panama City Beach, Florida.

Furthermore, she was one of only two soldiers and nine sailors to earn the coveted diver badge.

“I was happy to be there, happy to be in that suit,” Crabtree told CBS News, adding that her

service was inspired by her father and grandfather, both veterans. “I always wanted to be in the military, but a lot of people didn’t think the military was a good thing for women.”

Crabtree served from 1977-1998, four of those years as a deep-sea diver despite being told she did not belong.

“I was Army, going to a predominantly Navy environment,” Crabtree said. “I’m female to a predominantly male environment. I’m black, in a predominantly white environment. There is no real reason why any woman who was able to do the job shouldn’t have been able to do it. Or any reason why I should have been the first in 1982 to be a female diver for the Army. There were other women who had tried, but they didn’t succeed.”

‘I’M THE FIRST THAT WAS GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY’

Maj. Gen. Konata Crumbly made history when he was named the first black commander of the Georgia Air National Guard last February.

Following the promotion, Crumbly told Channel 2 in Atlanta he is focused on always having the troops combat-ready.

“I’m not the first African American qualified, but I’m the first that was given the opportunity,” Crumbly said. “Obviously, the world threats haven’t gone away. You got China, Russia, North Korea and Iran, and you obviously got violent extremists’ organizations. We’ve gotta be ready every single day.”

Crumbly also said that he is concentrating on changes to include the replacement of the J-STARS aircraft based in the state. It was the U.S. Department of Defense’s main airborne battlefield command and control platform during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It’s now being replaced by a multi-faceted battle management system also based in Georgia.

Previously, Crumbly was part of the ROTC at Florida A&M University. He also served as an Army helicopter pilot before moving to the Air Guard and piloting the J-STARS.

FIRST BLACK FEMALE COMBAT PILOT IS INSPIRATIONAL SPEAKER

In March 2003, Vernice Armour became the first black woman to serve as a combat pilot in the U.S. military. She flew with HMLA-169 during the Iraq invasion. She served two tours in Iraq during the Iraq War.

Prior to that, Armour earned her wings at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida, in 2001, where she graduated first in her class of 12.

After serving in Iraq, Armour was assigned to the Manpower and Reserve Affairs Equal Opportunity Branch as program liaison officer.

Since her retirement from the Marine Corps in 2007, Armour is a professional speaker, traveling the country inspiring others to reach their life goals.

Armour, whose nickname is “FlyGirl,” has been an inspirational speaker for 16 years. She told 72 Hours, an online news outlet, that she loves showing people that not only is there another way in life, but inspiring them to go after that other way.

“What I enjoy most is when someone comes up to me afterwards and says, ‘You don’t know this, but I had been considering suicide, and now I know that I can create a difference in my life,’” Armour said. “Or someone who was going to quit their job, and they tell me, ‘You know, I’d given up, but you gave me insight on how I can create a breakthrough in my life.’ I’ve had people send me a picture of them graduating with their cap and gown three years after one of my talks, because they had been inspired to go back to school.”

Armour recalled being a young girl and seeing a black woman in an Army flight suit and thinking how she had never thought of that before then.

“When I was a kid, the philosophy of my family had a profound impact,” she said. “My dad always talked about how thoughts become things and things become outcomes.”

Armour’s father was a retired major in the Army Reserve, and her stepfather was a Marine Corps sergeant who did three tours in Vietnam. Her grandfather was a Montford Point Marine.

While February is set aside annually to recall the contributions of African-Americans, VFW celebrates black veterans, as well as veterans of all races, every day.

This article is featured in the 2024 February issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.