

# **Trials and Tribulations:**

## **North Carolina African American Soldiers and the Racial Divide**



**A group of African American Army soldiers from the 364th Infantry Regiment (Colored), 92nd Infantry Division, posing with heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis (second from left, foreground) during his troop morale visit to the Aleutian Islands, Alaska, in the winter of 1944-1945 during World War II. Pictured with Louis is 1st Lt. Elmer P. Gibson (second from right, foreground), chaplain of the 364th Infantry Regiment.**

By Matthew M. Peek, Military Collection Archivist  
State Archives of North Carolina, February 2022

# **African American Military and Veterans Lineage Project**

The African American Military and Veteran Lineage Project is designed to address the lack of information regarding the roles, responsibilities, triumphs, and heroism North Carolina African Americans played in WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. In the early conflicts, despite being given inferior equipment, less training and serving in a segregated and biased military, African Americans served with valor and courage. Most of the history of their accomplishments do not exist in many American history books. Therefore, African American Military and Veterans Lineage Projects work towards the properly documenting and preserving the unknown or overlooked history of North Carolina African American participation in America's wars.

This project is being operated by the North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (NCDMVA), in collaboration with Elizabeth City State University (ECSU) School of Humanities and Social Sciences, North Carolina Museum of History, and State Archives of North Carolina's Military Collection. The project has been generously funded through a grant from the North Carolina Humanities Council for 2020-2022.

## **Introduction**

As the United States is facing recent events that have again raised the issue of race relations in the country, we thought it relevant to explore the long-term impact of racism faced by a selection of North Carolina African American veterans, and their experiences with the issue of and development of racism in the U.S. Army from World War II through the 1970s. We are going to look at the fight of three North Carolina Black U.S. Army soldiers at three different periods of military service against the role of racism and stereotyping, which allowed their lives and service to outshine the hideous hatred that attempted to restrict their contributions to America's military.

Not all had the same experiences or same degrees of challenges that were as obvious as others encountered during these periods, but they all lived and trained in an Army world surrounded and affected by racism. Their stories highlight an important point about our country: that what matters is not a person's skin color, but the impact of their lives and their contributions that benefit those who may not even recognize their achievements.

## Elmer P. Gibson: U.S. Army Chaplain and Desegregation Pioneer

In World War II, 1st Lt. Elmer P. Gibson—who was raised in Greensboro, NC, but lived in Philadelphia before the war as a Methodist minister in Philly and New Jersey—served in the U.S. Army from 1941 to December 1945 as one of the highest-ranking Black chaplains in the U.S. Army in the war. He served as a chaplain for the segregated 367th Infantry Regiment (Colored), and later the 364th Infantry Regiment (Colored), 92nd Infantry Division. His unit would be banished to Alaska as a segregated unit stationed on the Aleutian Islands. Such was common for the



Studio portrait of U.S. Army chaplain Elmer P. Gibson, wearing his full Army uniform, taken around 1941 after he had just entered the military.

Army, which shipped Black units to isolated, undesirable locations or to areas of heavy frontline fighting that ensured they would face high casualty rates—such as in Italy where most of the 92nd Division was stationed in WWII.

After his service in Alaska, Gibson did attain a temporary commission for Major before leaving active Army service, though he was kept from being promoted to full Major despite his qualifications. The claim was that there were not enough Major commissions available for chaplains; however, it is believed from documentary indications this may have been due to the fact that Gibson was a Black officer, and he was passed over for promotion.

In November 1945, Gibson was awarded the U.S. Armed Forces' Legion of Merit, for his dedicated service to the 364th Infantry and the manner in which he conducted his chaplain duties. Gibson was one of

only two living African American U.S. military chaplains to hold this award at the time. In a letter accompanying the Legion of Merit award notice to the U.S. Army

Chief of Chaplains, Gibson's commanding officer Brig. Gen. John F. Goodman noted that "He is a great believer in bringing the white and colored races into a sensible toleration of each other. I believe him to be one of the best Chaplains I have seen since being in the service." While in the Aleutian Islands, Gibson held joint chapel services for white and Black troops stationed there, as there were not enough chaplains for all of the Army soldiers stationed there at the time. As such, Elmer Gibson was one of the earliest military officers to attempt some level of integration of regular, combat-ready white and African American service individuals in the U.S. Army during WWII.



A biracial chapel service held in the Post Chapel on the Aleutian Islands, Alaska, on August 12, 1945, during World War II. The chapel band is seen sitting in the front row. [Official U.S. Army Air Corps photograph]

Honorable service to the U.S. Army was not enough to earn him his rightful rank. Even with this slight, the Army tried convincing him to re-up in active Army service. They offered him in December 1945 the opportunity to return to active Army duty as one of a few Black chaplains needed for occupation duty in the European Theater in 1946. However, Gibson would not have been appointed to the Regular Army, which seems to have been the reason he did not accept the

opportunity. He also would not have been given the rank of Major, which he would have received had he been white. This did change slowly during 1946, after Gibson decided he wanted to return to the military after serving as a civilian chaplain for a VA Hospital in Virginia in a largely all-white facility. He wished to continue serving to the spiritual needs of those in the military.

On March 4, 1946, he took an Army examination administered at Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, for his ability to be a career Army officer. Having passed his examination, Gibson was appointed to the regular U.S. Army with the permanent rank of Major by U.S. President Harry S. Truman. It took Truman seeing Gibson's efforts at integration and his dedicated service to get Truman's attention in order to authorize the ranking. Gibson became one of the highest-ranking African Americans in the regular U.S. Army. By January 1947, the U.S. Army had on active duty in the Regular Army 1,700 military chaplains; of those, only 96 were not white. Gibson truly stood as one of the few representatives of African Americans in his military profession.

The appointment as Major came with a caveat, though. Elmer Gibson was selected by U.S. President Harry S. Truman to be an advisor for him in helping to create the plans and policies to enact a complete desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces. Gibson would continue to serve in this capacity for Truman during his entire presidency, according to Gibson's family. This was around the time that President Truman created the nine-member civilian Advisory Commission on Universal Training, which investigated from 1946 to 1947 the issue of racial equality in the U.S. Armed Forces. The only Black member of this commission was Truman K. Gibson Jr., with whom Elmer Gibson was a friend and collaborator related to issues of race in the Army in WWII.

Because he was appointed as a Major without an "available" assignment in the Army, Gibson returned home to Philadelphia for much of 1946, until an open duty station was available or made available in a pre-integrated Army. He would also in the meantime attend the Army's Chaplain School at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. In December 1946, Maj. Gibson was assigned to Fort Jackson, SC, as a chaplain with the 5th Provisional Training Regiment from the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps. He remained at Fort Jackson through May 13, 1947, with this segregated unit. Elmer Gibson was reassigned to be the chaplain of the 365th Infantry Regiment at Fort Dix, New Jersey in May 1947. He would be at Fort Dix from 1947 to 1952. By April 1950, Gibson was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.



Photograph of U.S. Army Chaplain (Maj.) Elmer P. Gibson, wearing his chaplain's garments, standing outside of the door of a post chapel shaking hands with African American soldiers as they leave a chapel service at Fort Dix, New Jersey. Gibson was the chaplain of the 364th Infantry Regiment [Official Fort Dix Post Signal Office photograph]

On July 26, 1948, President Truman issued Executive Order 9981, establishing equality of treatment and opportunity in the U.S. military regardless of race—though it took longer for the military branches to act on integration. During this period, Gibson testified before President

Truman's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services (also known as the "Fahy Committee" after the committee chairman Charles Fahy), established in July 1948. Its purpose was to recommend revisions of military regulations in order to implement the government's policy of equality of treatment and opportunity for all members of the armed forces, regardless of race, color, religion or national origin. It is known by the Gibson family that former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt recommended Elmer Gibson as a person to appear as a witness on the issue of racial integration before the Fahy Committee. This committee released its report entitled "Freedom to Serve" in May 1950.

Between 1947 and 1950, Gibson wrote, spoke, testified, and answered questionnaires on the issues of integration and race relations in the U.S. Armed Forces. U.S. Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson approved a U.S. Army program for racial equality to begin after the program's announcement in September 1949. Since 1947, Maj. Gibson had been working to hold biracial church and chapel

services and baptisms at Fort Dix. As of 1951, the U.S. Army had nine training divisions. The training division at Fort Ord, California, was the Army's first one to be integrated. Fort Dix, New Jersey, and Fort Knox, Kentucky, were the last two training divisions to be integrated in 1951.

**U.S. Army Chaplain (Maj.) Elmer P. Gibson (right), performing a baptism of an unidentified African American Army soldier in the new immersion baptismal in Chapel No. 3 at Fort Dix, New Jersey, between 1950 and 1952. Gibson is being assisted by an Army corporal nicknamed "Rev" (left).**



It was from the chaplaincy work of Elmer Gibson at Fort Dix since 1947, and the respect he had earned among the officers and men at the base, that he was able to attempt efforts of integration early in religious situations. On January 20, 1951, all of Fort Dix was fully integrated in training units—at least in announcement, with months required to fulfill the integration order in practice. The base was integrated under the plan conceived and led by Lt. Col. N. R. Walker, assistant chief of staff at Fort Dix, and Chaplain Lt. Col. Elmer Gibson.

**U.S. Army Chaplain (Maj.) Elmer P. Gibson (right), sitting playing at a chapel organ while his commanding officer Brig. Gen. John F. Goodman (left) stands looking on in one of the post chapels at Fort Dix, New Jersey, during the 1950s. Gibson was serving as the division and post chaplain for the 9th Infantry Division at Fort Dix at the time. In the background is seen the chapel's altar and the American flag.**



Gibson's efforts have gone largely overlooked by the U.S. Army and his home state of North Carolina. Despite being one of the most important advocates for racial integration of the U.S. Armed Forces in the 1940s and 1950s, Elmer Gibson's role in opening the military for all peoples is one of those missing pieces of history that I believe is key to understanding the importance of integration on building a stronger U.S. Armed Forces. Gibson suffered significant racism in the 1940s in the Army, but persevered through it to help Black Army troops under his care recover from racism and physical attacks during WWII.

## **Alfred Fowler: Bladen County Soldier and the Racism of the Vietnam War**

Alfred Fowler was born on September 26, 1942, in Whites Creek Township in Bladen County, NC. His parents were John Edd and Laney (Shaw) Fowler. Alfred's mother died when he was five years old, leaving him to be raised by his father, with whom he was not very close. Alfred's mother gave birth to nine living children, the oldest of whom—Mary Lee — worked to raise Alfred and his siblings. Growing up, Alfred was very close to his youngest sister Mabel. After becoming an adult, Alfred moved to New York City—like so many North Carolina African Americans looking for better education and opportunities for employment—sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960s.

Cynthia Laverne (Bryant) Fowler was born in Harnett County, NC. Alfred and Cynthia met while the two were living in New York. Alfred (age 23) and Cynthia (age 19) would be married on August 6, 1966, and remained living in New York until January 1967. While in New York, Alfred Fowler attempted to enlist voluntarily in the U.S. military for service in the Vietnam War; but was rejected three times by the military, likely due to his having high blood pressure. In January 1967, the couple moved to Sanford, NC, and lived with Cynthia's parents at 5195 South Horner Boulevard.

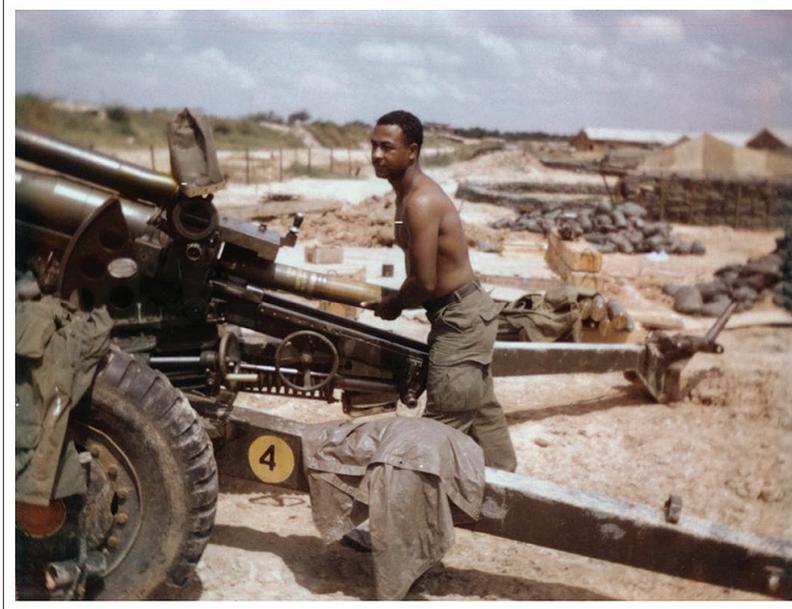
Alfred Fowler worked at the Cornell-Dubilier Electronics plant in Sanford prior to his service in the Vietnam War, in a laboratory at the company testing its products. When the Fowlers relocated to North Carolina, however, Alfred received his North Carolina draft board notice about six months later on July 3, 1967. Partly due to the Fowlers' recent relocation, Alfred would receive draft notices from three different local draft boards between August and October 1967, as different localities were trying to claim him in order to fulfill wartime draft quotas. He received his final

draft notice, which indicated his date of induction would be in November 1967.

The Fowlers thought that Alfred's race led to his being called for his draft notice, and eventually being approved for service in a Southern state that overlooked health concerns which had kept him out of service in New York. That particular issue was a major problem for young Black North Carolina men, who saw Army draft notices hit them particularly hard in the early days of the Vietnam War—as I have been anecdotally told by a number of highly-decorated African American Vietnam veterans in North Carolina. Likely, had Fowler remained in New York, he would not have been drafted after being rejected for voluntary service. Statistics bear this out, as referenced in a Time [Magazine] news article, “[U.S. Secretary of Defense] Robert McNamara's Project 100,000, implemented in 1966, pulled hundreds of thousands of poor men into the war—40% of them African American. By the following year, Black soldiers made up 16.3% of those drafted and 23% of Vietnam combat troops, despite accounting for only roughly 11% of the civilian population.”

Alfred Fowler was inducted into the U.S. Army as a Private on November 28, 1967. He entered basic training at Fort Bragg, NC, in December 1967, where he remained until February 1968. Alfred was assigned to the 2nd Platoon, Company E, 2nd Battalion, 1st Brigade, in the U.S. Army Training Center at Fort Bragg. He would be transferred to Fort Sill near Lawton, Oklahoma, arriving there between February 9 and February 10, 1968. The culture shock in Lawton was extreme for a Black man from North Carolina who had spent time in New York. He did not like Lawton at all, noting in one of his letters to his wife: “This place Baby, is so out of date. The music they play here, we forgot it back home. The way they dress is terrible. I was just walking down the streets window shopping, and just about all you see is Cowboy Boots and Bull horns, really? I realize this is a Western town but everything they wear looks like hand-me-downs.”

Serving with Battery B, 2nd Battalion, 321st Artillery Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, Alfred Fowler was sent to Vietnam with his regiment between the end of April and the first week of May 1968. He worked as an assistant gunner in a 105 mm Howitzer section. He was promoted to Corporal by July 3, 1968. Fowler's overseas service ended in April 1969 after a year-long term in Vietnam. While in Vietnam, Fowler's artillery unit participated in regular firefights with the Viet Cong. Upon returning to the United States, he was transferred to Fort Carson in Colorado—rather than his preferred location of Fort Bragg—sometime in May 1969. Fowler served at Fort Carson until being honorably discharged from the Army on November 26, 1969.



**U.S. Army artillery soldier Alfred Fowler, loading shells into a field artillery gun while he was stationed at an unidentified Army camp in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Image taken on October 30, 1968 [courtesy North Carolina Museum of History and Cynthia Fowler].**

Upon returning home to America, Fowler's family recalls that he suffered mood swings and mental distress from his service in Vietnam, believing this to be what today is identified

as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He never would openly discuss his service, shielding his family from the horrors of what he experienced in Vietnam. Alfred had changed quite a bit upon his return from service, and the letters he wrote from Vietnam indicate some of the struggles he was going through during combat—from his own men and the enemy. Since they had been newlyweds when he left for the U.S. Army,

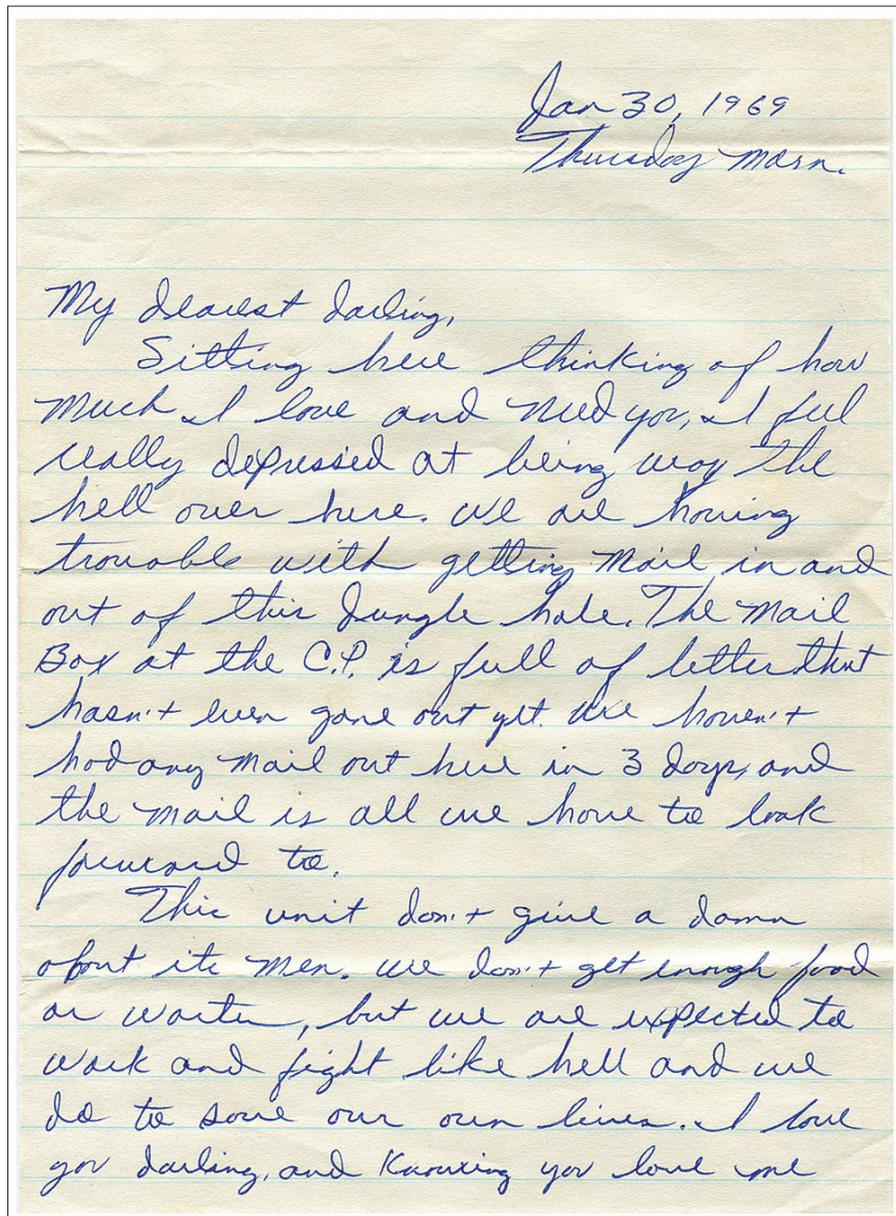
Alfred and Cynthia Fowler would have to relearn to live with each other, facing the challenges of adjusting to the drastic personal and cultural changes of the late 1960s as an African American couple in a racially divided North Carolina. The Fowlers would remain together until Alfred's death on July 17, 2004. He was buried at Sandhills State Veterans Cemetery in Spring Lake, NC.



**U.S. Army artillery soldier Cpl. Alfred Fowler, wearing his 82nd Airborne Division uniform, standing outside at an unidentified airport while traveling in the United States after his service in Vietnam ended during the Vietnam War (undated) [courtesy North Carolina Museum of History and Cynthia Fowler].**

One of Fowler's letters home to his wife, written on March 17, 1969, from an artillery outpost in Vietnam recounts how—while surrounded by Viet Cong forces—Fowler encountered racism in the ranks of the 82nd Airborne related to promotion: “Baby, this white man's army is making me mad as hell. I hate these Bastards. Know what happened? They are making two “White Boys (SGT.)” and I out rank both of them on CPL. I have almost 9 months time and grade on CPL, and they only have about 5 months or so. What gives me the [censored word] is that they are making E-5 (SGT) before I do, it's not fair Cyn [Cynthia].”

Upon returning to the United States from his year tour in Vietnam, Fowler was assigned to Fort Carson, Colorado, by the end of May 1969. Despite having only spent one month of his stateside military duty during his tour, he was under threat of the unit he was assigned to at Fort Carson being sent to Vietnam. The Army was changing rules for some men on returning to Vietnam for combat duty to fill quotas for men in service with various units. Having felt the unfair treatment and racism of the Army, Fowler wrote to his wife on July 20, 1969,



Page 1 of a two-page letter written by Alfred Fowler to his wife on January 30, 1969, from the jungles of South Vietnam, expressing his frustration over how he and his men are being treated by his Army unit. Such feelings grew in the isolation of jungle service American servicemen in the Vietnam War. From Box 2, Folder 1, Alfred Fowler Papers.

that “They are talking about sending this unit over to Viet-nam and if they do I want to try to take the [illegible word] way out first, if not I’ll go to Jail before I go back again.” It turned out to be a rumor, but the threat of being forced to fight longer for a country that did not support him due to his skin color led Fowler to resent how the Army treated him.

It also seems that Fowler got very little support from his white commanding officers. That would not be an unusual situation for Black U.S. Armed Forces members in Vietnam and Cambodia between 1962 and 1974 during the Vietnam War. Today, we remember Fowler through his Vietnam correspondence and his dedication to his unit in active combat, carrying himself with honor in an Army that did not necessarily recognize it in him.

## **Bennis M. Blue: Pioneering Female Officer of the 82nd Airborne Division**

Bennis M. Blue was born on August 10, 1953, in Averasboro Township along Route 1, outside Dunn in Harnett County, NC, to William Thomas and Mary Eltis Walker Blue. William Blue worked as a farmer in rural Harnett County. Mary Blue was of Native American descent on both parents’ side. Bennis Blue identifies as a non-tribal affiliated Native American of African American descent. Bennis’ mother died on November 6, 1957, at home due to pneumonia. After her death, William Blue would work as a craftsman to make ends meet. He worked as a landscaper, a carpenter, and a brick mason, as he worked to raise his children.

Bennis Blue was taken with her five siblings to live with her mother’s parents—Rev. Vester and Bertha Walker—in Dunn, NC, where Rev. Walker had begun an African American Holiness church. The Blue family moved around a lot as William Blue worked at different jobs and tried to care for his children. Bennis and her siblings would live in the homes of cousins, grandparents, and other family members for a while. Eventually, Bennis’ oldest sister Agnes, a 23-year-old trying to find employment to make money she would send back to her family, had come to live in Raleigh, NC. After a cousin spoke with her, Agnes Blue would rent a three-room house on Worth Street, then the African American section of the city; the house had no running water and no heat. She got the rest of the Blue children and their father to live with her in the house. Agnes Blue worked as a counter girl at the Dillon Supply Company in downtown Raleigh, and looked after the Blue children while William Blue was out working various jobs.

Bennis Blue attended the all-Black Crosby-Garfield Elementary School, across from Chavis Park in Raleigh when Blue was in the third grade. A neighbor who was the mother of a librarian, a school teacher, and a college professor, encouraged Bennis to read and learn. Bennis' neighbors were all educated, business people, or encouraging of education. Bennis Blue ended up being in the first class that attended the African American Fred J. Carnage Junior High School in September 1965. Blue got her first job in her neighbor Mozelle Dixon Merritt's beauty shop, where she washed dishes, swept up the floors, ran errands, and emptied the trash.

Growing up in southeast Raleigh, Bennis' family did experience significant racism from white people common to that encountered by all Black families living in downtown Raleigh pre-1970s. Bennis Blue would attend John W. Ligon High School and graduated from the high school in May 1971 as the last class to attend there. She earned a National Achievement Scholarship.

Despite having offers to attend MIT, Harvard, and a number of other schools, she chose to attend the historically Black Virginia State College (present-day Virginia State University) in Petersburg, Virginia. Having a love of English and literature, Blue became the editor of the freshman newsletter, and eventually the editor of the student newspaper the Virginia Statesman. Having finished college in December 1974, Blue graduated *magnum cum laude* from Virginia State in May 1975.

During the semester after finishing college before her graduation, Bennis Blue joined the U.S. Army Reserve in Raleigh, NC. Initially, she got into the Army after having fallen in love with a man in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC). After the relationship ended, Blue still was enamored with the Army and the way the soldiers carried themselves. What led Blue to enlist was an aptitude test she took at the Virginia State counseling office, which showed that she had strong characteristics of a military officer. There was no ROTC for women at Virginia State. In fact, as she relays in an oral history interview, the male ROTC students at Virginia State could not understand why she wanted to join the military and were not supportive of her desire. This lack of ROTC at her own university led to her enlisting back home in Raleigh in the Army Reserve. She was the only female military member in her family up to that time.

Blue would become the company clerk for the Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 4th Brigade, 108th Regiment, U.S. Army Reserves, based at their Western Boulevard office in Raleigh. Blue was serving there in the civilian acquired skills program, and held the rank of Private First Class. She did her first basic training for



**U.S. Women's Army Corps 2nd Lt. Bennis M. Blue, wearing her full Army jump gear and parachutes, posing in a mock airplane jump doorway while she was attending airborne jump training for women with fellow WAC officers at Fort Benning, Georgia, in the late summer and fall of 1976. On Blue's helmet is her WAC jump training number "AW003," with the "A" standing for "Officer," the "W" standing for "Woman," and the "003" standing for Blue's number in the alphabetically-arranged jump training order at Fort Benning of the WAC officers.**

based reserve force for women in the Regular Army at the time—which saw her serving with men unaccustomed to commanding women.

Bennis Blue asked her adjutant in Raleigh to be commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Army's Women's Army Corps (WAC). She was discharged from the Army Reserves in order to accept an officer's commission on April 27, 1976. Blue was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1976 as one of the 165 women

two weeks at Fort McClellan, Alabama, from March 24 to April 4, 1975. Initially, she became the platoon commander; but was demoted the day before graduation because of racism at the time. The Reserves in Raleigh had a mix of civilian and military officers overseeing aspects of operations and trainings there. As most were men, Blue faced both sexism for her gender and racism for her skin color.

Blue was removed from training by her Army Reserves sergeant during their summer camp at Fort Jackson, SC, being assigned to advanced individual training (AIT) at Fort Jackson for clerk training. Part of this had to do with a sense of women only viewed as clerks, typists, secretaries, or general office workers. Blue was training with the Army Reserves in Raleigh, instead of the Women's Army Corps—which was the separate gender-

to be commissioned as an officer that year. Blue was sent for 90-day training at Fort McClellan, Alabama, starting on May 3, 1976, as part of the WAC Officer Orientation and Officer Candidate Training Course. She finished her officers' training program and graduated at Fort McClellan on July 16, 1976. Blue recalls that her white female officers were hard on all the trainees, but not necessarily based on racial matters. In Blue's view, being a female officer meant you went through a lot of crap to get to where you were, and some of the senior WAC officers appear to have taken that tension out on the new trainees.

Next, Blue would be sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, for airborne jump training with the WAC, as she chose to go into airborne operations. She was stationed there for four weeks of training, finishing there at the end of July 1976. While stationed in Alabama and Georgia, Blue did see the rampant racism present on and off base, including police officers stopping cars of African American male and female military soldiers for no reason. Even though Blue was friends with a number of the white women she was stationed with in the WAC, on the weekends the white and Black female soldiers often seem to have broken up into different groups of friends based on their "race." For example, Blue and some of her WAC friends would attend a Black church in Anderson, Alabama, on Sundays while they were stationed at Fort Benning. Black male and female soldiers also hung out and partied on the weekend, serving as a kind of support while stationed in the deep South amid strong racist sentiments.



43 U.S. Women's Army Corps officers posing outside on the bleachers at Fort McClellan, Alabama, while they were attending the WAC Officer Orientation Candidate Training Course in the summer of 1976. Pictured is 2nd Lt. Bennis M. Blue (back row, far left).

Her ultimate desire was to join the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, NC—which to that point in 1976 was for men only. Female officers had already been added in 1978 to the 101st Airborne Division, but not in the 82nd Airborne. After Fort Benning, Bennis Blue was assigned to Fort Lee, Virginia, to train in quartermaster officer basic training and other advanced training. She would end up serving as a logistics officer after her time at Fort Lee. Blue also did helicopter jumps by strap hanging at Fort Lee during this period, in order to keep her jump status current. Blue would finish her time at Fort Lee in early January 1977.



Five African American Women's Army Corps officers' candidates standing outside of a building during the WAC Officer Orientation Candidate Training Course at Fort McClellan, Alabama, during some training period in the summer of 1976. Pictured are (no order) Katie Towers; Soror [spelling?] Marva McEady; Carolyn Pressley; Hattie Perkins; and 2nd Lt. Bennis M. Blue (bottom of image, kneeling).

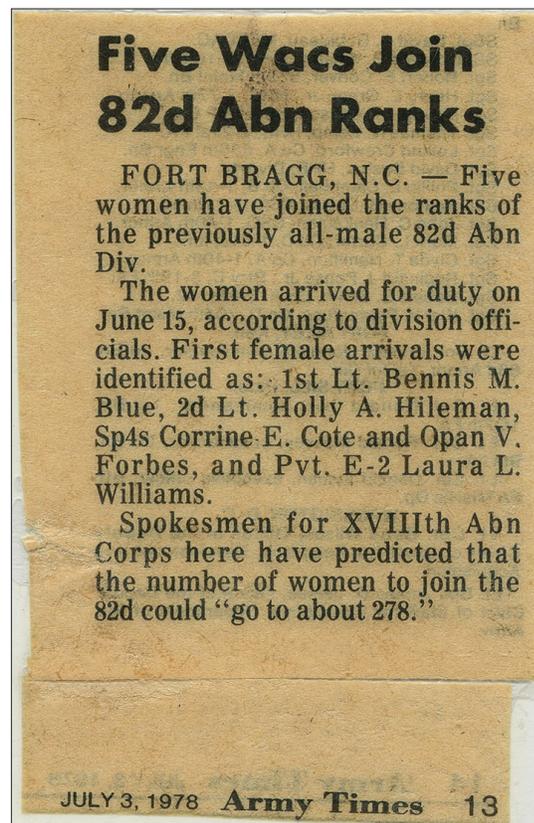
Blue was selected by 1st Corps Support Command (COSCOM) Gen. Elmer Pemberton to join his staff at Fort Bragg. In January 1977, she became the training officer with the Inspector General in 1st COSCOM, XVIII Airborne Corps. She would inspect the women whom she had been the training officer for in the company, to re-train people whose job specialties were being eliminated by the Army around 1977. For this work, she received the Army Commendation Medal. Blue also served in a Provisional Amphibious Company in 1st COSCOM that was formed on March 21, 1977, for the purpose of providing amphibious training to personnel from various 1st COSCOM units. It only existed and trained for three and a half weeks. Blue was the platoon leader for the second platoon in the temporary company during the training at U.S. Naval Amphibious Base Little Creek in Norfolk, Virginia. The training was completed on April 8, 1977.

Blue stated in her oral history interview she wanted to take every training opportunity offered by the Army, which included the hard amphibious training

that had very few women participating at the time. She wanted to fight for her place in the Army and hopefully the 82nd Airborne, and wanted to make sure they had no reason to not allow her in. The transition time from 1976 to 1978 in the Regular Army by allowing women into the ranks and the disbanding of the separate Women's Army Corps, led to a lot of challenges, sexism faced by female soldiers from male officers, and racism for Black servicewomen—particularly at Southern military bases.

Blue would be assigned as an officer in the 259th Field Service Company, 530th Supply and Service Battalion, at Fort Bragg. She also worked as the Office in Command of a burial detail with the Graves Registration and Memorial Affairs officer with the U.S. Army's Quartermaster Corps, starting in the spring of 1977. In this role, 2nd Lt. Blue and her unit identified peoples' remains from military and mass casualty incidents. She also was involved as a casualty officer in providing military funeral honors for veterans, and was responsible for handing the folded American flags to the veterans' families. While at Fort Bragg, Blue participated in

U.S. Marine Corps and Navy amphibious training joint in November 1978. Blue would be promoted to the rank of 1st Lieutenant on May 1, 1978.



The U.S. Army began asking for women to be added to the 82nd Airborne Division along with the integration of the WAC into the Regular Army in 1978. In June 1978, 1st Lt. Bennis Blue would be assigned as one of the first female minority officers of the 82nd Airborne, fulfilling a lifelong dream. She was technically the first female officer with the 82nd Airborne, as she arrived on June 15, 1978, early for duty and to sign in with the division. That same day, four other female officers joined Blue in the 82nd Airborne as the first women in the division. These women were Blue; 2nd Lt. Holly A. Hileman; Sp4 Corrine E. Cote; Sp4s Opan V. Forbes; and

Pvt. (E-2) Laura L. Williams. All of the women were greeted by Maj. Gen. Roscoe Robinson Jr., the African American commanding general of the 82nd Airborne.



**U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Roscoe Robinson Jr. (left), the African-American commanding general of the 82nd Airborne Division, shaking the hand of 1st Lt. Bennis M. Blue (right), after she had arrived early on the morning of June 15, 1978, at Fort Bragg, N.C., as the first of five female officers to join the 82nd Airborne.**

**U.S. Army 1st Lt. Bennis M. Blue (left), the assistant division property book officer for the 182nd Division Material Management Center (DMMC), sitting on a wooden post next to her commanding officer in the 182nd DMMC Lt. Col. David Dunn (right), as they were waiting to load up on aircraft for Blue's first parachute jump as a member of the 82nd Airborne Division in 1978 at Fort Bragg, N.C. This was to be Blue's "cherry jump," and Dunn's first jump in 15 years.**



After going through jump training with the 82nd Airborne, Blue worked as the property book officer assigned with the 182nd Division Material Management Center (DMMC), 82nd Airborne Division. Despite close calls, Blue would never serve in the field of combat or duty overseas while with the 82nd Airborne. Blue continued her education while she was in the Army. While stationed at Fort Bragg in the late 1970s, she attended and graduated from Webster University's campus attached to Fort Bragg with a master's degree in business management.

Blue states that she did not really encounter much racism at Fort Bragg, particularly in the Airborne with her commanding officer being a Black officer. She also recalls

the men she served with in the 82nd Airborne being welcoming and supportive, particularly her white commanding officer of her unit—Lt. Col. David Dunn. Still, her experience was not the norm for Black women in the Regular Army at the time. The tide of the worst racism in the Army was beginning to change with greater integration—though each Black soldier experiences different levels of racism to this day in the Army depending on a number of factors with their assignments, officers, and fellow unit members.

With a gap in service during the 1980s, Bennis Blue stayed with the Army and Army Reserves, eventually reaching the rank of Major in the U.S. Army Reserves by the mid-1990s. She had served in the 1980s at Kaiserslautern, Germany, stationed at the Army Garrison Panzer Kaserne with the 2nd Corps in the Materials Readiness Office. Blue later served as the commanding officer of the Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 7th Support Group, at the U.S. Army's McKee Barracks at Crailsheim, Germany. Blue remained in the U.S. Army Reserves through August 5, 1999, when she was honorably discharged.

Today, despite the early racism and sexism she encountered in the U.S. Army, Bennis Blue is remembered as one of the first female minority officers of the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg.

## **Conclusion**

These stories about real Black U.S. Army soldiers and officers are not just stories. I have met with the soldiers or the families of those soldiers who have passed away. When discussing the effects of racism on them in the military, the individuals' all show heavy hearts at the obstacles placed in their paths or being attacked while these three North Carolinians simply wanted to serve the United States of America. All of these individuals had to fight two wars: the war of inclusion and the war against the enemy or preparing to do so.

All of these North Carolinians also demonstrate the aspects advanced by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his 1963 book *Strength to Love*: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” Having worked to understand the sacrifices each of these three Black North Carolinians gave for their country, and working to promote their service histories for the public, I can only say that that these three match the heart of those words. May we all aspire to reach the same measure in our lives and service to our fellow humans.



Produced as part of a joint grant project of the North Carolina Department of Military Veterans Affairs and the State Archives of North Carolina, in recognition of the North Carolina African American Veterans Lineage Day programming.

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