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From Mail to Morale: Local Woman's Service in the 6888th Battalion

By EvaAnne Johnson

During World War II, the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion was a predominately-African American unit of the Women's Army Corps, and the only female unit of color to be stationed in Europe during the war.

Led by Major Charity Adams, the battalion of 855 women was stationed in Birmingham, England, and tasked with clearing the massive backlog of mail in the European Theater. In Birmingham, they were confronted with three airplane hangars full of bags of mail. This mail was "stuck" and quickly accumulating because the mail could not be delivered as addressed to the ever-moving troops on the front lines. Battling rodents eating the mail, no heat, and racial segregation, they worked around the clock to clear the backlog and successfully rerouted the mail within three months. In an eight-hour shift, they could sort and redirect more than 65,000 pieces of mail. It was so successful that they were then sent to Rouen and Paris to clear the backlogs of mail there, too. Their motto was, "No Mail, Low Morale." The 6888 is getting its well-deserved time in the limelight, thanks to Netflix's recent release of "The Six Triple Eight," starring Kerry Washington. But did you know that there was a local woman who served in this famous battalion?

Sgt. Mattie Laura Jackson was one of the 855 women in the 6888th. She was born in Sycamore on April 5, 1918, and was the youngest daughter of Neville and Laura Jackson. She grew up on North Avenue in Sycamore with two older sisters. (Another older sister had died when Mattie was a baby.) She was the niece of Bishop Jones of the Israel of God's Church in Sycamore, and her family were active members of the church. She was also an active student at Sycamore High School,

joining the Glee Club, A'Cappella, Allied Youth, the yearbook staff, and several other groups. She graduated high school in 1936.

Mattie enlisted in the Women's Army Corps (WAC) on August 1, 1943, when she was 25 years old.

After enlisting, she was sent to Ft. Oglethorpe, Georgia, for basic training. She became a sergeant after completing training in 1944, and was stationed for a brief time at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. With the rest of her battalion, she sailed for England in February 1945. Before they even arrived, their ship was chased by a German U-boat and they were confronted with the terrifying realities of war. They landed in Glasgow, Scotland on February 11, and boarded a train to Birmingham. Mattie was assigned as a postal clerk for the Postal Directory Service. After completing the huge backlog of mail in Birmingham, Mattie and her unit were transferred to Rouen, France, and then Paris. During each assignment, they exceeded ex-



Sgt. Mattie L. Jackson, shortly after being promoted to a sergeant. *Photo from the Sycamore True Republican, 5 Dec 1944, p. 1.*



WACs sort packages, taken from the mail sacks by French civilian employees, at the 17th Base Post Office. Paris, France. *Photo from the National Archives, Local Identifier: 111-SC-337995-1.*

pectations and quickly and efficiently cleared the backlogged mail. In Paris, Mattie had been promoted to Technical Sergeant, but she was ready to go back to the States. She was quoted in a Baltimore newspaper saying, "Paris is okay, but I want a transfer home." (*The Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 3 Nov. 1945, p. 2) Shortly after finishing the operations in Paris, Mattie returned to the US and was released from active duty on January 4, 1946, after serving for almost two-and-a-half years.

After her honorable discharge, she lived in Chicago and then Gary, Indiana, for a few years. There, she worked as a financial adjuster for the Veterans' Administration. She married Donald Allen in June of 1952. They moved to Inglewood, California, and she received a degree from Compton College. She was proud of her military service, and in California she was a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and WAC Organization 10 in Los Angeles. During retirement, she loved to travel the world, an interest

that may have begun during her first trip overseas in the 6888th. Mattie passed on November 10, 2006, and is buried at Elmwood Cemetery in Sycamore.

As I watched Netflix's "The Six Triple Eight," I imagined young Mattie Jackson as one of the women marching through the war-torn streets of Birmingham and tirelessly sorting through the mountain of mail. If you are able to watch this movie, pause at the end to look for Mattie Jackson's name on the honor roll and take a moment to remember one of Sycamore's World War II heroes.

If you'd like to learn more about the 6888th Battalion, I suggest reading *To Serve My Country, To Serve My Race* by Brenda L. Moore, which includes excerpts from an interview with Mattie Jackson Allen, as well as the autobiography of Major Charity Adams Earley, *One Woman's Army: A Black Officer Remembers the WAC*.