

# African-American Women War Heroes

Many earned status as nurses

*Editor's note: The following is part of a continuing Black History Month series on African Americans serving in the U.S. military.*

BY RON WEBER

THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

While many African-American women filled support roles vital to the U.S. military in times of war, others wanted to fight on the front lines.

For example, brave women such as Harriet Tubman served as a nurse, scout and spy for the Union Army during the Civil War.

Tubman's incredible journey up the Combahee River in South Carolina, saw her as the first woman of any race

to lead U.S. military troops on a mission. Tubman guided soldiers up the river where they destroyed Confederate warehouses full of ammunition and other vital Southern military supplies.

On the way back down the river, she called to slaves on the riverbanks, freeing them from their plantations and cruel masters. When the boats became too full, hundreds more grabbed hold of the sides. Witnesses said the people, all hanging on to each other in the water, looked like a necklace of people.

One of the bravest stories of an African-American woman in the Civil War was that of Mary Elizabeth Bowser.

Bowser was able to obtain a position as a maid in a Confederate home and play up her lack of education, appearing somewhat retarded. With the ability to memorize large amounts of information at one time, Bowser listened to high level confederate talks and read military papers on Jefferson Davis's desk. At night she would repeat the information to a well known Union sympathizer who would write it down

and help deliver it to the Union Army.

The espionage was often sent inside of eggshells or sewn inside of fabric material for women's clothing. Bowser never tipped her hand. She bravely kept her secret throughout her time with Davis, who along with his friends,

there were not enough qualified male nurses to handle the injuries from the war.

The first class of 32 black nursing school graduates were recruited and trained at Freedman's Hospital in Washington, D.C. Their service in the war and other parts of the country were so impressive that bills were sent to Congress, allowing for a permanent nursing corps in the army.

As world unrest signaled the upcoming World War I, The Red Cross began a full drive for women nurses. In 1909, The National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses was founded.

But when America declared war against Germany in 1917, the Red Cross and Army rejected African-American women nurses. Shocked and disappointed,

thousands of would-be-nurses were left on the sidelines.

In December 1918, the Army Nurse Corps, upon accepting a mere 18 black women nurses, sent them throughout the country to battle an international epidemic of influenza. The "experiment with black nurses," as it was called, was a huge success. The women were noted as highly competent professionals.

World War II would see a major shift in the role of African-American women.

President Roosevelt signed Public Law #554 which allowed the creation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps of which 10 percent would be African American. The Navy did not allow any black women into the WAVES until 1945, near the end of the war.

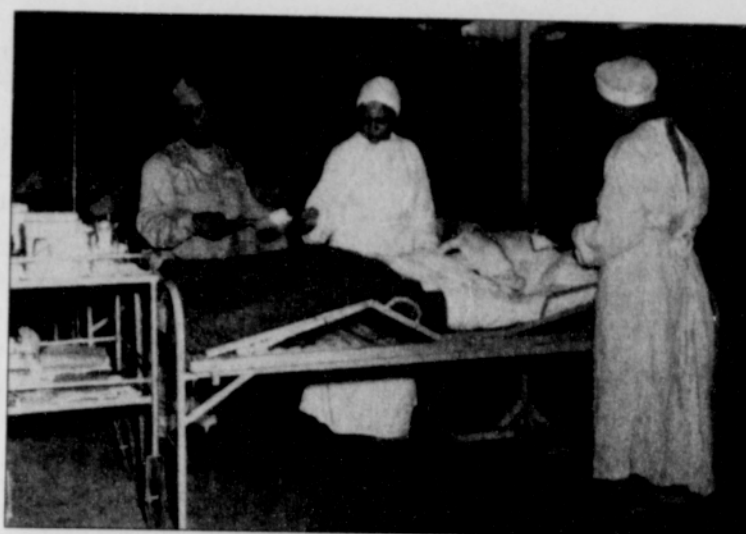
A very interesting fact involving black women in the Army Corps was their sporadic placement in a few locations throughout the continental United States where their presence was generally not accepted. But the discrimination wasn't prevalent in Europe where African-American

women were requested throughout the European Theater of Operation. More than 800 of the women were sent to Europe under the command of Major Charity Adams, a highly successful black woman officer.

Though isolated in some European areas and feeling the prejudice of white military personnel, the women were well received by black soldiers and Europeans.

Under ongoing pressure from

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African-American nurses in the U.S. Army during World War II were well received in Europe.



Harriet Tubman demonstrated bravery as a Union Army nurse, scout and spy during the Civil War.

thought of her only as a harmless mentally ill woman.

Like Harriet Tubman and others, black women took positions as nurses or common military laborers in the Civil War. Although Tubman is certainly the most famous black nurse during that era,



Mary Eliza Mahoney was the first black woman trained as a nurse in the U.S. Army.

the first black woman to actually go through formal training to become a nurse was Miss Mary Eliza Mahoney.

Mahoney graduated from the New England Hospital for Women and Children in 1879.

At the time, most military doctors preferred male nurses. However, during the Spanish-American war, it was clearly evident

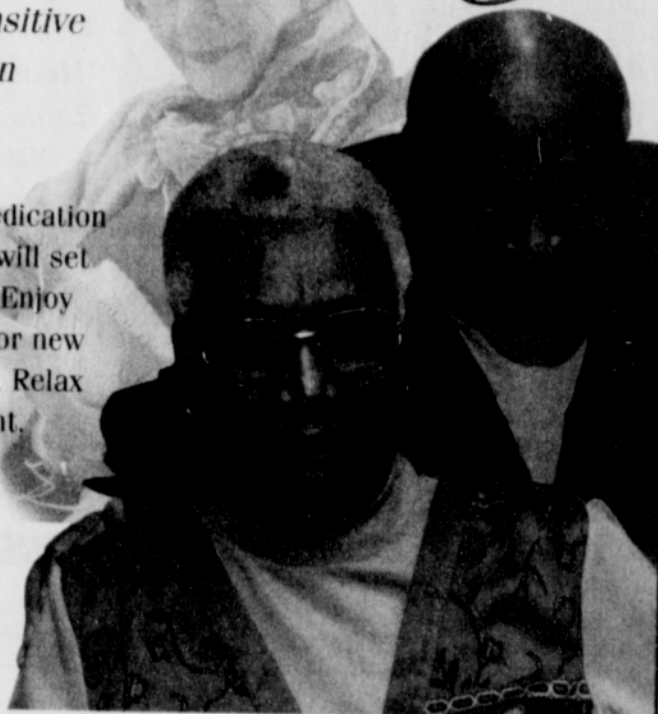
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