

Veteran Encounters 'WAC-ky' Gender, Racial Barriers

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U.S. Army veteran Marilyn O. Griffin will be among those honored for their service in the military during a “Saluting Our Veterans” ceremony at Gibbs Hall on 20 March. The ceremony will be held at the National Council of Negro Women, Inc North Shore Area Section’s 26th Annual Founder's Day Luncheon.



Marilyn Griffin, nee Davis, will be among those honored for their service in the military during a “Saluting Our Veterans” ceremony at Gibbs Hall on 20 March.

Women know few limits in today’s military. Gen. Ann E. Dunwoody, Commander, U.S. Army Materiel Command, became the first female four-star general in the U.S. armed forces in November 2008. But when Dunwoody received her commission in 1975, she became a member of the Women’s Army Corps, or WAC. The WAC was the branch of the Army formed during WWII for female service. It officially separated the sexes until it was disbanded in 1978 and women were officially integrated into the armed services.

It was under this organization that Fort Monmouth’s own Marilyn Griffin served. Griffin cited her aunt, a WAC veteran, as an inspiration for joining the Woman’s Army Corps. This aunt often sent Griffin small dolls and treasures from abroad during her time overseas. Griffin was intrigued by the exciting places that military service could allow you to discover.

Griffin started her military career at the age of 18 in 1963. She said that as an African American from the North she was not prepared for the prejudices that she would face during basic training, which was her first time away from her home in Neptune, New Jersey.

During the 1960s, WAC training occurred at Fort McClellan, Alabama. En route to McClellan, Griffin’s plane was detoured by fog and forced to land in New Orleans. There, all the African American recruits on board, both men and women, were told that they could not be provided with lodging. Instead, they could call family or friends if they had any close by, or sleep in the airport. Griffin remembers spending the night in the airport, while the white recruits were given hotel lodging. The next morning they flew on to Fort McClellan, which was not much of an improvement.

Griffin said that she and the other African American Soldiers were never allowed to leave base during basic training, not even during their leave time, because African Americans weren’t welcome in town. She recalled, “You know, coming from the North this was all very, very strange, especially being 17 or 18 years old.”

While Griffin also felt unprepared for the physical hardships of basic training she said in the end that “it was good training, I have to say because it helped me to become a better person.” She was taught to make her bed, shine her shoes and iron clothes, all which had been done for her, growing up as an only child. She continues this discipline today in the home she shares with her husband, even lining up her dining room chairs in perfect order before she leaves the house.

After basic training Griffin went to a computer training course at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, for 8 weeks. When she never received an assignment she was sent on to Fort Knox, Kentucky for clerical school, after which she ended up at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. She disliked the barren landscape of Oklahoma and was able to re-enlist in the Army to be stationed at Fort Monmouth, allowing her to return home to NJ in 1965. Here, she did clerical work for the financial office. Griffin officially ended her service in 1968.

Ms. Griffin states that her time at Fort Monmouth was the best part about her military career. She loved the community environment and since she was from the area, had the benefit of having relatives and friends working alongside her on base.

After she was discharged from the military she went on to Essex County College in Newark. She became a kindergarten teacher and has taught first grade, second grade and adult education, fulfilling her second childhood goal of becoming a teacher. She also joined the Army National Guard to earn extra money and stayed in for approximately 8 years. She then transferred to the Air National Guard at Fort McGuire, where she still volunteers today. “My whole life has been the military, I just love the military.”

Looking back Ms. Griffin remembers a great deal about her military service and the impact it had on her life. When she first entered the military she faced older officers with preconceived notions that women should be in the kitchen or at home caring for children, but she never let it deter her career. She combated these negative opinions, along with racial prejudice, by looking to her aunt, who provided her with a strong female role model who had persevered down a similar path. Ms. Griffin acknowledges that although it wasn’t an easy environment to work in, especially when others were being promoted before she was, she believes she learned some important lessons about life. “It was a part of life. Things don’t always happen when you want them to happen and how you want them to happen.”

Her favorite part of serving was marching in the military parades and the camaraderie she felt with her military family. Simple things like playing cards and talking with her fellow WACs are highlighted as some of her fondest memories. The time she spent at Fort Monmouth shaped her



MARILYN O. DAVIS

Griffin served in a time rife with gender and racial discrimination but persevered and went on to inspire her students that they, too, could achieve their dreams.

life, just as her service helped to pave the road for women in the armed services today and helped prepare her to mold young minds and empower young women as a teacher. Looking back she says that she “would never take anything back from her military experience...there were two things I wanted to do and I managed to do both of them. I had a role model teacher that I liked, and I became a teacher; and I also wanted to be like my aunt in the WAC, and I did that.”

Ms. Griffin is saddened by the BRAC closure at Fort Monmouth since she considers the Fort still a large part of her life and those she has become acquainted with are part of her family. She acknowledges that she will continue the relationships that she has fostered here and will move forward, despite the physical loss of a place that has greatly impacted her life.