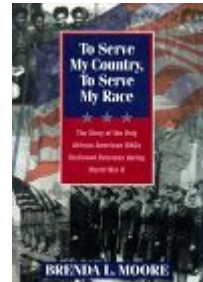


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brenda L. Moore. *To Serve My Country, to Serve My Race: The Story of the Only African American WACs Stationed Overseas during World War II.* New York: New York University Press, 1996. 272 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5522-8.

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We Also Served

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Even today many Americans remain ignorant of the fact that black women served overseas during World War II. A Postal Unit, the 6888th, was posted to Europe, where they served in Great Britain and later France when the burden of keeping track of thousands of soldiers (as they moved from area to area, were killed, rotated back to the States or otherwise moved around) became so overwhelming that an enormous backlog of all-important mail and packages built up to an unmanageable chaos. An estimated 855 women served in this unit, and Moore was able to list the names, ranks and serial numbers of 742 of them in Appendix A. Records are somewhat scanty, making reconstruction of the list difficult.

Moore looks at the Unit from several perspectives: who were these women, where did they come from, what were their living and social conditions while they served in Europe, and how did their military experiences affect their lives when they reentered society and later? To do this, she interviewed fifty-one of the women, either by telephone or in person, and utilized a variety of other methodologies which she outlines in detail in her introduction. Moore herself is a veteran of six years of Army service, and at the time of publication of this work was Associate Professor of Sociology at State University of New York.

Rather surprisingly, Moore does not appear to have extended her research to the database of doctoral dissertations which would possibly have yielded a rich, un-

tapped source of material, nor does she cite some of the best-known works on military women such as those by Rogan, Holm, and Schneider and Schneider. These references do constitute valuable resources on the history of women in the military, including that of black women, and their absence from the bibliography seems odd. Her bibliography is extensive nonetheless.

The author presents a comprehensive background both to social conditions regarding blacks in the United States just before and during World War II and to the history of women, and African-American women in particular, in the military in general. These segments create a context for her primary emphasis on the Postal Unit, which was unique in several ways. Massive social change was taking place within the society and culture of the United States due to multiple factors, and racial issues were strongly influential in these changes. The war was forcing social change faster than it would have occurred otherwise. Initially, African Americans were even denied entry into the armed forces, but attrition and demands for more and more personnel made it imperative that this racist policy be changed. Women too were making rapid inroads in equality, and eventually some black women were accepted for military service.

Initially, black nurses were recruited and posted to care for black soldiers, and then the sheer pressures of inadequate numbers of personnel to work behind the lines forced the military to recruit more and more women. Since African American women, many much older than

the average white female recruit, and often with college degrees and impressive work experience, were eager to serve, a few were eventually admitted as well. Initially, their numbers were so small they were posted singly to various posts, invariably given menial jobs and treated badly in spite of their backgrounds, until the situation in Europe made it essential that women be sent in an attempt to clear up the chaotic postal situation. Due to many pressures, particularly on the part of the tireless African American social activist Mary McLeod, the Army was prevailed upon to form a unit of black women, complete with black women officers and non-commissioned officers. Thus, the 6888th was formed.

It is the recountings of the various interviewees and personal details of the day-to-day experiences of the women that make this book fascinating. The women found themselves working horrendously hard, but for the first time serving with black women officers and non-coms, and entered a totally accepting and egalitarian environment as opposed to the racial discrimination and abuse they endured in the United States, particularly in the South. First posted to Great Britain, they were welcomed wholeheartedly by the British, often taken into their homes and well feted. Working together as a solid unit they quickly and creatively turned their appallingly bad living quarters into a warm and friendly barracks, and set about doing their jobs with a will. Off-duty hours offered many opportunities for sight-seeing and friendly exchanges with the British, and it must have seemed like Paradise compared to some places in the United States. When the 6888th was later transferred to France, they found the French just as accepting and friendly.

It was not, of course, all beer and skittles as the saying goes. The work was mind-numbingly dull, and the volume of mail overwhelming. As attrition began to seriously deplete the numbers of women and inadequate replacements arrived, the work pressures worsened. The mail was processed by hand, standing up apparently, in unheated spaces, so frigid the women wore their snow uniforms in airless facilities where fatigue, eyestrain and body injuries added to the misery. There was a certain amount of racism experienced from encounters with

some white soldiers, and the women were sometimes viewed by black soldiers as provided for their exclusive sexual delight. The numbers of black soldiers far exceeded those of the women, and problems could and did arise from those dynamics.

Probably the single most influential factor in the African American WACs' good adjustment and high morale was the extraordinary woman appointed as their Commanding Officer. Charity Adams Earley was, by all accounts, a peerless leader with unparalleled leadership and charismatic personality who melded her diverse group of women into an incredibly productive force. While many of the women were older and possessed advanced degrees, there were also daughters of field hands and working-class women. The work itself was not conducive to enjoyment, although many of the women expressed strong feelings of pride and caring in what they were doing to boost the morale of the fighting forces. Moreover, patriotism was also a powerful motivator for most.

The 6888th was unique and performed a magnificent job under difficult circumstances, and their story deserves to be known and admired. This book illuminates that story in a very human way. If this reviewer has one cavil, other than the failure to cite or utilize some research resources, it is the somewhat misleading title of the work. While it is true that much of the text does deal specifically with the 6888th, it is also true that the scope of the work is broader, with much space devoted to general histories of race relations, social change, military history and the present situation of African American military. The reader must wade through a significant amount of rather forced scholarly discussion on various sociological academic writing, particularly in chapter 7, which adds little to the "story" of the Postal Unit per se. In the end, the book seems to be an uneasy marriage of an interesting account of a unique and worthy group of women whose place in history should be much larger than it is, and a dry, scholarly tome with some portions of little interest to anyone but another academic. Still, academics must have grist for their mills, and here they will find it.

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