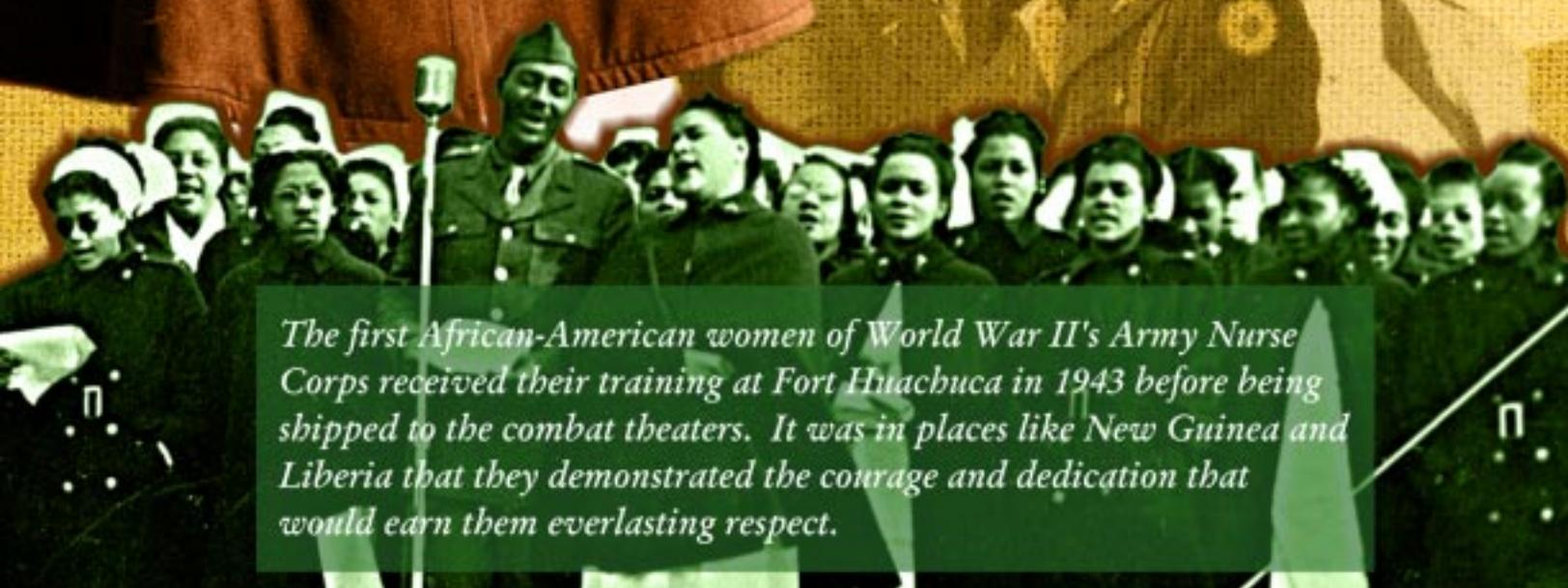


# *Huachuca's Heroes*



*The first African-American women of World War II's Army Nurse Corps received their training at Fort Huachuca in 1943 before being shipped to the combat theaters. It was in places like New Guinea and Liberia that they demonstrated the courage and dedication that would earn them everlasting respect.*

# Army Nurses at Huachuca



*Army nurses leaving Fort Huachuca after being assigned to the Prisoner of War camp at Florence, Arizona. Photo courtesy Prudence Burns Burrell.*

**A** small group of women who contributed greatly to the World War II effort, but labored largely in obscurity, were the

African-American women of the Army Nurse Corps (ANC). No group of young professionals were more determined to serve their coun-

try than the black nurses that filled the ranks of the Army Nurse Corps in 1918 and in World War II. Well schooled and experienced, they found

## THE ARMY NURSE CORPS AT FORT

the way to military service barred, enrollment in the Red Cross denied, and eventually assignments to any but sealed off and segregated environments prohibited.

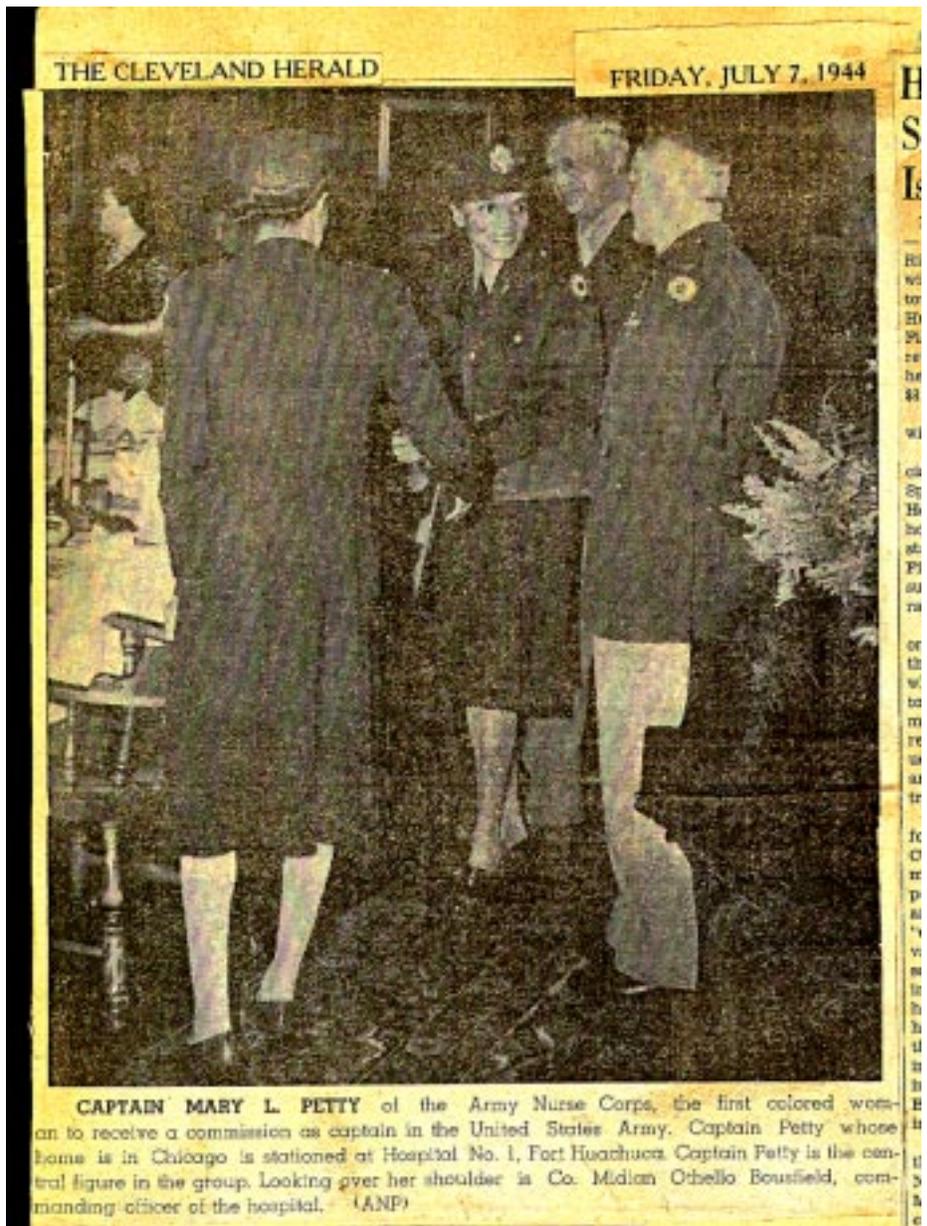
When mobilization for World War II began in 1940, the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses urged their membership to enroll in the American Red Cross, the organization that served as a clearinghouse for the Army Nurse Corps. They met with rejection by local offices of the Red Cross and were rebuffed by the Army Nurse Corps which told them: "Your application for appointment to the Army Nurse Corps cannot be given favorable consideration as there are no provisions in Army regulations for the appointment of colored nurses in the Corps."<sup>1</sup>

Initially, when their persistent lobbying efforts gained them admission to the Army, they received the biggest slap of all. They were informed that their numbers would be limited to 56 and they would only be allowed in wards administering to black soldiers. The Surgeon General James C. Magee was unbending on this policy. He announced at a meeting with the Negro Advisory Committee in March 1941: Negro nurses and other Negro professional personnel would only be called to serve in hospitals or wards devoted exclusively to the treatment of Negro soldiers."<sup>2</sup> The first African-American Army nurses volunteered with the full knowledge that they would be restricted to segregated units, but that insult was overlooked in their eagerness to serve the cause for which the U.S. Army was fighting in 1941.

The Army Nurse Corps was first established in 1901. In 1918,

only after the armistice was signed and an influenza epidemic drained available nursing resources, were African-American nurses finally admitted in small numbers. Eighteen of them served at Army hospitals at Camp

To join the ANC and receive an officer's commission, a woman had to be a registered professional nurse and a member of the American Red Cross. The recruitment effort was led by Mary McLeod Bethune,



Sherman, Ohio, and Camp Grant, Illinois. At those places they were segregated in their living quarters, but at both camps the nurses were assigned to all services and in all wards, white and black.

founder of Bethune Cookman College, Mabel K. Staupers, President of the Negro Graduate Nurses Association, and Eleanor Roosevelt. The first contingent of African-American nurses numbered 48. Half of these



*First Lieutenant Prudence Burns Burrell was born in Mounds, Illinois, and graduated from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. As an Army nurse, she was stationed at Fort Huachuca and then at the 268th Station Hospital in the South Pacific (Australia, New Guinea, and Manila, Philippines). While in the Pacific, she met and married Lieut. Lowell H. Burrell, a career soldier who eventually wound up back at Huachuca. Ms. Burrell taught school in Bisbee, Arizona, while her husband was stationed there. She pursued a career as a teacher, becoming an associate professor of nursing and a elementary, secondary and high school at many of the places she and her family were stationed.*

were sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and the other half to Camp Livingston, Louisiana. The first nurse to report in at Fort Bragg in April 1941 was Lt. Della H. Rainey of Suffolk, Va. In civilian life she had been the operating room supervisor at Lincoln Hospital in Durham, NC. She was promoted to chief nurse at Fort Bragg in 1942 and then transferred to the station hospital at Tuskegee Air Field. When a chief nurse job opened up at Fort Huachuca's station hospital in 1943, she filled it, but soon moved on to Camp Beale, Ca. After the war she served in the occupation force in Japan and retired from the Army as a major, the highest rank to be achieved by any African-American nurse in World War II.

In July 1942 another 60 nurses were admitted and assigned to Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Where the station hospital was commanded by a black physician, Lieut. Col. Midian O. Bousefield. In six months' time, the nursing staff grew to as many as 100. Lieut. Susan E. Freeman, formerly the head nurse at Freedmen's Hospital in Washington, D.C., directed the nursing staff. The Fort Huachuca hospital was called as fine a one "as Uncle Sam has in his entire Army." It included two physiotherapy training schools, one for WACs and one for civilians. The staff also organized two 150-bed hospitals for overseas duty.<sup>3</sup>

Lieut. Freeman, from Stratford, Connecticut, came to Huachuca from Camp Livingston, Louisiana, where she had been one of the original nurses admitted to the ANC. She was shipped out from Huachuca in 1943 to become the chief nurse of the first overseas contingent of black nurses at the 25th



*An unidentified Army Nurse at Huachuca in 1943. Photo courtesy Prudence Burns*

Station Hospital in Liberia, West Africa. Promoted to captain, Freeman received in 1944 the Mary Mahoney Award from the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses in recognition of her services with the

American Red Cross in the 1937 Ohio River flood disaster and to honor her for her assignment as the first African-American nurse to command an overseas unit in the Army

Nurse Corps.

The nurses from Huachuca and Bragg were shipped out to places like Liberia, where 30 nurses in the 25th Station Hospital Unit cared for U.S. troops protecting air fields and rubber plantations; Tuskegee Air Field, Alabama; the 168th Hospital in England where they treated for German prisoners of war; and to the China-Burma-India theater where they filled posts at the 383d and 335th Station Hospitals near Tagap, Burma, attending the medical needs of the black troops working on the Ledo Road. In the Southwest Pacific, the African-American Army nurses served at the 268th Station Hospital in New Guinea, which had a 250-bed capacity and was commanded and staffed solely by black officers. Those nurses who remained in the states either stayed at Fort Huachuca or were sent to prisoner-of-war camps in Arizona and California.<sup>4</sup>

The number of black nurses would reach 200 at the time of the bombing of Pearl Harbor and 500 before the war was over. In January 1944 the superintendent of the Army Nurse Corps, Colonel Florence A. Blanchfield, wrote: "Colored nurses have a definite contribution to make to the nursing services of the Army, and careful consideration is now being given to determine how their services may be fully realized."<sup>5</sup> At war's end in September 1945, there were only 479 black nurses in a corps of 50,000. The small number was due to a quota system which kept down the enrollment of African-American nurses. The quota was dropped in 1944 and some 2,000 black student nurses began work in the Cadet Nurse Corps program. By war's end the U.S. Army had learned that medical

skill and dedication were qualities not determined by skin color.

<sup>1</sup> Staupers, Mabel Keaton, R.N., *No Time for Prejudice: A Story of the Integration of Negroes in Nursing in the United States*, Macmillan, New York, 1961, p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> Morais, Herbert M., *The History of the Negro in Medicine*, a volume in the International Library of Negro Life and History, Publishers Company, Inc., New York, 1967, pp. 128-30.

<sup>4</sup> Burrell, Prudence Burns, interview and material furnished, on file in the Fort Huachuca Museum files.

<sup>5</sup> Morais, p. 130.

# THE ARMY NURSE CORPS AT FORT