

VFW Honors Black Veterans and Active-Duty Troops

America's largest combat veterans organization salutes the nation's African-American veterans of the past and present

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While celebrating Black History Month, the VFW is commemorating Black veterans for their service and contributions to military history. Like all veterans, African-American men and women have been an integral part of every VFW qualifying war. Here are stories of just some of the black men and women who made history in the military.

COAST GUARD AWARDS AFRICAN-AMERICAN PILOT

In 2019, Lt. Ronaqua Rusell was awarded an Air Medal for her efforts in a Hurricane Harvey relief mission.

Rusell, who is an HC-144 Ocean Sentry aircraft pilot, earned the award while stationed at Texas' Coast Guard Sector Corpus Christi in 2017. Rusell, a native of St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, is the first African-American woman serving in the Coast Guard to earn the award.

Four other female African-American Coast Guard pilots attended Rusell's Air Medal ceremony: Lt. Cmdr. Jeanine Menze, Cmdr. LaShanda Holmes, Lt. Angel Hughes and Lt. Chanel Lee.

ARMY RECOGNIZES FIRST BLACK UNION CIVIL WAR UNIT

In January 2021, the Army Heritage Center Foundation presented findings of the first-known all-black Army unit.

The First South Carolina Volunteers of African Descent, or 1SCVAD, was organized at Port Royal, S.C., in May 1862, according to the Army Heritage Foundation. The unit comprised former enslaved men and predated the 54th Massachusetts Regiment. According to the report by retired Army Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges and retired Army Col. Chris Allen, on the night of Dec. 31, 1862, the soldiers of 1SCVAD went to bed as "contraband" but woke up on Jan. 1,

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1863, as free men when the first public reading of the Emancipation Proclamation made them free men.

ALL-BLACK CREW CONDUCTS TRAINING MISSION

For the first time, an all-black flight crew of 33 airmen in February 2021 conducted an E-8C Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar System, or JSTARS, training mission.

The mission took place at Georgia's Robins Air Force Base with airmen and soldiers forming Team JSTAR. The mission was carried out to commemorate Black History Month 2021, according to the Air Force.

Conducting the training mission were airmen from the Georgia Air National Guard's 116th Air Control Wing, airmen of the 461st Air Control Wing and the soldiers from Army's 138th Military Intelligence Company.

"This mission gives us the opportunity to celebrate the legacy and honor our previous successors in the Air Force, primarily the Tuskegee Airmen, and the sacrifices they made in order to get us to where we are now," said Air Force Capt. Dewey McRae, an instructor with the 461st Air Control Wing.

McRae also said that the mission was historic.

"Within the active-duty and Guard, we have finally been able to come together and fulfill an entire African-American aircrew," McRae said. "Taking that a step forward, we not only had enough people for the actual mission crew but were able to fill additional seats with instructors and evaluators, taking a full jet of African Americans to represent the combat Air Force."

BLACK MARINE EARNS FIRST STAR

Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Anthony Henderson was promoted to his current rank in July 2021 after more than three decades of military service.

His promotion came after being passed over for promotion three times even after Department of the Navy Secretary Richard Spencer recommended Henderson's promotion to one-star in 2019, according to The New York Times.

Henderson was commissioned as a second lieutenant in 1989 when he started serving in the Marine Corps as an infantry officer. Henderson has deployed to Cuba, the Mediterranean Sea, Africa, the Asian Pacific and Southwest Asia, according to his official Marine Corps biography.

Henderson currently serves as the deputy commanding general of II Marine Expeditionary Force and commander of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade. A Washington,

D.C., native, Henderson graduated from Louisiana's Southern University and A&M College in 1989 with a bachelor's degree in history and earned a juris doctorate in law in 1993. He is a licensed attorney in the state of Louisiana, according to his official Marine Corps biography.

FIRST BLACK SERGEANT-AT-ARMS TAKES POSITION INHOUSE

In March 2021, retired Army Maj. Gen. William Walker was tapped as the new sergeant-at-arms for the House of Representatives, making him the first African-American to serve in the position. He is the House's 38th sergeant-at-arms.

Walker, who previously served as the commanding general of the Washington, D.C., National Guard, was appointed to sergeant-at-arms by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in March 2021.

Walker served 39 years in the Army. And for 30 years, Walker not only served in the Army National Guard but also as a special agent for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, according to a House press release.

MIDSHIPMAN BECOMES FIRST BLACK FEMALE BRIGADE COMMANDER

In early 2021, Midshipman 1st Class Sydney Barber became the first black woman to be a Naval Academy brigade commander, the highest position for an Academy student.

Barber said she never pictured herself as a brigade commander at the Academy.

"I looked up to strong female leaders and had lots of role models," Barber said.

A Lake Forest, Illinois, native, Barber now is a Marine Corps second lieutenant. She graduated from the Academy in May with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering.

In its 175-year history, the Naval Academy, based in Annapolis, Maryland, has had only 16 women hold the top student position, also known as the "six-striper." Women have only been accepted to the Academy since 1980.

THREE OF THE REMAINING TUSKEGEE AIRMEN PASS AWAY

At least three of the famed Tuskegee Airmen died in 2021.

Robert Holts, 96, of Bellevue, Nebraska, died in February 2021. Holts was the last Tuskegee Airman from Nebraska, according to the Omaha World-Herald.

Robert Ashby, 95, of Phoenix, died in March 2021. He was one of three remaining Tuskegee Airmen of Arizona, according to the Air Force Times.

Asa Newman died in June 2021. An Ohio native, Newman was 102 years old.

Tuskegee Airmen flew P-51 Mustangs and were tasked with protecting Allied bombers in Europe. They were the first black military aviators in the Army Air Corps.

The name of the group derives from the Army airfield near Tuskegee, Alabama, where the men were trained. Among the nearly 1,000 pilots who graduated from the program, 352 served in WWII, according to NASA.

This article is featured in the February 2022 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.