



# ANNA MAE ROBERTSON

Veteran Was Trailblazer In Only All-Women Battalion Deployed During WWII

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Anna Mae Robertson was just trying to get by when she enlisted into the United States Army in 1938. She and her brother were living in Arkansas when they suffered the tragic death of their mother. With nowhere to turn and nobody to watch over them, both enlisted as a way to maintain order in their lives.

More than 80 years later, Robertson looked to her historic accomplishments during her years of service (1938-1946) and said she’s happy to be a trailblazer. As a black woman who served during World War II, Robertson served in the only all-female battalion that was deployed overseas during the war. It was also the first female African-American battalion in the Army.

Robertson was interviewed at length in 2014 by the Wisconsin Veterans Museum and its Oral Histories Collection. She spoke about her time serving overseas in the infamous Women’s Army Corps 6888 Central Postal Directory Battalion, how she stayed strong as the mother of eight children living in Milwaukee and spent much of her post-military time as an aide in several hospitals.

Robertson grew up in a small town in Arkansas and spent time with the rest of her family working on crops. With her father out of the picture, it took a toll when her mother unexpectedly died. Searching for ways to apply themselves, she and her brother both enlisted into the military.

“My mother died and that left just the two of us,” Robertson said during the Wisconsin Veterans Museum interview. “We didn’t have anyone to take care of us, so he went into the Navy and I went into the Army.”

## Blazing a Trail

Prior to deployment, Robertson went through training in Iowa, Kentucky and then New York. She said that while her battalion was all women, they also separated the black soldiers from the white ones. Despite the circumstances, she said that she never felt out of the ordinary.

“I wasn’t nervous,” she said. “I was just wondering how I was going to do ... I didn’t know anyone, but it was easy to make friends.”

Robertson said that although they were disconnected, she stayed in touch with her brother through numerous letters.

“I would write to tell him what I was doing and ask him what he was doing and what it was like to sail on a ship,” she said.

Soon, Robertson and the rest of her battalion sailed on their own ship after

receiving orders to deploy to Birmingham, England. Once there, the group was tasked with organizing and delivering endless pieces of mail crammed into warehouses. They developed a unique system to identify the soldiers the mail was addressed to, and devised locator cards for service members with common last names, she said during a 2014 interview with the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

Six Triple Eight soldiers worked around the clock every day to deliver the mail

to U.S. service members in Europe. Her team was given six months to complete the work, and they finished in just three.

While in England, Robertson said that her battalion lived in old schools that had no light and the windows painted black.

“There was a lot of shooting before we got there,” Robertson said. “We got there after the shooting and the windows were still covered because they didn’t want someone shooting at you to have a clear window to look through, so they covered the windows.”

Near the end of the war, Robertson and her fellow soldiers were sent to France to work on a mail backlog. In addition to sorting the mail, Robertson also worked as an aide at a hospital in France. There, she made beds, gave baths, and took the temperatures of soldiers. All the while, though, she said she was anxious to learn when she would be able to go home.

“I missed everything from home,” she said.

Although she and her battalion were rarities in the military, Robertson recalled that she was never really treated differently. When the war was finally declared over, Robertson said there was no celebration or confetti for her and her battalion. Instead, her focus shifted to what was next.

“I was more scared going back than coming in because it’s all on (me),” she said. “What was I going to do? Where was I going to work?”

### **A Long Journey to Milwaukee**

Once back on American soil, Robertson said she moved in with her aunt in Detroit while her brother lived with their father in Flint after his Navy service concluded.

Robertson said that after her separation from the Army, she wanted to “get out on her own” and actively looked for work. One of her friends had a wedding in Milwaukee, and that’s what led her to come to the area for the first time.

Eventually, she called Milwaukee home and found work at



a fish factory, spending her days canning pickled herring, she said. But her desire to help others like she once did built, and she got a job as a nurse aide at VA Medical Center in Milwaukee.

During that time, she met her soon-to-be husband, who coincidentally also served in the Army during WWII. After about five years working at the VAMC, Robertson had children and stopped working. She ended up having eight children with her husband — seven girls and one boy.

Robertson will celebrate her 95th birthday on March 5, 2019. She recently took part in the Center for Women Veterans’ “I Am Not Invisible” project at the place she once worked — the Milwaukee VA Medical Center.

Robertson was one of more than 100 women veterans to take part in the project, which highlights the service time and accomplishments of their service. She arrived with her familiar ear-to-ear grin as she was pushed in a wheelchair by one of her daughters to the photo shoot. Other women veterans continuously embraced her with hugs and messages of gratitude for paving the way for them.