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By Major Victoria Smith

Black History Month offers an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of African-Americans.

“We are not makers of history. We are made by history.”
– Martin Luther King, Jr.

Black History Month offers an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of African-Americans. The origins of Black History Month date back to 1926. Historian and author, Dr. Carter G. Woodson initiated a week-long observance to commemorate contributions made by African-Americans. In 1976, President Gerald Ford issued the inaugural message on the observance of Black History Month. In the decades that followed, U.S. presidents designated February as Black History Month. In 1986, Congress passed Public Law 99-244 which officially designated February as National Black History Month.[1],[2]

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Airman First Class Nicholle Cleophas-Ramirez

At 17 years old, Airman First Class Nicholle Cleophas-Ramirez is the youngest student in her Paralegal Apprentice Course. While she calls Miami, Florida home, A1C Cleophas-Ramirez's family is from Armenia, Colombia. When Airman First Class Cleophas-Ramirez looked at her class schedule in the weeks leading up to her freshmen year of high school, there was a class on her schedule that she did not sign up for and was not expecting to see—Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC). Instead of dropping the class, Airman First Class Cleophas-Ramirez decided to give JROTC a try. Airman First Class Cleophas-Ramirez quickly realized how much she enjoyed JROTC and continued participating throughout high school. After graduating high school in only 3 years, Airman First Class Cleophas-Ramirez enlisted in the Air Force. When asked why she joined the military, Airman First Class Cleophas-Ramirez's answer was straightforward—her JROTC instructor's leadership and example inspired Airman First Class Cleophas-Ramirez to enlist. For Airman First Class Cleophas-Ramirez, Black History Month represents “unity, remembrance, and an acknowledgement of history.”



Master Sergeant Malisha Jennett

For Master Sergeant Malisha Jennett, pride in her family and gratitude for their sacrifices come to mind when she thinks about Black History Month. Born and raised in Vicksburg, Mississippi, Master Sergeant Jennett grew up on her family's plot of 120 acres. Her father was one of thirteen children, and after his father passed away, the young men in the family worked to find ways to financially support the family. Some of Master Sergeant Jennett's uncles were drafted in the Vietnam War and sent money back to the family. For their contribution, the younger siblings, including Master Sergeant Jennett's father and some of his younger brothers, picked cotton after school and on the weekends on the same land that Master Sergeant Jennett would later grow up on. When the landowner decided to sell the property years later, he sold the property to only one family—Master Sergeant Jennett's father and his brothers—because they had taken care of the property for so many years. As a child, Master Sergeant Jennett did not understand the significance of her family's sacrifice or the hard work that went into maintaining the property. Now as an adult, she cherishes her memories of shelling peas alongside her parents and beams with pride when talking about the family farm.



Master Sergeant Owen Seivright

Master Sergeant Owen Seivright joined the military to follow in his father's footsteps. Born in Jamaica, the Seivright family moved to the United States after Master Sergeant Seivright's father enlisted in the Army. Master Sergeant Seivright was four years old at the time. His father's career and experiences with the Army inspired Master Sergeant Seivright to enlist at 20 years old. Master Sergeant Seivright was among one of the first groups of non-prior service paralegals to enlist in the Air Force, an accessions strategy championed by Chief Master Sergeant Clemencia Jemison, the first African-American woman to serve as the Senior Enlisted Advisor to The Judge Advocate General.^[3] For Master Sergeant Seivright, Black History Month means:

Honoring those who came before me. Honoring those who paved the way. It includes honoring service members like my father who immigrated to the United States and joined the military to provide for their families. Black History Month also means improving on what's happened before and paving a way for those who may follow after you.



Major Maurice Cheeks

Major Maurice Cheeks dreamt of becoming a lawyer since high school. As a child, he witnessed firsthand as members of his immediate family became involved with the criminal justice system and served time in prison. His family's legal struggles are what drew Major Cheeks to the legal profession. He saw the legal profession as a way to help others. As an undergraduate at Howard University, Major Cheeks participated in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC). Always in search of a new challenge and opportunities for self-improvement, then-Cadet Cheeks set his sights on the Funded Legal Education Program (FLEP). After commissioning, then-Lieutenant Cheeks became a Logistics Readiness Officer (LRO). Throughout his time as an LRO, Major Cheeks held onto his dream of one day attending law school. Major Cheeks served as a LRO for five years before he was accepted into FLEP. Having realized his dream, Major Cheeks has a passion for helping others achieve theirs by guiding, motivating, and mentoring new and aspiring JAGs. For Major Cheeks, "Black History Month is an opportunity to celebrate the legacy and accomplishments of Black people with pride and gratitude."



out opportunities to light the way for others. Early into her career, then-Captain Gay applied to be an instructor at The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School. Her desire to meet and mentor new students as they joined the JAG Corps drove her decision to apply for the position. As an instructor, then-Captain Gay used the experience and insight developed during her assignments as an Assistant Staff Judge Advocate in the base legal office, Area Defense Counsel, and deployment to Iraq, to prepare students for their future roles as litigators, advisors, and leaders. In her current role as a Staff Judge Advocate, Lieutenant Colonel Gay works to continue the lasting legacy of mentorship and professional development within the JAG Corps. To Lieutenant Colonel Gay, Black History Month is "more than a month." "I hope that there comes a day when we talk about the achievements of African-Americans during more than just February. Our history is American history."

Lieutenant Colonel Velma Gay

Lieutenant Colonel Velma Gay has always strived to light the path for those behind her. After graduating from Florida State University at only 19 years old, Lieutenant Colonel Gay became a high school teacher in Florida. Lieutenant Colonel Gay taught high school for two years before setting her sights on a new career path and attending law school. After practicing as a civilian attorney for six years, Lieutenant Colonel Gay joined the JAG Corps seeking a challenging, diverse practice and camaraderie. As a JAG, Lieutenant Colonel Gay has continued to seek

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Endnotes

- [1] *Black History Month*, HISTORY (Nov. 30, 2022), <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-month>
- [2] Dave Vergun, *DOD, Nation Celebrate Black History Month*, DEP'T OF DEFENSE (Jan. 31, 2022), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/Story/Article/2912763/dod-nation-celebrate-black-history-month>
- [3] 1 THE JUDGE ADVOCATE GENERAL'S SCHOOL, U.S. AIR FORCE, THE JUDGE ADVOCATE GENERAL'S CORPS AND FOUNDATIONAL PARALEGAL SKILLS (2020).