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AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 77

Black/African American History in the Air Force JAG Corps

Host: Major Laura Quaco

Guests: Colonel Ja Rai Williams and Lieutenant Colonel Velma Gay Thompson

In this episode, Major Laura Quaco sits down with Colonel Ja Rai Williams and Lieutenant Colonel Velma Gay Thompson to discuss integration in the Armed Services pursuant to Executive Order 9981, and research they conducted related to the history of Black/African Americans in the United States Regular Air Force Judge Advocate General's Corps.

[Intro music – The Air Force Song (Instrumental)]

Introductions

Major Laura Quaco:

Good morning, afternoon, and evening listeners. Welcome back to The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School Podcast. I'm Maj Laura Quaco and I'm your host for this podcast. I'm sitting down with Colonel Ja Rai Williams and we have Lieutenant Colonel Velma Gay Thompson on the line, and you're going to hear about some of the research they did recently for an article they wrote called "My History, Your History, Our History: Highlighting 75 years of Integration in the Armed Services with a Brief History of Black/African Americans in the United States Regular Air Force JAG Corps."

Now, if you're listening to this episode, when it first comes out, don't go searching the Internet just yet to find the article because this is a special preview. That article is going to be released in January of 2024 as part of the 75th anniversary celebration for the Air Force JAG Corps. So, stay tuned and look out for that article when it comes out. But, I thought, hey, why can't we sit down now and talk about some of the research that the writers found? And not only are you going to hear from them for this episode, but I'm going to do another couple episodes where you'll get to hear from two of the very trailblazers they discuss in their article. One is Col (Retired) Susan McNeill and the other is Chief Master Sergeant (Retired) David Haskins. More on them to follow.

With that, let's move on to the introductions of our interviewees today. Col Williams is currently the 19th Air Force Staff Judge Advocate at Joint Base San Antonio Randolph in Texas. Now, for my nonmilitary lawyer listeners, Staff Judge Advocate or SJA, is just the term we use for the lead attorney in a legal office. She has been an SJA on multiple other occasions. She's been air staff counsel, prosecutor, defense counsel, appellate defense counsel, and many other things throughout her career.

Lt Col Thompson is currently the 97th Air Mobility Wing, SJA at Altus Air Force Base in Oklahoma. She's been SJA on another occasion, she's been deputy general counsel, Air Force Strategic Policy Fellow. She's worked in administrative litigation as a branch chief. She's even been instructor at The JAG School here where I currently work, in addition to being a prosecutor, a defense counsel, so a whole gamut of jobs in the Air Force JAG Corps, just like Col Williams.

So, ladies, before we get into your research, and you know what we're going to talk about today, I want to first turn it over to you all so you can tell us about what inspired you to research this topic.

Inspiration

Lt Col Velma Gay Thompson:

Thank you so much, Maj Quaco, for having us to give you a little bit of background, Black and African American history has always been very important to both Col Williams and I. And growing up and being educated in the public school system, a lot of African American history was left out when I was taught American history. Instead, in most cases we were taught diluted stories of African American experiences that glossed over our rich history of different contributions that were made and how Black Americans have shaped our country.

So knowing and telling our history has always been very important to me. A call came out through the JAG Corps online news service requesting article topics to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Air Force JAG Corps, and I immediately thought about writing an article detailing

the progress that we have made in the JAG Corps with different diversity initiatives.

Specifically, I was thinking about focusing on the recent election of our first African American active duty regular Air Force general officer in the JAG Corps, Brigadier General Gail Crawford. I reached out to Williams and asked her if she wouldn't mind tag teaming on an article with me. So once we received an email back from Maj Allison Johnson from The JAG School congratulating us and informing us that our topic was actually selected, we started to do some research and it was then that we realized that there was actually no documented history out there for us to even use. We found various history on the Army JAG Corps and their list of first African Americans to achieve certain accomplishments. But there was actually no documented history for the Air Force. That's why we both decided to change our focus and to start documenting Black and African American history within the Air Force JAG Corps.

Maj Quaco:

Wow. Thank you for sharing. Col Williams, do you have anything to add?

Col Williams:

Not really. Lt Col Thompson covered most of it. One thing that I would also like to point out is in the earlier stage of our research, we realized that it was also the 75th anniversary of the integration of the armed services. And so we thought how wonderful it would be to merge the two topics, as well, and highlight the 75th anniversary of integration as well as the 75th anniversary of the JAG Corps.

Black/African American

Maj Quaco:

So, thank you so much for providing kind of your inspiration for the article. Before we go into the findings, would you mind—because I noticed in the article, use Black/African American every time, and can you just tell our listeners why that is?

Col Williams:

Yes. And so one thing I would like to point out, because our listeners don't necessarily know this, is that both Lt Col Thompson and I are African American women. Black and African American are acceptable terms to use, but they're not necessarily interchangeable ones. It's usually based on one's personal preference. So one in that community, may identify as Black American or they may identify as African American because of just how rich and deep the community is. So to be inclusive of the entire community, we decided to use both terms, which again, are not interchangeable, but includes everyone based on what their preference might be.

Research

Maj Quaco:

Great. Thank you so much, ma'am, for providing that distinction. Okay. Now, I want to turn it to you all to explain how you conducted this research.

Col Williams:

Well, Lt Col Thompson knew to call the right person because research is kind of my specialty. And so what we did, first, is we did a basic Internet search of information that was out there, and a lot of information came back. It was actually a little overwhelming. We had to scope where we were going to go from there. So what we decided to do is research specific individuals who we came across in our Internet search. Once we identified a list of names, we reached out to current and former judge advocates and paralegals and requested to interview them to gather more information. So we have a lot of oral testimony that we collected and used in our article. And of course, it's based off of what they could remember. So some of that information may not be 100% accurate, but it is to the best of their ability, and what we could find to corroborate what they told us. We also utilized public Air Force records. We went back to the AFPC, that's the Air Force Personnel Center website, and we looked into historic information, such as prior promotions. So, we had discovered that there was no information out there about some of our more

senior judge advocates and paralegals who were Black or African American, so we focused on colonels and chief master sergeants and was able to discover and find some information from the Air Force Personnel center.

Maj Quaco:

So that sounds like you had to do a lot of research and talk to a lot of people to kind of find all this for yourself firsthand. Now, let's talk about what you did find on the historical side. Can you talk to the integration and the research you found there?

Lt Col Thompson:

So as Col Williams stated, it was interesting in our research as we started that we found that it was more than one 75th anniversary celebration. So on July 26th in 1948, President Harry Truman actually issued Executive Order 9981, and that order directed the military services to enforce equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin. So what's interesting that we found out was that the Air Force was the first branch to actually fully integrate, and that happened in 1952. What was symbolic for us was that in July 1948, the Executive Order for Equal Treatment was established by President Harry Truman. June of that very same year, Congress actually established the Office of The Judge Advocate General, which is why we are celebrating now for the 75th anniversary of The Air Force Judge Advocate General being established.

Maj Quaco:

So were there JAGs before the office was actually established?

Col Williams:

Yes, there actually were. Our research discovered that there were about 59 officers who were already JAGs in the Army, and they were also getting ready to transfer over from the Army to the Department of the Air Force in preparation for the stand-up of the Air Force Judge Advocate General's Corps.

Black and African Americans in the Air Force JAG Corps

Maj Quaco:

Okay. So we had Army judge advocates transferring to the Department of the Air Force. Now, I'd like to dive more into your findings of Black and African Americans in the Air Force JAG Corps. Can you please share some of your findings there, ma'am?

Col Williams:

Yes. So what was a little difficult about our findings are in earlier years, it was hard to determine if there were any Black or African American judge advocates who either transferred from the Army into the Air Force Judge Advocate General Corps, or if there were any, who were part of the earlier classes that came through the Judge Advocate General Corps. What we did find is that in 1950, there were a little over 500 attorneys in the Air Force JAG Department, which is what the Judge Advocate General's Corps was called at the time. What we picked up was the first historical data of potential Black or African American officer who was a judge advocate, and that was from 1952. We found a photo actually from a JAGSOC class that was called a JAG Staff Officer Course. And photos were taken and kept, and those photos are still maintained within the Judge Advocate General Corps. So, we found that individual but was unable to determine who that individual was.

What was also significant is we found who we believe may have also been a JAG who was Black or African American, who served in the earlier part of the Air Force JAG Department—maybe around the early 1970s, late 1960s. We were unable to independently verify that, but that gentleman was a North Carolina attorney, and we believe it might have been an attorney by the name of Henry Michaux. We're probably saying that name wrong, but it's M-I-C-H-A-U-X. And what was significant about that individual is he and his brother were both admitted to the North Carolina bar, and they actually bought to be admitted to the North Carolina bar. They went to court.

Maj Quaco:

Wow.

Col Williams:

To fight to admitted as African American men to the North Carolina bar. We believe he may have been one of those individuals we found in our research, but we were just unable to independently verify that.

Maj Quaco:

So if there's any family and friends out there who know them, feel free to reach out to us.

Col Williams:

Absolutely.

Maj Quaco:

So, and if I could chime in, ma'am, you mentioned the JAGSOC, JAG Staff Officer Course. Can you tell our non-Air Force Lawyer listeners, what is that course?

Col Williams:

Yes. So the JAGSOC, which is now known as JASOC, the Judge Advocate Staff Officer Course, it's the initial skills training course for judge advocates who first enter into the Air Force. And so that course used to be called JAGSOC. It's now known as JASOC. From what we could determine, it pretty much stayed the same as far as the length of time to train these new military attorney officers to be able to practice in the Air Force. The only thing that really changed is the name and perhaps a little bit of time was added to it. But now it's currently a nine-week training course that specifically focuses on military law and maybe the first year or so of what a new judge advocate will face while practicing.

Maj Quaco:

Okay. And so that photograph you found of who you believe to be the first documented individual was likely towards the beginning of his JAG career.

Col Williams:

Absolutely.

Maj Quaco:

Great.

Attorneys

Lt Col Thompson:

And as Col Williams mentioned, a lot of our history was based on viewing those photographs that were taken as individuals entered into their JASOC course. So as she stated, the first historical data was in 1952, we did not have a name for that individual. But viewing the photographs, they indicate that there were at least five Black or African American male students who attended the JAG training course from 1952 through 1969. However, in our research, we were unable to place names with the actual faces. But, in 1970 we were able to place the name of Patrick HP Sweeney, who attended the JAG training course during that year. He went on to become the first African American Staff Judge Advocate of a major command and the first African American JAG to serve as a White House fellow. He ended up promoting to the rank of colonel and retired in 1999.

Col Williams:

We also came across Jacqueline Guess Epps of Richmond, Virginia. Now, Ms. Epps was the first Black or African American judge advocate female to enter in to the Judge Advocate General's Corps, and that was in 1974. Unfortunately, a few years ago, Ms. Epps died, and so we were unable to receive information from her about her time. But what was significant about her is she came into the Judge Advocate General Corps, served for about four years, and then she separated and went into civilian practice where in Virginia, she did some amazing things. She was the first Black or African American woman in the Newport News Commonwealth Attorney's Office. Years later, she joined a law firm and became one of the first Black or African American women to become a partner in a major law firm in Virginia. But as I said, after a very successful year, she passed away on September 14th of 2008.

Maj Quaco:

What a shame that we weren't able to talk with her.

Col Williams:

Yeah, it was very sad, but Lt Col Thompson and I were able to find someone who knew of her.

Lt Col Thompson?

Lt Col Thompson:

Yes, Col Williams. What was interesting about that is that Col Susan McNeill, who Maj Quaco mentioned in the beginning of the introduction, and who you will hear from in part two of this podcast, that Col McNeill actually heard about Jacqueline Epps becoming the first African American Black female to enter into the JAG Corps, and she was already in the Air Force. Susan McNeill actually commissioned into the Air Force in May of 1970 as a procurement officer during the Vietnam War, and it was after she graduated college in Pennsylvania. So, she entered in 1970, was a procurement officer for years until she joined the JAG Corps. And she—well went to law school, of course, and then joined the JAG Corps in 1978. So while Col McNeill was not the first black female to enter into the JAG Corps. In 1991, Col McNeill became the highest ranking Black African American woman judge advocate of all military branches and the first in history to promote to colonel in the Armed Services for the JAG Corps.

Paralegals

Maj Quaco:

Wow, so that sounds like two major trailblazers for Blacks and African Americans in the JAG Corps. And of course, there are other officers, other judge advocates that you all discuss in the article coming out in January. But I'd like to shift gears here and talk about some of the paralegals or as they were called, legal specialists. Could you discuss some of your findings there?

Col Williams:

Yes. So Lt Col Thompson and I thought it to be very important to make sure we included our paralegal both having been mentored by them our entire career. And they, too had some significant contributions to the JAG Corps. So, prior to 1955, administrative personnel were called legal specialists. They were given some legal training and a letter stating, you are now a legal specialist. After 1955, that's when the legal specialist career field was implemented, and 15 years later, the position of Special Assistant to The Judge Advocate General for Legal Airman Affairs was established. So, we decided to focus on the accomplishments of Black or African American CMSgt paralegals. We came across many, but there are two who we want to specifically note. But before we highlight the two, it's important to note that since 1955, there have been a number of Black or African American legal specialists and paralegals in the Air Force Judge Advocate General's Corps. But it was not until 1998 that the first Black or African American paralegal, CMSgt (Retired) David Haskins, was selected to serve in that senior paralegal position to The Judge Advocate General.

Maj Quaco:

And ma'am, I've got to jump in really quickly here, because I know I've got some loyal listeners out there trying to remember why that name rings a bell. And it's probably because you listened to Episode 71 in which we had CMSgt Ty Haskins on The AFJAGS Podcast, and she was the Senior Enlisted Advisor to The Judge Advocate General, which is the same position that we're talking about with regard to CMSgt David Haskins being the first Black African American. We've just renamed the position since then as she gave us some senior leader perspectives. So go back and listen to it if you haven't. But now listen to this story that Col Thompson is going to tell us with regard to the connection between CMSgt David and Ty Haskins.

Lt Col Thompson:

Thank you, Maj Quaco. This was a very interesting story that we were shocked to hear about. Of course,

Col Williams and I both know Chief Ty Haskins, but we had the pleasure of sitting down and talking to Chief David Haskins. Chief David Haskins gave us the story of how he actually presided over the graduation ceremony of Chief Ty Haskins, who was then, I believe, a staff sergeant at the time when she went through the paralegal apprentice course. And at that time, before he finished his graduation speech, he called three individuals up on the stage. And one of those individuals was Chief Ty Haskins, and he gave those three individuals, well, first, he just he was going to give one of them an opportunity to finish his speech. And when he found out that one of the individuals he called up had the same last name of his, no relation, he allowed her to finish his speech and Chief Ty Haskins finished the speech. And when she finished that speech, he actually gave her his chief stripes and she held on to those chief stripes throughout her career, and when she was actually selected for promotion to CMSgt, she invited Chief Haskins to her promotion ceremony, and he was at her retirement ceremony, as well. We thought it was so interesting because both Chief Haskins went on to have the most senior enlisted position for paralegals in the JAG Corps—both Chief Haskins. So we just thought that was a great story.

Maj Quaco:

That was really neat for me to hear, actually, because when I got back to The JAG School to be an instructor here and I was, you know, taking my laps around and reliving everything from my JASOC days—JASOC that we talked about—in the paralegal hallway of classrooms. We have pictures of all the Senior Enlisted Advisors to TJAG, The Judge Advocate General, and I saw both Haskins names up there, and I wondered if there was a relation there, and it turns out there wasn't. But that's a really interesting story, so thank you for sharing.

Col Williams, did you have anything you wanted to add?

Col Williams:

Yes. In addition to Chief Haskins, we also spoke with a number of other chiefs to include Chief (Retired)

Avis Dillard-Bullock, who was a CMSgt both earlier in my career and Lt Col Thompson's career. Chief Bullock actually is currently a Chief Operating Officer and Senior Vice President. But one person in particular that I want to note is CMSgt Ralph Oliver, who I had the pleasure of serving with and working with in the same office. Now, he was the first Senior Paralegal Manager. And let me pause and jump in here, Maj Quaco, to make sure we address the interchangeable terms we're using for our senior paralegals to The Judge Advocate General. The name or the term has changed over the years. We went from the term that I mentioned earlier to Senior Paralegal Manager and now to Senior Enlisted Advisor.

So, going back to CMSgt Oliver, he served as what was then known as the Senior Paralegal Manager for about a year, but what was notable about him is he did not retire out of that position. Chief Oliver is still serving in the regular Air Force. So that's outside of the Judge Advocate General's Corps as a Command Chief, which is the higher enlisted Chief of the unit where he serves. So that's pretty significant and worth mentioning about him. But in addition to those who we mentioned, there are a number of Black or African American CMSgt paralegals who've made valuable contributions to the Judge Advocate General's Corps.

Final Thoughts

Maj Quaco:

Wow. Thank you to you both for doing the research that you did and providing us some of those examples of notable judge advocates and paralegals. Listeners, you'll see the full article come January. But before we close it out here today, I wanted to turn it over to you two see if there's anything you wanted to add about—kind of now, having done your research, what it all means to you and what you think it should mean to our listeners.

Col Williams:

For me, Col Williams, it's an opportunity to spotlight and celebrate the achievements that African Americans or Black Americans have accomplished not only in this

country, but in our Air Force Judge Advocate General's Corps, despite the history of racism and oppression. Most of all, I believe it's important for those interested in our history and those who are a part of our history today, to be able to understand the lessons learned, highlight the accomplishments and document that for future generations to be able to reference. This is a legacy that I am blessed to be a part of, that 20 years from now one can reference and maybe even pick up from where Lt Col Thompson and I left off and take it even further. And what I would like to see and what I hope our listeners will do is not only just stop with Black or African Americans, but highlight the history of all of the accomplishments of others in the Air Force Judge Advocate General Corps, such as Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders. And to continue to document the rich legacy that makes us a very diverse and effective Corps.

Lt Col Thompson:

And we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the opportunity that we had to sit down and speak with some of our retired JAG Corps members—Col Susan McNeill, Col Bruce Brown, Col William Orr, Col James Durant, Col William Gunn, Col Pamela Stevenson. Lt Col Cameron Miller, Chief David Haskins, Chief Avis Dillard-Bullock, Chief Beverly Miller, Chief Tynisa Haskins, just to name a few. And this is ongoing research and like Col Williams stated, we all know diversity is important as it affords the access to a great range of ideas, experiences and knowledge, but it also protects against injustices and helps us maintain public confidence in our institutions. 1948 was a historic year because it opened the door for us as Black and African Americans for greater opportunities for us and to serve our country in our chosen profession. So thank you to The Judge Advocate General, Lieutenant General Plummer, for allowing us this forum to share our history through both The Air Force JAG School Podcast and through our article that will be published in January of 2024, as we conclude our 75th anniversary celebration. So thank you.

Closing

Maj Quaco:

And thank you ladies, for coming on The AFJAGS Podcast and sharing your research with us.

All right, listeners, that's all I've got for you today. Please feel free to review, rate, and subscribe this podcast. And for now, this podcast is in recess.

[Gavel bangs twice].

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Glossary

- **AFJAGS:** Air Force Judge Advocate General's School
- **JAG:** Judge Advocate General
- **JAGSOC:** Judge Advocate General Staff Officer Course [now JASOC]
- **JASOC:** Judge Advocate Staff Officer Course
- **SJA:** Staff Judge Advocate
- **TJAG:** The Judge Advocate General

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