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About Private Tommie D. Smith Guy, WAC

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About Pvt Tommie D. Smith Guy, WAC

Presentation Notes by Reinetta F. Jones, University of Kentucky Special Collections

Veteran's Day Memorial Program

Cove Haven Cemetery, Lexington, KY

November 11, 2022 @ 11:00a.m.

I have been invited to tell you about Pvt Tommie D. Smith. She was born in 1921 in Lexington, KY, the daughter of Carrie Mae Clayborne and Stanberry Smith. Tommie D. Smith was the wife of Roosevelt Guy, and they lived in Temple, TX, where Tommie Smith Guy died in 1969. She was brought back home and is buried in this cemetery. Tommie Smith Guy died young and for far too long her story, her determination, her augmentation toward the betterment of our lives, has all been misplaced and forgotten.

Allow me to share some of what she did in her short lifetime. Tommie D. Smith had to go to Cincinnati, OH, to join the Women's Army Corp [WAC] in January of 1943. She stood 5 feet 1 inch tall and weighed 134 pounds. She was a small woman. Stay with me because there is a reason why I am telling you this information.

When Tommie D. Smith joined the Army, it had been less than a year when the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps Act (WAAC) authorized a voluntary enrollment for up to 150,000 women to join the U.S. Army. No more than 1,500 (10%) of those women were to be African Americans. The literature about the WAC gives the impression that the newly established branch of the U.S. Army provided a wide breadth of training and educational opportunities. For African American women in the Army, those opportunities came with the price of prejudice, segregation, racism, and sometimes there was violence.

Tommie D. Smith had been in the Army for two years when she and two other African American WACs were beaten by the police in Elizabethtown, KY, in July of 1945. Their crime, sitting in the white section of the waiting room at the Greyhound Bus Station.

[Bus stations and the buses were considered segregated, starting at Louisville, KY, and all points south of Louisville. It would be learned during the women's trial that there was not a segregation law for interstate buses or bus stations in Kentucky. And, the women were not sitting in the white waiting room, they were sitting in the doorway that separated the "white" and "colored" waiting rooms.]

The three WACs were with the 1550th Service Command Unit, WAC Section II. They were with a group of WACs waiting for the bus that would return them to Fort Knox. After the beating at the bus station, Pfc Georgia Boston, from Texas, and Pvt Tommie Smith, from Lexington, KY, returned to the base on the bus. Pfc Helen D. Smith had been dragged off to jail and retained. The military police from Ft. Knox retrieved her from the Elizabethtown jail and brought her back to Ft. Knox.

The women were ordered before the commanding officer, Colonel Throckmorton, and they were court martialed for disobeying the supposed transportation segregation laws in Kentucky. The women received medical attention, and Pfc Helen Smith spent a week in the hospital recuperating from the beating by the Elizabethtown policemen.

The three women did not give up, they did not quit the U.S. Army, they did not runaway and hide. They sought justice. Unknown to them at the time, they would be recognized as civil rights activists within the U.S. Army. As more newspapers spread the news about the beatings, there were others who joined the women's fight for justice. Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. who was African American, had Lieutenant W. Robert Ming represent the women. Lieutenant Ming was from the base legal office at Godman Field that was located on the Fort Knox army post. The court martial charges were reduced to disorderly conduct, and during their trial, the women were found innocent of all charges.

Still, the women fought for justice. African American military women were not punching bags for racist and hateful people. Four hundred fifty-eight overseas war veterans at Baxter General Hospital Veterans Committee for Equal Rights petitioned the Secretary of War to investigate the brutal beatings of the three women. The news of the beatings had become national news and the story was printed in newspapers around the United States.

In Kentucky, at least five newspapers printed the story: *The Owensboro Messenger*, *The Lexington Leader*, *The Lexington Herald*, *The Park City Daily News* in Bowling Green, and *The Louisville Courier-Journal*. Each of these newspapers got the story from Spokane, WA, and printed what was to be a "balanced" report. The

newspapers did not send a reporter to Elizabethtown or Fort Knox to investigate the story. They took the story from Spokane and added a thing or two here and there. It was reported in *The Owensboro Messenger* newspaper that City Attorney D. M. Cooper said that the city of Elizabethtown would welcome an investigation by the War Department. His evidence showed that the three women had objected when the police ordered them to leave the white waiting room. The report insinuated that the women had brought the beatings upon themselves.

The Park City Daily News in Bowling Green, KY, reported a similar story that ended with the statement that Police Officer Robert Irwin said the three women attacked him after he asked them to leave the white waiting room. The *Courier-Journal* took that same story and added the following: City Attorney Cooper said that the women had attacked Policeman Robert Irwin when he asked them to leave the white waiting room. Thus, Officer Irwin was forced to use his night stick in self-defense which did not hurt any of the women. There was also said to be a sworn affidavit that was concurred by three eyewitnesses.

[Remember, Tommie D. Smith was a small woman. All three WACs had been stationed at Fort Knox for more than two years and each had an excellent record of conduct.]

While the Kentucky newspapers pushed the story of the police defending themselves, other newspapers, such as *The Sheboygan Press* and *The Journal Times*, both in Wisconsin, pointed out the injustices the women had suffered in the south. [The violence toward African Americans enlisted in the military was not only happening in the south.] *The New York Age* newspaper asked how the U.S. Army had failed to give adequate protection to African American women and men in uniform when in the south. The Louisville NAACP Branch wanted to take action against policemen Robert Irwin and Lucian Gaddie for the beating of the women.

There was a lot of push and pull from the different factions: the U.S. Army, the various newspapers, Elizabethtown city officials, the NAACP national office and the Louisville branch, family and friends who feared for the three women's lives. The news about the WACs being beaten in Elizabethtown, KY, had gotten to be so much more than U.S. Army wanted it to be during the final days of WWII, which would end in September of 1945.

The three WACs, Georgia Boston, Helen Smith, and Tommie Smith, had been found innocent of all charges in July of 1945, but that was not enough to make things right. The issues were much bigger and their fight had stirred the call for justice to be given to African American men and women serving in the U.S. Military.

We thank you for your service. We thank you for your bravery and dedication on all fronts. Peace be with you all.

SOURCES:

1. Tommie D. Smith Guy entry in the Notable Kentucky African Americans Database online @ <https://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/300004473>.
2. Tommie D. Smith WWII Army Enlistment Record in Ancestry.com.
3. Women's Army Corp (WAC), a Santa Clara University Digital Exhibit online @ <https://dh.scu.edu/exhibits/exhibits/show/womeninwwii/women-s-army-corps--wac->.
4. WACs beaten in Elizabethtown, KY, entry in the Notable Kentucky African Americans Database online @ <https://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/1789>.
5. "Knox court-martial frees Negro Wacs," *Sunday Herald-Leader*, July 29, 1945, p.26.
6. "Overseas group kicks about Kentucky event," *The Lexington Leader*, August 31, 1945, p.9.
7. "Probe of beating of three Negro WACs is sought," *The Owensboro Messenger*, September 1, 1945, p.2.
8. "Probe of 'beating' of three Wacs welcomed by Elizabethtown," *The Courier-Journal*, September 1, 1945, p.9.
9. "Ask probe of WAC beatings," *The Park City Daily News*, September 2, 1945, p.6.
10. "Why we have race feeling," *The Sheboygan Press*, August 28, 1945, p.20.
11. "Army should act," *The New York Age*, August 18, 1945, p.6.