

EPISODE FIFTY-FIVE OF "ARMED WITH SCIENCE: RESEARCH APPLICATIONS FOR THE MODERN MILITARY," A DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE WEBCAST SUBJECT: CONTRIBUTIONS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE U.S. NAVY HOST: JOHN OHAB, PH.D. GUEST: DR. REGINA AKERS TIME: 2:00 P.M. EST DATE: WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2010

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ANNOUNCER: "Armed with Science: Research and Applications for the Modern Military" is a weekly Webcast that discusses cutting-edge science and technology and how they apply to military operations.

Each week we will interview scientists, administrators, and operators to educate and inform our listeners about the importance of science and technology to the modern military.

(Intro music ends.)

DR. OHAB: Good afternoon, and welcome to episode number 55 of "Armed with Science: Research and Applications for the Modern Military" on Wednesday, February 17th, 2010. My name is Dr. John Ohab, and I work with the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. I'm pleased to say that we've made it through the historic snowfall last week. We thought we'd continue on a historic trend with a show celebrating African-American History Month.

We're joined today by Dr. Regina Akers, a historian at the Naval History and Heritage Command, and an expert on African-American History. Dr. Akers is one of the leading historians on the History of Diversity in the Navy project and a senior adviser to the director of Minority Affairs and Oral History.

Dr. Akers will discuss the little-publicized contributions of African-American women in the U.S. Navy, what today's youth can learn from the experiences of African Americans, and her motivation for pursuing a career in research.

Dr. Akers, thank you so much for your time this afternoon. It's certainly a pleasure to have you on the program.

DR. AKERS: Well, I'm delighted to be with you. Thank you for the invitation.

DR. OHAB: A quick note to our listeners, if you have questions, we can help you get those answers. Tweet them to @armedwscience and I'll make sure Dr. Akers gets those by the end of the show. Otherwise, you can post them on our blog, science.dodlive.mil, and we'll reply as soon as we can.

Now, Dr. Akers, I read through your biography this week, which includes undergraduate and doctoral degrees in history, and subsequently a great deal of highly regarded work in this field as a professional. How did you first develop an interest in military history and, more specifically, the contributions of African Americans in the military?

DR. AKERS: Well, that started with my parents, my mother in particular. Her father completed over 30 years and retired from the Army. He served with the 10th Cavalry. And she and her two siblings were Army brats, to some extent. And my father, who completed two years in the Army after World War II. And then I'm one of 11, and four of my six brothers served in the military -- one in the Air Force, one in the Army and then two in the Navy.

And so as I was growing up, my mother would share stories about her father's Army service and what it was like for them as a family as his career progressed, both the good and the bad of it all. So that's probably the root of it.

And then as I got a little older as an undergraduate student at Catholic University, I went to write my thesis, which was required of all seniors, about African-American women in World War II exclusively, and my adviser encouraged me to do a more general study about women's contributions.

So what I had in the end was a theses which analyzed the degree to which World War II was truly a turning point for American women. And two of the examples I used were the "Rosie the Riveters" or those women who went to work in the factories, and the Navy's female reservists, more commonly known as WAVES.

DR. OHAB: Now, for those who aren't familiar, can you talk about the early role of African Americans in the military? How far back does this history take us?

DR. AKERS: Well, if you mean African Americans as a whole, it goes back to the Revolutionary War certainly, and in many capacities even before we had our Navy, such as it was, with the state and Continental navies as well as the Privateers.

If you look at why the Revolutionary War was fought, the hope for liberty and a more egalitarian society and independence, African Americans, that had an appeal for them. For those who volunteered to serve, they would also have served in that period by way of what was called a substitution system. So if my owner did not want to go to war, I would go in his place. And then he would receive my salary. And often, they were promised freedom upon successful completion of that tenured service.

And then there was also something called impressment whereby the enemy forces were to seize a vessel I was on or an area, and I would be captured and forced to serve on their side. So African Americans have a long legacy that began certainly as both freed men and as slaves with the Revolutionary War. And has continued to this day.

DR. OHAB: And how about women specifically?

DR. AKERS: Well, women, in general, in America have served -- have a long history of service with the military, again, dating back to that same period. However, they did not become an official part of the military until 1901 when Congress established the Army Nurse Corps and then seven years later the Navy Nurse Corps. So the first women to officially serve in our military were nurses. And several of them were veterans of the Spanish-American War.

DR. OHAB: Now, are there any women in particular that served as an inspiration to you during your work?

DR. AKERS: Wow, that's a good question. I've met some really phenomenal persons over the years. Well, certainly, Rear Admiral Michelle Howard, who is the Navy's second black female admiral, and one of the finest officers I've ever met. You may recall when the captain of the Maersk Alabama was rescued, she commanded the unit that oversaw that. But she has many firsts to her credit. But more importantly, in addition to that rather, she is just a phenomenal person.

I've known her for several years now, and I especially admire her humility, her commitment to her service and to the men and women who work for her.

And she's always trying to reach out and help others, too. As she has advanced through the ranks, taken the time to mentor, to encourage, and that applies to civilian personnel as well as military personnel.

DR. OHAB: Now, in the course of your work, is there anything that you would want the general public to know or that they would be surprised to learn about African Americans or other minorities in the Navy, in the military?

DR. AKERS: Yes, several things come to mind, actually. In terms of African Americans, they have always desired to support the nation, even before we were a nation, in hopes that, one, a better society would emerge for them, because they believed in why the war was being waged. And they've always been there.

Often, people will see a Colin Powell or a more current representation, but African Americans have always served and often volunteered before being asked or drafted.

As for Native Americans, they are a particularly interesting group, because they did not become U.S. citizens until 1924; and yet,

they, too, their service goes back to and before the Revolutionary War. Even though they considered themselves a nation themselves, but they still contributed to the war.

In the case of the War of 1812, they served on both sides, the British and the American sides.

There's also probably a more popular example would be the Navajo code talkers who developed a language that the enemy could not penetrate. And we'll never know how many lives they saved as a result of their contributions to the war.

DR. OHAB: We spend a lot of time on this Webcast discussing scientific research that has to do with beakers and -- (inaudible) -- and things of that nature. But how do you actually go about researching history? DR. AKERS: Very carefully, very carefully. (Laughs.) Generally, you decide what you want to study, what position you want to take on it or what argument you want to make, survey the sources to see if there are enough sources to substantiate what you want to do and, in essence, develop a proposal for the project or an outline of what you think it may want to look like, how long it will take you, where the resources are, what's readily available and what isn't.

When I started my research as an undergraduate student, we relied very heavily, as we do now, on archival sources or primary documents, as well as primary and secondary-published sources, other people's theses, dissertations and et cetera.

Today, there's a much wider variety of primary-source material available. There's a much larger body of scholarship. More articles and books and things of that nature that relate to the topic have been published.

And of course, oral history is a critical part of that, to interview veterans about their service.

DR. OHAB: Yeah. You recently led a session on oral history at the Naval Academy's 2009 International Naval History Conference. Can you tell our listeners, first, what oral history is and then why it remains important for documenting the contributions of African Americans in the Navy?

DR. AKERS: Oral history is -- the methodology has changed over time, but the idea is to develop a list of questions that are geared towards a specific topic from an individual, to record their perspectives, their experiences. How that recording is done, back in the day we had cassette recorders; now we have digital recorders.

Today, it's accepted for me to send you questions by mail and you to answer them. And some practitioners still consider that an oral history.

Technology affords us the opportunity to attach an apparatus to this phone and to record our conversation in that way.

Oral history is critical, because documentary evidence is very specific. A form is designed for a specific purpose, a report has a certain reason for being created, versus oral history where the report may tell you what happened and a bit about how it happened or that a policy was in place (if you're ?) reading a policy statement. But if you wanted to know how the policy was developed, who actually wrote it, even though Jim Smith's name was on it, then you'd want to talk to the people who were involved in that process. And that would allow you to better understand that document that you first looked at, but also give you some different perspective on how it was arrived at. Oral history also has a wonderful way of raising issues and questions and taking you places that didn't even occur to you as the scholar, as the individual talks and recounts. So it's a very, very critical source that we use.

Now, like the written record, we have to substantiate oral history, just as you do any other source. But it is critical to the study.

DR. OHAB: Now, what kind of lessons can today's youth learn from the experiences of African Americans in the Navy through oral history?

DR. AKERS: Through oral history specifically, or just African - in general, I would say, many times I've observed over the years that our students or young Americans will select, when you ask them who they want to emulate or be like, they'll select a hero or an athlete or a businessperson. Generally speaking, they don't consider the outstanding men and women who have served in our military.

And while a person in the military clearly does not make the income of a Michael Jordan or the actor Will Smith, there is much to learn from their experiences by example.

Vice Admiral Samuel L. Gravely was the Navy's first black to be promoted to the rank of admiral and to command a ship. And he was in the service from 1942 until 1980. And he faced, you might imagine, a lot of obstacles, because of the racism that was permeating in American society was very evident in the Navy and practiced in the Navy at that time.

However, Admiral Gravely never let the obstacles that he faced block him or deter him. He would turn them into stepping stones. And this is one example that he shared with me.

Early on in his career, he was not necessarily given assignments that were commensurate or equal to his skill set. And so he might have extra time. Well, he decided to use that extra time to take correspondence courses. So when an opportunity for a new job would arise, between his test results, his evaluations by his superiors, his performance and his credentials and the education he had gotten through these correspondence courses, he would often be head-and-shoulders over the other candidates.

And so, in a sense, he didn't let that obstacle stop him, the fact that he wasn't given the job that was necessarily equal to his duties.

He also was a firm believer that every job was a chance to learn and to excel. And additionally, he was well-mentored, too. And one of the best compliments he could pay to his mentors was that he did the same thing. I can't tell you how many people I've met whose lives he's touched -- black, white, civilian, military -- as he went through the ranks. In fact, I was talking to his wife the other day, Mrs. Gravely, and she said she still gets calls from people that interacted with her husband or were mentored by him, to this day.

And the other thing, I think, that young people and really all of us can benefit from Admiral Gravely is, he had a wonderful formula for success. For him, success was education, motivation and perseverance. And if you think about it, that's a pretty good formula.

DR. OHAB: Well, let's talk about perseverance.

Dr. Akers, during the course of your work, what are some of the biggest challenges that you've faced?

DR. AKERS: Several actually. I am not a veteran. And sometimes when you're working with veterans, particularly in the context of doing oral histories, sometimes the person you're interviewing may question your qualifications to hear, understand and appreciate their experiences.

So I had a few occasions where the subject would ask -- we would begin our session by them asking me questions. And in a way, that's okay, because you want your subject to be absolutely comfortable with you. And if you haven't met them before, they can be a little bit apprehensive. But that was one challenge.

Another big challenge is, there never seems to be enough time to study all that you want to study, to read all the books on your list or to interview all the people that you'd like to interview. There just isn't enough time.

And also, to not become too frustrated when your subjects, individuals you meet who you think might be a good oral history subject, it's their story to tell or not tell -- period. And sometimes, veterans choose not to tell it.

And one example that stands out in my mind is my uncle, Uncle Powell (ph), who, unlike a lot of blacks in the World War II Navy, served on a number of destroyers during World War II. And he was in Tokyo Bay on 2 September, surrender day.

He served as a steward for several admirals. So the more I learned about him, the more excited I was getting about even approaching him about sharing his experiences.

Well, when I asked him about it, to even consider it, he looked me straight in the face, and I'm quoting him here, he said, "I enlisted to fight, not to lay out another man's clothes," unquote. Now, be clear, he did not regret serving his country, but he did regret the limited opportunities that the Navy afforded him. And so he had no desire to revisit that at all, as unique as his opportunity was. But it's theirs to tell or not to tell -- period.

Another frustration is that often veterans don't think that they have a story that's worth telling. So all too often, you'll hear, oh, I didn't do that much; I did my time, and I got out. And they kind of -- some are self-effacing, some are very modest. But some of them just really don't value what their experiences are or why someone else would want to know about them.

And so sometimes you have to help them appreciate what their experience is and to realize that someone can benefit from hearing what they experienced, the good and the bad of it all.

DR. OHAB: I imagine that's one of the most rewarding parts about doing your kind of research.

DR. AKERS: Oh, it is, it is. Oral history, in particular, can be very cathartic. Sometimes the oral history process brings your subject to, the person you're interviewing, to a point of healing. It brings peace to a part of their life that was unsettled. And you don't always realize that when you get started, but it does for them.

And also, they're honored that you're interviewing them, and that their story, their recollection, their history is going to be part of, you know, the government's official archives. That really makes them feel well.

Many times when you're there to do an interview, they will actually set up a whole day to spend with you. I'll never forget Chief Brown. I went to her house in Virginia. And that day, truly -- I met her pharmacist, I met her banker. We went to the same place she goes to lunch every day. And the interview was set up for 10:00, but we actually didn't sit down until 5:00 that evening, believe it or not, but we had a fantastic interview, a great three hours together.

So for them, it is more than an opportunity to learn and to gather information; it's personal. And you have to respect that when you're working with a person, because that's their story, that's their history. And you have to let them experience it the way that they want to.

DR. OHAB: I really appreciate you sharing those experiences with us.

I'd like to take a couple of questions from our Twitter sheet. Jim Dolbow asks if you can tell us a little bit more about the Naval History and Heritage Command's Diversity Project.

DR. AKERS: Oh, yes. About 18 months ago, we were approached by the Diversity Directorate at the Bureau of Naval Personnel to develop initially an exhibit to show the diversity in the Navy, the history of diversity in the Navy. And that has now become several smaller projects where we're trying to literally tell how key groups we've identified -- and that includes women, African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and we're also touching on religious diversity -- how that has happened historically, starting with 1775, the start of the Revolutionary War, to current day.

And we're doing that through narrative, we're doing that with chronology, we're doing that with photographs -- we've amassed a nice digital collection of photographs -- to tell the story and how it has happened.

As you might imagine, it's been a most interesting process for us to do it. There's a team of us working on this. And our project director of Dr. Robert Schneller, and there are several other historians and other specialists working with us. There's an editor, there's a photo curator.

But the project has become -- it's evolving, as projects do. And it's become a nice way for us to introduce our command to many, many people who otherwise might not have known of us.

And we've had some interesting exchanges over the time. I've had the pleasure of meeting, for instance, astronaut Wendy Lawrence, a Naval Academy graduate, who went on to be a successful astronaut here. And several other people, enlisted as well as officer personnel, and civilians as well.

You may be familiar with the CNOs statement on diversity. And diversity is seen for what it is. It's a strength, and it's a strategic imperative, as the CNO would say, for the Navy and its mission. And so this project is right in line with that, to tell that story of how these persons came to serve and how their role has changed over time.

DR. OHAB: A follow-up question from Jim Dolbow on Twitter as well, asking if you can recommend any books or any reading material for anyone interested in learning more about African-American women in the Navy.

DR. AKERS: You know, I wish I could just give you four or five titles very quickly, but unfortunately I can't. Generally speaking, the overviews of women in the military, such as Jeannie Helms' book "Women in the Military," or women in the Navy, such as Susan Godson's book, "So Proudly We Serve," they are good overviews, but they tend to not provide an in-depth analysis of minority participation.

The same is true if you look at an overview of blacks in the Navy. It's as if they present their participation as bleeps along a historical line versus having it interwoven along the historical line and as the Navy evolved, as the Navy grew and as it changed over time, whereas the military did so.

And so you can glean some of it from those kinds of sources. A very good overview is Bernard Nalty's book "Strength for the Fight" published by Free Press. And my colleagues have contributed to the literature in that regard. And they do a better job, I think, but these are very specific studies. Dr. Schneller, our project manager that I mentioned, has published a two-volume study on the racial integration of the Naval Academy. The first volume takes the reader up until the first black graduate, Commander Wesley Brown, in 1949. And the second volume brings the reader from 1949 to 1999. And of course -- (inaudible) -- featured prominently in there.

My colleague, Dr. John Sherwood, authored "Black Sailor, White Navy" where he looks at race relations in the Navy during the Zumwalt era. And that's critical for lots of reasons, but Admiral Zumwalt was a real maverick for change and a real advocate for improving the quality of status of all sailors, but also providing more opportunities for equal opportunity and equality in the Navy for minorities.

And he issued these mandates, if you will, called Z Grams, and they basically said, this is what the Navy needs to do to advance the cause of women, to give them more opportunities. And it worked. It didn't go through Congress, it didn't go through the White House. He just put them out there, and at some considerable cost, too, because this was not the most popular time to take the positions that he did take. But he did so nonetheless.

So as you would look at the titles I've mentioned, particularly John's book I noted, you are looking at blacks in the Navy during that era of 1970 to 1974, but you're also able to learn about women, because those policies will apply to, you know, not just black males, they'll apply to all blacks in the Navy.

And that's the thing about this research that makes it challenging. It's multi-layered. I remember when I was doing my research on the integration of the WAVE program during World War II, I'd have to look at the policy regarding all women and all blacks, because there was no section that said, this is what happened to black WAVES.

So you would have to look in both those areas as well as how the Navy changed in their policies regarding the use of the two groups of persons, to then see how that impacted black women. And then also, you know, what other factors influenced the Navy's decisions.

DR. OHAB: We have one final question from Angela, who posted on the blog, asking whether there was any information about the first African-American woman killed in action.

DR. AKERS: Well, Angela, that's a very interesting question. Unfortunately, such firsts are very difficult to confirm. One, as we've noted earlier, women have a long history of service with our military, though they didn't become an official part of the military until 1901 when Congress established the Army Nurse Corps. I'm not aware

of a first documented from those early days during the revolution, and I haven't seen a first by that name or by that demographic for even some of the more recent conflicts.

But firsts are sometimes very difficult to substantiate, because inevitably -- we just had a question in the office fairly recently on the first black to make the rank of chief or E-7. And we were working with our specialists here as well as some of our other colleagues and thought we had just arrived at it. And sure enough, within a day, we got an e-mail indicating that it wasn't this person, this wouldn't have happened in the early part of the 1900s. But that in fact there's a possibility that someone might have achieved that rank as early as the Civil War period.

And so now we've forwarded that request on for comment to a Civil War specialist to get his input. It's just an example of how difficult firsts, mosts, shortestests, longestests, they can be to substantiate and to prove.

DR. OHAB: We've talked a bit about the history. Let's look to the future. What do you see as the benefits down the road of continuing to study African Americans and other minorities in the military. Why is this so important?

DR. AKERS: I think for a number of reasons. One, our society - today's military is much more diverse than it's ever been, for sure, but that doesn't mean that racial equality or gender equality has necessarily been achieved.

Two, in general, the record keeping, the way the Navy is keeping records and in general, society is moving away from a paper base, and we're doing a lot with the Internet, and we're doing a lot with electronic records.

And so if someone were looking back or if you were to talk to even a veteran of the early part of this war, think about it. He or she probably would not have arrived at their designation in the war theater and sent a letter back home. But he or she probably would have sent an e-mail back home or a photograph someone snapped of them once they got settled where they're serving.

Contrast that with the wonderful letters we have from earlier wars to chronicle one's experience. So as we're looking at the overall participation of blacks today, the research needs to continue so that we can continue to understand what blacks have done and what they are doing and other minorities, by the way, are doing in uniform, and how they're doing it, and how it's impacted their lives.

The other issue is that, unfortunately, black veterans tend to publish less than their white counterparts. And black males tend to public more than black females. And consequently, when you think, what book or what article, whatever, can you refer one to, there's a much smaller number.

So as much as we know about black's service, and we do know a lot, there's much more to learn about the past, as well as the present. And you know, all the missing pages of the history in the Navy in the United States have not been filled. So the study needs to continue so that we can learn more and better understand what the experiences are.

And also, because we are becoming more diverse, to better understand sometimes, to better understand what one minority experience might help us better understand what another minority experience.

DR. OHAB: One final question as we finish off today's show. What three words would you use to describe the legacy of African Americans in the armed forces?

DR. AKERS: Heroic. Determined. And sacrificial, and I don't just mean that in terms of loss of life or injury. Many of them sacrificed a lot to serve, and so did their families. And that's really true of all veterans. But in this particular case, they've made tremendous sacrifice to achieve and to excel, particularly those who are able to attain the higher ranks. Many of these folks have very, very supportive families. So that also would apply to their families. But they were determined to serve, even when they were fighting for rights that they themselves were denied here in the United States in earlier periods.

And their heroism has just been tremendous since the Revolutionary War to current day.

DR. OHAB: Dr. Akers, as we conclude today's program, do you have any final thoughts that you'd like to share with us?

DR. AKERS: Well, I'm delighted that you decided to focus on African Americans and particularly African-American women, because we need -- time doesn't afford us to share as much as we could, but to have this opportunity to, I hope, to wet the appetites of your listeners, to encourage them to look a little deeper, take advantage of the multiple resources that are available on the Internet now that weren't previously, there are some terrific Websites. To learn more, and not just in February, but throughout the year.

And when your kids have school projects, encourage them to consider some of the outstanding men and women who have served in the military, some of which I bet are in your families that maybe you didn't ask them about or maybe that veteran hasn't chosen to mention it. But there are outstanding veterans all around us. So as your kids do get these projects, encourage them to consider that. There's nothing the matter with a Will Smith or a Michael Jordan, but also to consider these outstanding men and women. DR. OHAB: Today's guest is Dr. Regina Akers, historian at the Naval History and Heritage Command.

Dr. Akers, this has really been a very interesting discussion. I wish you the best of luck and hope that we can have you back again sometime in the future.

DR. AKERS: I'd be delighted. And thank you very much.

DR. OHAB: Thank you.

DR. AKERS: Take care now.

DR. OHAB: Listeners, you can tune in next week, Wednesday, February 24th, when we talk with leaders from the High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program, also known as HAARP. The joint Air Force and Navy program is investigating the viability of using emerging radio wave technology for next-generation communications, radar and navigation systems. What is HAARP? Find out next week when we talk to HAARP scientists from their experimental research facility in Alaska.

Thank you, again, for your attention. I am Dr. Ohab, and you've been scienced.

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