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A Fat Folder of Family Secrets: Mom's Hidden Past

I've always been proud of my father's WWII service. Why didn't my mother reveal her wartime work?

By Francene Hill



Courtesy of Francene Hill

On June 20, 1942, a twenty-two-year-old African American woman in Washington, DC, raised her right hand and solemnly swore to defend the U.S. Constitution against all foreign and domestic enemies. Fresh off a segregated train from Little Rock, Arkansas, she affirmed that she had no affiliation with any political party or organization promoting the overthrow of the government by force or violence. As part of her oath of office at the War Department during World War II, she promised not to reveal confidential documents to any unauthorized person. It was only last year that a [genealogy](#) search revealed that this remarkable woman was my own mother.

"While my 75-year-old mother entered Tiny Tot's payroll into her computer, I learned about her life before children, from dancing at the Savoy Ballroom to rushing to visit New York City before a rumored bomb attack. Her mention of 'working various government jobs' during my father's overseas service ignited my interest to dig deeper."

Until that point, I had only known about my father's contributions during the Second World War. Every **Veterans Day**, I proudly honor his service by sharing on social media the pictures of him in uniform that were prominently displayed in my childhood home. In one photo, my father is standing at attention in the snow, wearing his decorated olive **army** uniform and garrison side cap. In another, captured during his furlough in Bear Mountain, New York, he sports a white uniform and service cap while seated on the grass in front of my mother. My father was deployed overseas ten months after that photo was taken. When I stumbled upon my mother's thick folder from the War Department, I discovered she was serving her country back home while my father fought overseas. I wondered why she had never revealed her own patriotic past to me or my siblings.

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What I did know about my parents was already an incredible story. They were high school sweethearts who grew up in the Jim Crow South before graduating together from Dunbar Junior College. While my father went on to attend Prairie View College in Texas, my mother stayed in Little Rock and became a probation officer at the Colored Juvenile Court. In 1941, they married, but my father was drafted before they could celebrate their first anniversary. After his honorable discharge four years later, they moved to St. Louis, Missouri and started a family.

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In 1950, my father convinced my mother to quit her job to raise their two- and three-year-old sons. It later dawned on me that it was the very job at the War Department for which she held a high security clearance. At the time, however, my father was upset that his wife's salary surpassed his own at the post office. Undaunted, she enlisted four neighborhood children to join her two toddlers and turned childcare into a thriving business called Tiny Tot Nursery School. A year after starting the daycare, her first daughter was born. However, it would be another seven years before the unexpected arrival of the favorite child of the family (yes, me). While managing her childcare

enterprise, my mother also served on non-profit boards of directors, including Jack and Jill of America as National Treasurer. Little did I know that a decade before becoming a Black female entrepreneur, my mother had played an integral role supporting the war effort.

"I discovered her signed and notarized affidavit, pledging to safeguard military information or face the penalty of death or imprisonment as dictated by the Espionage Act."

I discovered my mother's work in the federal government during my annual holiday visit to St. Louis in my thirties, 12 years after my father passed. While my 75-year-old mother entered Tiny Tot's payroll into her computer, I learned about her life before children, from dancing at the Savoy Ballroom to rushing to visit New York City before a rumored bomb attack. Her mention of "working various government jobs" during my father's overseas service ignited my interest to dig deeper.

After requesting both my mother's personnel files and my father's veteran records from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), it took two years for them to retrieve the documents. My father's military files were stored in the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri when the building caught on fire on July 12, 1973. Approximately 80% of Army personnel records from 1912 through 1959 were destroyed. Thankfully, 58 pages from my father's 1942 - 1945 service record were recovered from the area that suffered the most damage, even though many pages were burnt or faded due to water damage.

While scrolling through my father's files, I stumbled upon a precious handwritten letter from his mother addressed to President Franklin Roosevelt. In her December 17, 1944, correspondence, my grandmother desperately pleaded with the Commander and Chief to "please, in the name of our dear Lord and Savior, let him be home... he's my only child in the world." My father was always a mamma's boy, so I found it amusing that her letter became part of his official military records.

"She held a high security clearance. My father was upset that his wife's salary surpassed his own at the post office. "

I found his actual draft letter, ordering him to report for duty at 7:30 a.m. on May 27, 1942. Contrary to my assumption that he deployed directly from Arkansas, he received military training in five states, ultimately departing from California. He then arrived in Sydney, Australia, a place he never mentioned visiting, before being assigned to New Guinea for the subsequent three years. For my father's military service, he was awarded American and Asiatic Pacific Theater ribbons and medals for Good Conduct and Victory.

"While scrolling through my father's files, I stumbled upon a handwritten letter addressed to President Franklin Roosevelt."

In my mother's 146-page Personnel Record Folder for War Department Civilian Employee file, I discovered her signed and notarized affidavit, pledging to safeguard military information or face the penalty of death or imprisonment as dictated by the Espionage Act. Results from her O'Hanlon Loyalty and Character Report detailed interrogations of her neighbors, employers, and teachers to verify that she was a loyal American who had never traveled abroad or had relatives living outside the country.

"Within her first five months, her outstanding efficiency ratings led to three promotions, followed by another four before her departure. At just 24 years old, she was already supervising a team of 20 employees."

In 1942, my mother's annual starting salary was \$1,440, comparable to \$27,191 today, more than doubling her previous probation officer income of \$600 per year. Within her first five months, her outstanding efficiency ratings led to three promotions, followed by another four before her departure. At just 24 years old, she was already supervising a team of 20 employees. Plus, to help her country pay for the enormous cost of the Second World War, my mother sacrificed \$15 of each paycheck to purchase war bonds.

During her eight-year career, the War Department relocated her from Washington, DC to Newark, New Jersey and later to St. Louis, Missouri. My mother's final Personnel Action Form confirmed the reason for her resignation was to remain at home and care for her family. It also indicated her annual salary had increased to \$3,130 by January 1950 (\$40,995 today).

"Regrettably, my mother passed away just seven months after our conversation, so I will never get to ask her what it was like being a Black woman safeguarding top military secrets during World War II. She obviously took her oath very seriously and carried those secrets to her grave."

My mother was among several African American women who assumed essential positions vacated by men who had enlisted in the armed forces. The U.S. government depended on the invaluable contributions of more than a half-million "Black Rosies," a name derived from the World War II icon "Rosie the Riveter" recognized by her red bandana. Often overlooked, these heroic women of color labored in shipyards, farms, railroads, factories, administrative offices, and non-combat military units to uphold democracy. Details about my mother's wartime role remain a mystery, without even a job description in her personnel file to shed light on her duties. I am left to speculate about the top-secret documents that may have crossed her desk and the national

security responsibilities she may have upheld.

Regrettably, my mother passed away just seven months after our conversation, so I will never get to ask her what it was like being a Black woman safeguarding top military secrets during World War II. She obviously took her oath very seriously and carried those secrets to her grave. Being a member of the Greatest Generation, she might have taken her sacrifice and service for granted, not regarding them as something particularly exceptional or noteworthy. Much like my mother, her generation invested in war bonds, rationed food, and planted victory gardens as part of their patriotic duty. In contrast, today's concept of patriotism is more diverse and frequently divided based on personal beliefs, familiar history, or generational experiences.

Nevertheless, thanks to genealogy research, I unearthed priceless details about my parents' lives. This Veterans Day, I will remember both of my parents' contributions to the nation. Learning about their experiences as an African American couple during the 1940s has given me a greater appreciation for their strength and tenacity despite the challenges of war and segregation.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Francene Hill, a freelance writer based in Silver Spring, MD is writing a biography of her mother Kermit Hill, who shares her name with the frog on Sesame Street. At readings and open mic events, Francene enjoys sharing from her work in progress, titled "[Tiny Tots in Tiaras and Tuxedos](#)." Francene is a proud alumna of Smith College and Penn State University. Find Francene on Instagram and Threads @golf4fun09

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