



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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LABELLE VETERAN EARNS STATEWIDE HONOR, NAMED FAYETTE COUNTY 'FACE'

Uniontown, PA – The Pennsylvania Commission for Women recently honored 21 women from across the commonwealth as part of Female Veterans Day. Among them was Maj. H. Lenora Byrd, U.S. Army, Retired.

Byrd, of LaBelle, spent two stints in the army for a total of 21 years. For her service to her country, she has earned Fayette County's Faces and Places designation for April.

Byrd received a proclamation from Fayette County Commissioners Dave Lohr, Scott Dunn Vince Vicites.

She was nominated for the Female Veterans Day honor by Vicites.

"Lenora has a very in-depth military background," Vicites said. "Her life story is very commendable, and I just thought she would be a very good person to nominate for this award."

Byrd, 81, said she was "very honored" to be among the 21 Pennsylvania female veterans to receive the award.

"I was surprised. Vince and Vanessa (Getz, founder and president of SALVO Strategies) really shocked me," Byrd said. "I really appreciate it, and I'm really proud to represent Fayette County."

Born Dec. 16, 1940, Byrd graduated from Brownsville High School in 1958 and attended California State Teachers College – now California University of Pennsylvania – for two years before enlisting in the Women's Army Corps in 1961. She headed to Fort McClellan, Ala., for basic training, where she received the Outstanding Trainee of the Cycle award. She then entered Advanced Individual Training at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, as a medical corpsman and was promoted first to corporal, then to sergeant. She completed Officer Candidate School back at Fort McClellan in 1964 and was commissioned as a second lieutenant and assigned as a WAC platoon officer for a year.

Byrd married an enlisted sergeant, but she was involuntarily discharged when she became pregnant with their daughter, who was born at Fort Sam Houston Hospital in 1966.

After her discharge, Byrd worked as a recreational specialist in San Antonio. She then transferred to Washington, D.C., where her husband had been assigned to Walter Reed Army Hospital. Byrd enrolled in law enforcement courses at the University of Maryland and worked part-time as campus police officer. One of her assignments was guarding Janis Joplin during a performance on campus.

That wasn't Byrd's only brush with musical stardom; she sang with a 10-piece band which opened for the Jackson Five and Diana Ross during gigs in Ocean City, Md.

Byrd and her husband eventually divorced, and she returned to Fayette County, where she received her bachelor's degree in social work from California University. She would go on to become a caseworker at Fayette County Children and Youth Services.

In 1973, she became the first woman to join the 430th U.S. Army Replacement Detachment in Hiller with the rank of SP5. Byrd applied for and received a direct commission as a first lieutenant in the reserves.

That same year, Byrd contacted a friend for information on returning to active duty, as regulations concerning female military personnel with children had changed. With her 7-year-old daughter in the custody of her mother, Byrd returned to Fort McClellan as a WAC Basic Training Company Commander.

In 1978, the WAC was disbanded, and Byrd was among the female military personnel who integrated into the previously all-male army. She was selected to the Military Police Corps and assigned to the MP school at Fort McClellan as a Firearms Training Officer. Four months later, she moved up to become a civil disturbance instructor at the MP school.

After five months at that post, she was promoted to captain. The MP Brigade Commander offered her an assignment as the MP Company Commander for the next two years – the first woman to hold that position.

But Byrd's military career wasn't without its challenges. Upon requesting an ROTC assignment at her alma mater so that she could be with her daughter and mother and pursue a master's degree, she said she was told by her MP advisor at the Pentagon that she needed to be interviewed by an infantry officer in charge of the First Army ROTC Regional Headquarters in Fort Bragg, N.C., something Byrd said was not typical protocol.

Byrd successfully secured the position, and after three years, completed both the ROTC assignment and her master's degree in Education and Counseling.

In 1981, Byrd was promoted to major and assigned a tour in Germany as Deputy Provost Marshal in Hanau. She then was assigned to Frankfurt V Corps Headquarters as a MP operations officer.

Byrd said of all the places she has been, Germany was her favorite.

"I didn't know I was black (there)," she said. "They treated me well. The German people were nice, the musicians were nice. I played softball over there."

Byrd then was selected for a special duty assignment for 50 days in Great Britain. An assignment as Provost Marshal at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Md., followed. However, Byrd said the general in charge wanted her to be a physical security officer. She declined and left the post after she said she faced discrimination.

Instead, Byrd was assigned as Provost Marshal at Ft. Detrick, Md., a medical research and development installation.

In 1988, Byrd began preparing for retirement after she said she was once more discriminated against based on age in an attempt to attend the Command and General Staff College in Carlisle. Byrd said attendance at the college was necessary to be eligible for the rank of lieutenant colonel. With one year left to serve, she accepted her final assignment as a training officer of Signal Corps International Students at Fort Gordon, Ga.

She retired from the U.S. Army in October 1989 at 48 and headed to Atlanta to begin civilian life.

“Lenora’s story is one well worth telling and worth celebrating,” Commissioner Chairman Dave Lohr said. “She joined the military not because it was the popular or easy thing to do, but because she was up to the challenge. She encountered ongoing challenges, one after another, throughout her career, and faced them with grace and dignity. She has set a standard to which we should all aspire.”

Dunn said the obstacles Byrd overcame are a testament to her strength.

“I’m sure she had barriers placed in front of her that most people didn’t, and to see her overcome that is tremendous,” he said. “It says a lot for the spirit of the military, and it says a lot for the spirit of the people in Fayette County. I was very honored to meet her and recognize her accomplishments.”

After enjoying various positions at several schools in the south, Byrd returned to Fayette County in the 1990s to care for her ailing mother, who passed away in 2012.

Byrd has kept herself busy since her return to her home state. In 1994, she became the director of the Women, Infants and Children program through the Fayette County Community Action Agency in Uniontown.

In 2007, she self-published her first book, titled *A Black Woman in the White Man’s Army*, which tells of her time in the military. She has since published four autobiographical e-books.

In 2010, Byrd was named Vice President of Brownsville Area Schools Alumni Association and then became president in 2013. She created the BAS Alumni brick courtyard at the high school.

In 2014, she formed the Power of Music committee to feature free Sunday concerts with local bands to perform in West Brownsville and Brownsville. The committee disbanded in 2020.

Byrd became a member of West Brownsville American Legion Post 490 in 2015 and Brownsville American Legion Post 295 in 2019. She was one of the driving forces behind the installation of 240 veterans’ banners in Brownsville.

Byrd currently resides in LaBelle. Her daughter, Chantay Lindsey, is a GS14 system analyst working for the Department of Defense.

Byrd said it is sometimes difficult for her to relate to the current generation, but she does have a few sage words to offer the girls and women of today.

“Just do the best you can do. Don’t give up,” she said. “Never give up is the main thing, regardless of the struggles. The struggles make you a stronger person.”

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For more information, contact Kristi Rooker Kassimer, Public Relations Specialist, at 412-691-0262, kkassimer@fayettecountypa.info or Jamie Rankin, Journalist, at 724-434-4486, jamierankin13@gmail.com.