

USAMMA command team reflect on careers, importance of Black History Month

By C.J. Lovelace February 5, 2024



FORT DETRICK, Md. — Col. Gary Cooper and Lt. Col. Nikki Davis pride themselves in leading a diverse organization that values its workforce.

Both influential African American leaders, the senior command team at the U.S. Army Medical Materiel Agency said they always relish the opportunity to mentor and lead USAMMA's workforce. Yet, they're quick to recognize the impacts that other leaders had on them as they progressed through the Army ranks during their more than 60 years of combined service.

"We in the military know and understand how diversity is our strength," Cooper said, reflecting on the importance of the Army's Black History Month observance in February.

"It's important that we celebrate our diversity and recognize those accomplishments of African Americans before us," the USAMMA commander said. "You reflect on their lives and what it was like for them, and you realize how much better they've made it for us today."

Davis, a military brat who was the first in her family to be an officer, said it's important to know where you came from to gain a greater appreciation of where you are and where you want to go.

"No matter the month or observance, we need to look at the contributions that these groups of people have made; because those folks are valued, they are appreciated," she said. "We can't lose sight of those contributions."

Cooper, a native of Albany, Georgia, entered active-duty service as an enlisted Soldier in 1986, working as a petroleum supply specialist.

A college education through the GI Bill was his initial motivation, but it was a career he enjoyed so he stuck around for about eight years.

“Whatever took gas, we refueled it,” he said. “Trucks, airplanes. We went to [forward-operating bases] where we did hot refuels when they brought helicopters in — Apaches, Cobras, Chinooks. If it took fuel, we did it.”

Then-Sgt. Cooper considered leaving the service before he was approached by his company commander at the time, who urged him to consider the Army’s Green to Gold program, an educational pathway to enable enlisted Soldiers to complete their degree and commission as an officer.

Truthfully, Cooper said he didn’t have a desire to be an officer, specifically because he “hadn’t seen that many black officers” as examples for his future career path.

“I could have probably counted them on my hand,” he said.

“Why would I want to go from something I enjoy to being an officer?” Cooper asked himself. “... It was like going into the unknown. I didn’t want to do it because I had a limited frame of reference of officers, the Army-type leadership, to have not seen many Black officers. But, leaders are at all different levels.”

It was the wise advice of his first sergeant at the time, 1st Sgt. Browning, an African American NCO, whom Cooper credits for the encouragement to challenge himself and make the transition.

“He said, think about it like this: If you didn’t try it, how could you ever complain about it? My challenge to you is do it, and if it’s not for you, then call me up and complain about it,” Cooper recalled. “I think he knew I wouldn’t complain.”

Cooper turned over the next page of his Army story when he graduated with a bachelor’s degree from Savannah State University in Georgia, and commissioned into the Medical Service Corps in 1996.

Davis, a native of Jacksonville, North Carolina, first entered service in 1998, enlisting with the Army Reserve as a motor transportation specialist.

It was a time of transformational growth and change for the then-college student, who later commissioned in 2002 into the Medical Service Corps through the ROTC program at East Carolina University.

Her first assignment had her on a flight halfway around the world to Korea.

“I had pinpoint orders to be a platoon leader at a company in a medevac battalion,” she said. “It was a big change, being so far away from home, in different time zones. But it was exciting at the same time.”

Davis arrived on ground around the same time as another young officer, a white man. Davis said she was discouraged when her detachment commander called her in to tell her she may have a change in assignment.

The detachment team said they needed someone to join their staff and they had decided to send the white officer down range in her original position. She was somewhat confused why they wanted her to stay with the headquarters staff, but they shared with her that she had more experience than the other officer so they decided to switch their assignments.

“When I got the opportunity to talk to another minority female officer, she said, ‘You know, this is because you’re Black,’” Davis recalled. “It didn’t make sense in that moment, but I later learned that the company was led by a Black company commander, a Black first sergeant and another Black platoon leader, so they decided to send the white officer instead.”

Davis said she didn’t let the decision bother her, thinking back to what she was taught growing up — it’s about what you do and who you are, not about what you look like.

“Did they not pick me because of my skin color? Possibly,” she said. “But I recognize that the decision was more about wanting more representation at the company command level, and I’m okay with that.”

Davis said it was situations like in Korea that gave her feelings of inadequacy at different times in her career. Was she good enough? Did she get the job because she earned it or because of her appearance?

It was the wise words of her father, a 26-year Marine Corps veteran, who helped guide her through trying times, she said.

“It’s been challenging, but at the end of the day, it goes back to what my dad said: ‘Nikki, continue to work hard, give it your best, know what your why is and eventually things will go as they should.’”

Despite his initial reluctance, Cooper has excelled as an officer, serving in numerous leadership positions over the past 28 years.

Prior to coming to Fort Detrick to serve as USAMMA commander, he served as commander of the Medical Recruiting Brigade at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and deputy G-4 for the Office of the Army Surgeon General/Medical Command, based at Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

Reflecting on his career, Cooper said that while it was his peers — Black Soldiers in the enlisted ranks in his early years — that really encouraged him to go for it, it was the diversity of his teams and how he was treated over the years that influenced the leader he’s become today.

“I couldn’t have scripted it up myself,” he said. “Black, white ... I learned something from everyone. It’s made me realize how important diversity, good character and making sure everyone feels they are valued and heard is to build a cohesive unit.

“Here’s what I like to tell people: It’s not just about what you and those around you look like, but how you positively impact and influence the lives of others,” Cooper said. “Talent can get you there, but you need good character to stay there.”

Davis shared similar experiences to Cooper, in that it was rare for her to “see someone who looked like me” in her early years as an officer.

“In my experience and in my path, I was the only African American, the only female a lot of times,” she said. “It was discouraging because I thought the military would typically look more like our country, and that was not my experience.”

Davis said she’s encouraged by the strides the Army has made over her 26-year career, such as removing photos from boards when considering promotions and opening new job opportunities for women.

Despite that, it was her experiences of feeling marginalized or underrepresented in the earlier years of her career that Davis said allowed her to build empathy with other Soldiers who may experience the same today.

It’s something she draws on as she leads and works to empower everyone to have a voice, feel that they are valued and remain hopeful about their future serving in the world’s greatest land fighting force.

“In order to aspire to be something, you have to be inspired,” she said. “My goal has always been to inspire the people coming up and hopefully their story will be even better than mine.”