

Black Army Nurse Commander Cited 30 Years Ago by Liberia Government

As an epilogue to the recent observance of Black History Week, Bridgeport area community leaders yesterday noted this year marks the 30th anniversary of ceremonies at which the government of Liberia awarded an Order of African Redemption to Miss Susan Elizabeth Freeman of Stratford, who commanded the first U.S. Army unit of black nurses in World War II.

Miss Freeman, who was discharged from the Army Nurse Corps with the rank of captain at the end of the war, resides at 1433 Stratford avenue, Stratford.

Four Years in Army

She served more than four years as an Army nurse, including nearly 12 months at a hospital in Liberia for which her group received a Unit Commendation in November, 1943.

She also was the recipient of the Mary Mahoney award for service to the American Red Cross during the Ohio-Mississippi flood of 1937, when she was a civilian nurse.

Miss Freeman's accomplishments in her profession were recorded in the 1966 first edition of "Profiles of Negro Womanhood," in association with the Negro Heritage library.

The account runs as follows:

The S.S. James E. Parker plowed its way through the rough waters of the Atlantic heading toward Africa. A former luxury liner, it had been converted into a transport. Now it was carrying mail, food and ammunition as well as its human cargo of doctors, soldiers, and the first unit of Negro nurses to be sent overseas.

Chief nurse of the unit was Susan Freeman of Connecticut — a short, slim, attractive young woman with sparkling dark eyes and light brown skin. For her, this assignment seemed a fitting climax to years of service in the

profession she loved. She felt greatly honored to have been appointed head of this pioneer group of women.

Four days after the convoy left the United States, it ran into a severe storm. Rain and wind lashed against the James E. Parker as it rolled from side to side. Lieutenant Freeman, one of the few passengers to appear at dinner, had returned to her cabin, prepared to retire early. From her porthole, the grey destroyers and battleships were barely distinguishable

in the heavy seas. The ship gave a sudden lurch, and she fell against her berth. Just then, there was a knock at the door. The ship's surgeon had come to ask if she would assist him in an emergency appendectomy. Although most of the nurses were seasick, she was able to find one to serve as scrub nurse. While the boat continued rolling under a stiffening wind, the doctor and the nurses worked swiftly and in silence until the operation was completed. Within five days, the patient was well along toward full recovery.

This was only one of many exciting experiences aboard the ship. Another occurred the night the alarm signal sounded to



1943 photo
MISS SUSAN E. FREEMAN

abandon ship. All military personnel, as a matter of routine, were ordered to sleep with their lifejackets beside them, with one arm through the armhole. It was a dark night, a heavy fog hung over the seas, and the ships in the convoy had difficulty keeping in formation. One of the ships appeared to be closing in on the Parker. The alarm sounded immediately. The passengers quickly put on their lifejackets, hurried on deck and were prepared to jump. "We stood in great anxiety for twenty minutes. We did not have to abandon ship, however, as the all-clear sounded, bringing a welcome relief to all of us," she says. The convoy reached the shores of North Africa without further mishap.

Stratford Native

Susan Freeman was born in Stratford, Connecticut, to Susie Louise (White) and William Joseph Freeman. The Freemans were a closely knit family, and Miss Freeman looks back on many "poignant and revered moments" in the family homestead where she still lives. "The courage and strength of my father and mother," she says, "along-with their faith, have always been an inspiration to me."

From early childhood, Susan had always wanted to be a nurse. She would nurse her dolls, and her brothers and sisters too, whenever they could be enticed into submitting to her tender care. Once, when her dog was hit by a car, she ran for a needle and thread in order to "sew him up." There were also times when her mother was ill, and she would say to Susan, "Come, little nurse, give me a glass of water," providing early encouragement to her daughter's ambition.

The first real tragedy [sic] Susan Freeman had to face was the death of her mother. On a Tuesday in November of 1918, about 2:30 a.m., she was awakened by her sister Agnes and told that her mother was dying. Her father wanted all of the children to come to their mother's bedside immediately. Susan did not fully understand what was happening as she walked

quietly down the hall to her mother's room. "When we entered, my father told us to kneel at her bedside as he prayed. My mother, with her arms folded, went peacefully to sleep. Watching her go that way is something I can never forget."

Susan Freeman attended Stratford High school from 1917 until her graduation in 1921. She was active in sports, and became "quite a star basketball player." During her senior year, she was stricken [sic] with diphtheria [sic] which almost proved fatal, but she recovered in time to graduate with her class.

From childhood on. She never wavered in her determination to become [sic] a nurse. In 1923, she entered Freedmen's Hospital Training School for Nurses in Washington, D.C., and completed the required three-year course. She then did post-graduate work at Columbia university in New York City, and at Howard and Catholic universities in Washington.

Rewarding Career

Nursing proved as rewarding a career as she had anticipated. Sensitive and understanding, she enjoyed helping her patients. A grateful patient's expression, "Oh thank you, nurse, I feel so much better," always struck an inner chord, and the young nurse would feel that she was "somehow furthering God's work on earth."

Her army career began April 23, 1941, as a second lieutenant. On her way to her assignment at Camp Livingston, Louisiana, she experienced a significant encounter with segregation. Army regulations called for Pullman accommodations but, when she arrived in St. Louis, she was informed by the conductor that Negroes could not ride Pullman in the South.

While Lieutenant Freeman was speaking with him, a friend of hers, Mrs. Estelle Massey Osborne, came over, to inquire what the trouble was. Mrs. Osborne could not understand this

difficulty since she herself always rode Lower 13. At the time, Lieutenant Freeman did not know what "Lower 13" was. When the conductor showed her to her berth, she discovered to her amazement that it was a private room. She continued her journey to Camp Livingston in solitude and style. This was one instance where the separate but equal doctrine had its advantages for Negroes.

Segregation

Negro nurses were new to Camp Livingston. Susan Freeman was the second to arrive, and others appeared daily — creating no little excitement in the camp. At first, all nurses were assigned to a single area, but it was not long before they were segregated. New quarters were built for the Negro nurses, and they, along with Negro doctors, were assigned to wards where there were Negro patients only.

Upon receiving her commission as a first lieutenant, she became the first nurse, Negro or white, to receive a promotion at Camp Livingston. She was then assigned to Fort Huachuca as chief nurse; and was given only 10 days in which to train for this position. Her orders, as well as those of the other Negro nurses, again called for Pullman accommodations, and again were ignored. All Negro nurses were told to take seats in the day coach.

When Lieutenant Freeman said she would not travel this way, her colonel sent for her. She asked him one question: "Have you ever ridden in a day coach that Negroes ride in down South?" When he said he hadn't she assured him he could have no idea what it was like. The very next day, he got the group Pullman accommodations. To make certain that there would be no trouble, two federal agents rode in the same car.

When they stopped at El Paso to change trains for Fort Huachuca, the Negro nurses were told to go to a rear section of the station for dinner. They refused and, choosing to do

without food, found themselves a bench outside the station where they sat under the protective vigilance of the agents until their train pulled in. A white woman, who later boarded the train, approached Lieutenant Freeman and asked if the seat beside her was taken. The lieutenant replied that she did not know. The woman repeated her question and received the same answer. Finally, in exasperation, the woman asked, "Aren't you the portrette?" This was her chance to put the woman in her place. "Madam," she said, "can't you recognize the uniform of an army nurse? Don't you know that there is a war going on?" As the discomfited woman walked away, a [group of GI's sitting nearby burst into laughter.

Organizing Hospital

At Fort Huachuca, there were only 11 nurses including Lieutenant Freeman, and 700 patients in the completely disorganized hospital. The patients lay on cots and beds, having been herded into one large area. It was Lieutenant Freeman's job to see that wards were established, and that a full quota of nurses was assigned to the camp.

She soon had a staff of 110 nurses, and the number of beds for patients had increased to 1000. The hospital was running smoothly, when she received her "sealed orders for overseas."

Arriving in Casablanca, Lieutenant Freeman could hear, the big guns of war, as fighting was still going on in North Africa. The nurses immediately went on to the hospital in Liberia, where they were housed in wooden buildings put up by the government. Since there were no screens in the windows, they slept under mosquito netting. Nineteen of the 30 nurses in the unit contracted malaria, and two of them had to be sent back to the United States.

Nursing was not confined to the hospital alone. Sometimes a call would come from an outpost that a plane was in distress, and the

crew was bailing out. One or two of the nurses would immediately be rushed to the scene to administer first-aid, or to bring back any of the men who might need hospitalization.

One event that stands out in Lieutenant Freeman's memory as being "particularly exciting" is the time she was asked to stop at a certain ward while making her rounds, as a male patient there claimed to know her family. It did not seem possible that here, in far-off Liberia, she would meet anyone from her hometown. After speaking with the patient, she learned that he was from Bridgeport, Connecticut, and really did know her family. He had come to Liberia with the Marcus Garvey Movement, and been stranded there.

Commendation

Susan Freeman remained in Liberia for almost a year. While there, she and eight other nurses received a unit commendation. Dated Nov. 8, 1943, it came from the Office of the Commanding General, and stated in part:

"During nearly eight months at this foreign service station, and in the face of difficult circumstances, these nurses have clearly demonstrated fidelity to duty, a sense of responsibility, and understanding of their positions as officers that is well above the average."

She returned to the States in December, 1943, and was reassigned to Camp Livingston, with the rank of captain. Arriving there, she was elated to find that the camp was now completely integrated.

In 1944, she received a citation as Knight Official of the Order of African Redemption from the Liberian Government. The following year, she received the Mary Mahoney Award for service to the American Red Cross during the Ohio - Mississippi Flood of 1937, and for commanding the first unit of Negro nurses overseas.

Susan Freeman is too modest to catalog her many awards. "I was very happy and honored

to be the recipient of so many ... citations. I have always tried to-do my best to carry out efficiently and honorably any assignment or task given me."

On July 31, 1945, shortly before the end of the war, she was retired from the army with an honorable discharge.

Upon returning to her home in Stratford, she engaged in a wide variety of civic and religious activities. In 1951, these were curtailed for a time when she woke up one night with "a cardiac distress." She called her father and asked him to pray for her, just as he had for her mother when she was dying. "I had no idea that I would recover, because I had every symptom of dying." With a strong will to live, as well as good care and good luck, she managed to pull through.

Susan Freeman's goal in life is to continue rendering assistance and service in whatever capacity she can, and to "maintain and perpetuate Christian ideals and beliefs to the best of my ability."