

'Little ad' paves way to historic career

Editor's note: This is the second in a series of articles marking the observance of Black History Month.

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Many leathernecks recall Edgar R. Huff, the first black sergeant major in the Marine Corps; Frederick C. Branch, the first black Marine officer; and Frank E. Peterson, the first black general and aviator. But rarely do we hear mention of the first black woman Marine officer.

Annie Laurie Grimes was appointed to the grade of warrant officer making her the Corps' first black woman officer.

After reading a newspaper advertisement about administrative duties, travel, adventure and education, she joined the Marine Corps for four years in February 1950 in Chicago. "I'd just finished photography school, was working in a factory and wanted to work in an office. So I took a day off for a job interview. There were about 20 people there, and I thought that was too many for one job. So I went to the post office, thought about that little ad, and signed up.

"I just happened to luck out, because they didn't have any blacks. There were only two black women in already, and I guess that was at the time they decided, 'let's make three,'" Grimes said.

Before her arrival to boot camp, a verbal order had been given to "not send one black woman by herself to Parris Island, S.C. - this out of consideration for the woman." But somehow, that failed to happen. Grimes was the only black woman in her platoon. "It wasn't my first time to be thrown in with mixed groups, and I didn't mind not having other blacks around. It didn't make any difference to me, because I was sort of a loner anyway," she said.

Although she was alone, Grimes "got along well with the girls," she said. Some recruit training requirements were amusing to her, because, at age 24, she was older than most recruits.

"I wasn't homesick like a lot of them, and I thought some of the things they had us do were kind of dumb. But there wasn't much to it. It was fun, kind of rough, but not too bad," she said.

As the end of training drew near, Platoon Seven-Alpha had a graduation dance, as did other platoons in the past. There were no black male Marines aboard Parris Island, so one of the two black Marines, who had escorted the first black women Marines of Platoon Five-Alpha to their dance, also escorted Grimes.

When Grimes completed recruit training, she remained at Parris Island for Personnel Administration School. "It was starting to be ex-



Annie Grimes became the first black woman Marine officer and first black woman to retire from the Marine Corps.

citing already, because I always wanted to learn how to type," she said. But living the life of a student instead of a recruit meant socializing in Beaufort, and being the only black woman aboard the base during the struggle for integration. meant there were times when Grimes felt left out. "When I got down there, segregation was really bad. They would be getting ready to go to dances, and I couldn't go because there wouldn't be any blacks there. That would be kind of sad when you wanted to be part of things. I had some hard times, but I made it through and coped with those things," she said.

Upon completion of school, Grimes reported to Headquarters Marine Corps as a file clerk. Then, three black women Marines were at the same duty station, and the union of Annie Graham, Ann Lamb and

Grimes was the beginning of a lifetime friendship. Graham and Lamb successfully completed their three-year tours, got married and raised families. But Grimes had career blood flowing through her veins, and her dream, sparked by that "little ad in the newspaper," was about to become reality.

She became a purchasing clerk and attained the rank of staff sergeant, by the time her first four years ended. She was then transferred to San Francisco in 1953. "That was an exciting city. I guess I just lucked out - went at a good time and got a good duty station," Grimes said.

In February 1958, as a technical sergeant, she was transferred to Camp Pendleton, Calif., for a four-year tour. From there, she traveled in 1962, to Philadelphia as a gunnery sergeant. In September 1964, she

found herself at Camp Lejeune, N.C. And before being transferred back to the West Coast in 1967, to Barstow, Calif., her promotions to master sergeant and warrant officer occurred. She remained in California until she retired Oct. 1, 1970, after 20 years of successful service, marking a milestone - the first black woman to retire from the Marine Corps. "The positive experiences completely overshadow any negative ones I encountered," she said.

After retirement, Grimes attended business college, now manages her own real estate property, and is a member of the Montford Point Women's Auxiliary. She enjoys keeping busy, meeting people, and keeping up with Marines by going to Montford Point Association conventions, which she feels is "one of the little highlights" of her life.