

Young African-American woman from Rogersville distinguished herself as Lt. Col. in the U.S. Army

BY BILL JONES
STAFF WRITER

When 88-year-old retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Laura E. Fulkerson died at the James H. Quillen Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Johnson City last April 19, the Hawkins County native left behind an illustrious record of service to her country and others.

She is interred at the Mountain Home National Cemetery along with numerous other U.S. military veterans dating back to at least the Spanish American War.

Col. Fulkerson was born near Rogersville, in Hawkins County, on July 26, 1929.

According to her obituary, She worked in public health nursing after graduation and later joined the U.S. military as a nurse and was sent to the Philippine Islands.

She retired after 23 years of service from the U.S. Army as a Lieutenant Colonel.

Swift alumni salute Lt. Col. Fulkerson

"We posthumously salute a Swift graduate with a distinguished military record," wrote Swift Alumni member Linda Kincaid. "Lieutenant Colonel Laura Fulkerson was born in Hawkins County, and raised in the Petersburg community. She was the fifth child of eight children born to the late Tom and Cornelia Fulkerson.

"Her father was a tobacco farmer and her mother was a homemaker. Laura graduated from Swift Memorial Junior College in 1951 and from Freedman's School of Nursing at the prestigious Howard University in 1955.

"Laura never married. She worked in public health nursing after graduation and later joined the U.S. Air Force, which sent her to the Philippine Islands. She later retired from the U.S. Army. She was also a charter member of Women's Memorial in Washington, D.C.

"Laura was a soft-spoken 'gentle woman with a southern charm'. She was a dedicated nurse and after her retirement she continued to use her nursing skills by helping others. She also worked tirelessly in her church and her community."



Laura E. Fulkerson as a young U.S. Army Officer

She also was a member of the AME Zion Church, where she served as a deaconess, secretary of the Sunday school, Willing Workers Club, Women's Service Club, and senior choir and enjoyed working with the church as long

as she was able to do so.

Those left to cherish Laura's memory include sisters, Hazel Miller and Ellen Jenkins; and several nieces, nephews, and cousins.

Swift alumni spokesperson Kincaid

wrote that many Swift college (and Swift High School) graduates joined the U.S. military and made a significant contribution to the country.

"The African-American experiences in the U.S. military reveal a complex and conflicted history," she wrote. "Since the arrival of slaves on the North American continent, they shared a belief in defending freedom in the U.S. and in the world. African Americans fought in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, The Korean War, Vietnam War, Desert Storm, in Afghanistan and in Iraq. All were gallant and some made the ultimate sacrifice.

"The U.S. military did not initially embrace African-Americans nor did the military know how to incorporate them into the branches of service. There were segregated units and isolated missions. However, in the 1950's, the military finally allowed equal treatment of African-American servicemen and servicewomen. Story after story documented acts of heroism and bravery on the battlefield and also from

Laura E.
Fulkerson

those that did not see combat including their contributions in supportive roles (cooks, medics, etc.) in all branches of the military.

"Serving in the military afforded many African Americans the ability to see parts of the world that would have remained just a place to fantasize about otherwise. Many made a career of the military. Many were able to take advantage of completing their education on the G.I. Bill that was signed into law in 1944. Many were afforded an opportunity to purchase a home and to receive healthcare through the Veterans Administration."

