

Army Makes History Promoting Black Female Chaplain to Colonel

The Army has promoted an African American woman chaplain to the rank of colonel for the first time.

Chaplain (Col.) Monica R. Lawson was given the new status in a ceremony streamed live Wednesday (Sept. 2) on the Facebook page of the U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School. The African Methodist Episcopal minister is the chief of recruiting and accessions for the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps.

"As an African American woman who has always been proud of the skin that I'm in, in this time this is a bright spot in a sea of what seems to be darkness never-ending," Lawson said during the ceremony in the auditorium of the school at Fort Jackson in South Carolina.

"In a time when we are faced with political polarization, racial unrest, a pandemic and economic uncertainty, it's good to have something to celebrate and to take our minds off of what is going on, if for only for a moment."

The hour long ceremony began with the playing of a recording of "The Star-Spangled Banner" and ended with those gathered in person singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," also known as the Black national anthem.

Lawson spoke on the historic occasion of "the sin of racism" and the need for "heartfelt, heart-changing dialogue."

"I know many of you are saying 'What does race, race relations and racism have to do with you being promoted?'" she said. "Well, just in case you didn't figure it out, it took us 245 years for this moment to happen."

The Scripture reading, from the book of Isaiah, included the words: “but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint.”

Earlier in the ceremony, before the eagle insignia were attached to the shoulders of her uniform to symbolize Lawson’s promotion to colonel, Army Chief of Chaplains (Maj. Gen.) Thomas Solhjem encouraged Lawson to empower those beneath her to succeed.

“You’re being recognized today not because you are a Black female,” he said. “But you are being recognized today because you have exhibited to a board of what will soon be your peers and those superior that you have the potential to lead in this United States Army Chaplain Corps.”

After Solhjem led her in an oath to the Constitution, the two exchanged elbow bumps instead of handshakes, in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

Lawson, a native of Five Points, Alabama, is a graduate of Spelman College, a historically Black women’s college in Atlanta, and a recipient of a Master of Divinity degree from Turner Theological Seminary, the AME Church’s school on the campus of Atlanta’s Interdenominational Theological Center.

Her military assignments include serving as a battalion chaplain at Fort Story, Virginia, and Fort Jackson; a family life chaplain at Fort Knox, Kentucky; a command chaplain at Fort Bragg, North Carolina; and a deputy Pentagon chaplain.

In her remarks, Lawson paid tribute to several men and women who were among the earliest Black or female military chaplains or colonels in the chaplain corps. They paved the way for her, she said.

“Too many times when people write history, we tend to leave out the history of those who made it possible for us to

achieve our historic moments,” she said.

“I wanted to allow the world to see that you can make history and still embrace the history of other people. Acknowledging other people’s accomplishments, regardless of race, religion or gender, does not diminish your accomplishments.” {eoa}

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