

UW Alumni Association: Two Veterans Day stories

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A Veterans Day Salute: Marcella Ng

Remembering a UW-Madison alumna who became the first Black woman aviator in the military

On this Veterans Day, the Wisconsin Foundation and Alumni Association salutes the thousands of UW alumni who served our nation. Marcella Hayes Ng is one of those veterans. The 1978 UW-Madison grad became the first Black woman aviator in U.S. military history.

The northern Missouri native came to UW-Madison in the fall of 1974. In the spring semester, she began training in the ROTC program — and she excelled. Her love of marching band and group formations translated perfectly to the team drills and regimen of ROTC life. That and her competitive nature and experience with literally tackling whatever came her way made her a standout.

In 1977, Ng was selected for advanced camp in Fort Riley, Kansas, where she continued to impress. In a physical training test involving five different events, Ng earned 497 out of 500 possible points. After her graduation from the UW in 1978, Ng was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the United States Army. She headed off to flight school at Fort Rucker, Alabama, in 1979. In November that year, Ng completed her flight training and qualified as a helicopter pilot, becoming the first Black female aviator in the U.S. military.

She married Dennis Ng, one of her classmates. They have now been married for 42 years. They were assigned to the Army Married Officers Couple Program in Germany, attached to the 394th Transportation Battalion. Ng became the first Black

officer, the first female officer, and the first female aviator within her unit in Germany. Ng eventually became the commander of the 49th Transportation Battalion at Fort Hood, Texas. She retired from the military as a lieutenant colonel in 2000 after 22 years of military service and stayed in the area with Dennis and their three children.

Wisconsin patriot established Veterans Day

World War I veteran made serving other veterans his lifelong mission

In 1915, Harvey Higley graduated from the University of Wisconsin. Just two years later, the life of this Marinette County native changed forever when the United States declared war on Germany, entering into World War I.

Higley, a chemical engineer, walked out of private employment and entered service in the greatest conflict the world had known. He served in France, and for the rest of his life, one of his greatest concerns was caring for his fellow veterans. He served as secretary of veterans affairs under President Dwight Eisenhower, and among Higley's lasting achievements was establishing Veterans Day as a national holiday.

Higley believed that the nation owed its veterans for their sacrifice. "The contract between the government and those men — it has to be paid," he said. Higley came home to Wisconsin after the Great War and worked at Ansul Chemical, a Marinette firm that manufactures fire extinguishers. He served as the company's president from 1938 to 1948.

A lifelong Republican, Higley rose to national prominence with Eisenhower's election as president in 1952. From 1953 to 1957, Higley served in the cabinet, guiding policy during the period when the country had more veterans than at any other time: after both World War II and the Korean War. Higley considered it his mission to protect the rights of those veterans — for their good and for the good of America. He was especially determined to see that they received benefits in education. "The GI Bill has been of inestimable value to a very large number of veterans," he said, "and this country has gained materially due to the GI Bill of Rights."

Eisenhower was impressed with Higley's efforts to stand up for the rights of African American veterans. "I greatly appreciate your report on the success of the Veterans Administration program to eliminate segregation in all VA hospitals and domiciliaries," he wrote to Higley. "You and all who cooperated with you in this

program are to be highly commended.”

In 1954, Higley helped lead the charge to create a national holiday to honor all veterans. Working with Congressman Ed Rees of Kansas, he worked to pass a bill that changed the name of Armistice Day — which celebrated the end of World War I — to Veterans Day, a “day dedicated to the cause of world peace.”