



Fires Center of Excellence
Public Affairs Office
Fort Sill, Oklahoma
Phone (580)-442-2521
After Duty Hours (580)-917-7960

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Fort Sill, community leaders sign Black History Month proclamation

FORT SILL, Oklahoma (Feb. 4, 2021) -- Diversity is the Army's strength, said Brig. Gen. John Rafferty, director of the Long Range Precision Fires Cross Functional Team. "From private to brigadier general, I've seen diverse organizations accomplish the most amazing things under the most difficult and dangerous circumstances."

Rafferty was a speaker at the Fires Center of Excellence (FCoE) and Fort Sill Black History Month proclamation signing ceremony Feb. 1, at the Patriot Club. Dozens of post leaders, Soldiers, and community members attended the morning ceremony.

In his invocation, Installation Senior Chaplain (Col.) Robert Glazener said: "Eternal God ... open our eyes that we may first see the character of a person and not the color of their skin, give us strength to stand and speak for those who have no voice, and let our nation be a nation where all people are equal."

Kenneth Emerson, Directorate of Plans, Training, Mobilization, and Security operations specialist, welcomed the audience. "Black History Month gives our nation a chance to examine, remember, and honor the contributions African-Americans have made toward the building of our nation and making real the principles that America was founded upon."

During the ceremony, Rafferty; Will Scott Jr., Lawton Branch NAACP president; Lawton Mayor Stan Booker; Shirna Scott, National Pan Hellenic Council of Lawton-Fort Sill president; Dr. John McArthur, Cameron University president; Bishop John Dunaway, Lawton Ministerial Alliance president; and Kevin Hime, Lawton Public Schools superintendent, signed the proclamation.

Rafferty said signing the proclamation “is an opportunity for us to sign up to work. It’s a recognition that we’re not where we need to be yet as a country, as an Army, as a society.

“It may take us awhile to get there, but we are going to do it together,” he said.

“The proclamation today is further evidence of the fantastic Lawton Fort Sill community team that we have,” Rafferty said.

The general recognized the Lawton Chapter of the 9th and 10th Cavalry Buffalo Soldiers.

“It’s not only a fantastic historic service organization, but one that also pays tribute to one of our most historic units,” Rafferty said.

In 1866, Congress established cavalry units of Black Soldiers many of whom had had been former slaves, he said. “This very post was founded, secured, and established by Soldiers of the 10th Cavalry Regiment.”

Buffalo Soldiers continued to serve in the frontier Army, and in the Indian wars, and places overseas, like San Juan Hill in the Spanish American War in Cuba; and the Philippines, he said.

“They set the establishment of Black units in World War I.”

One of those historic units in The Great War was the 369th Infantry “The Mighty Harlem Hellfighters,” who spent more continuous days in sustained combat than other American unit, Rafferty said.

Still, that wasn’t enough to show the Army that it needed to be integrated, Rafferty said.

In World War II, it took a presidential executive action to establish a Black flying unit -- the Tuskegee Airmen. They were in the 99th Fighter Squadron, which was commanded by Capt. Benjamin O. Davis Jr.

Davis had graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1936, where he had endured the “silent treatment” for four years, Rafferty said. “Can you imagine the effect it had on a young man?”

When he graduated he was one of two Black officers in the Army. The other was his father Col. Benjamin O. Davis Sr.

In 1948, again it took an executive action, this time by President Harry S Truman, to set a course to integrate the Army.

Yet, Soldiers serving in the South were subjected to cruelty established by local laws, Rafferty said.

Soldiers were on the front lines to ensure the school integration rules established by Brown v. Board of Education in 1954; and laws of the Civil Rights Act 1964 were protected and put into action, he said.

“All those opponents of integrating the Army are nobody,” Rafferty said. “They are swept into the dustpan of history.

“As we go forward we still have progress to make, we still have goals we need to establish for ourselves and meet with respect to diversity and equality of opportunity in our Army,” he said.

Lawton Mayor Stan Booker said the city would also be signing a Black History Month proclamation next week. Part of it will honor the late Dr. Charles Whitlow, a longtime pastor in the community.

Since he became mayor a couple years ago, Booker said the city has established the Citizen Advisory Board, where people work with the Lawton police chief to keep the lines of communication open.

“We’re already seeing the effectiveness of that,” Booker.

At the next city council meeting, Lawton will begin the Mayor’s Committee on Race Relations, Booker said. “That’s designed to keep the conversation going to take us to the future.”

The study of history is important, the mayor said.

“We must understand history to ensure that we do not repeat it,” Booker said. “We must understand history to celebrate the milestones and successes that we’ve had bringing us along to the present.”

Booker proceeded to read the proclamation.

“... where as Black History Month will continue to emphasize to all Oklahomans and the nation the significant contributions made by African-Americans to the progress of our great state.”

Afterward, Rafferty presented the signers of the proclamation with FCoE pen sets made of various woods to symbolize diversity.

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Editor’s Note:

For any questions pertaining to Fort Sill please contact Fires Center of Excellence Public Affairs office at 580-442-6270 or 580-442-2521.