

“Storytelling is one of the most primary conditions of human learning and growth.” – Opalanga Pugh

HAVE YOU HEARD? SPREAD THE WORD!

By DJ Montoya
1st Space Brigade



Opalanga receives a framed One Star Note and Coin from COL Michael Yowell, commander of the 100th Missile Defense Brigade (GMD), for her participation in this year’s USASMDC/ARSTRAT Black History Month Observance.

PETERSON AIR FORCE BASE, Colo. – This year’s Black History Month Observance at U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command/Army Force Strategic Command Operations was a collaborative effort between the command, Team Buckley and the Colorado National Guard. To that end, a program of “African-American” storytelling and dance was offered up to an audience in the training rooms of USASMDC/ARSTRAT’s Building 3.

Opalanga D. Pugh, a widely known storyteller, kicked-off the program with her unique brand of personal development, a vehicle for education and a force for social change.

“Storytelling is one of the most primary conditions of human learning and growth,” says Pugh.

“Some of our most basic lessons have come through stories and the power of the narrative. Story telling is group experience, everyone gets to play because we all have a story to tell,” and to go along with that, Opalanga – as she is often called – enlisted the audience of military, civilians and contractors in a combination of song and narrative to relate the history of African culture with its eventual enslavement and migration to America.

At times Opalanga utilized two African native instruments, one which is called in some parts a kalimba, “or as we would refer to it here at Peterson, an African thumb piano.” The other was a hollow ornate gourd.

She touched upon what she called “slavery to Space” with historic personages such as scientist George Washington Carver to Astronaut Mae C. Jemison to mention a few.

“You know how they say that necessity is the mother of invention, so it should be no surprise that there have actually been so many ‘African-American’ inventions.”

Renowned storyteller Opalanga D. Pugh, plays a “kalimba” while weaving a tale of African life, slavery, and triumph before an audience at USASMD/ARSTRAT Operations headquarters during a Black History Month Observance. *Photos by DJ Montoya*



RIGHT: Member of Oluwaseyi, an African folk dancer troupe, receive crystal vases after their performance. Left to right: Jataun Meadows, Angela Boyce and Lisa Watkins.



Opalanga never lost sight of the numerous contributions blacks have played in this country’s military.

“The story of the relationships of blacks in the military has evolved over history. And the history of ‘African-Americans’ spans from the arrival of the first enslaved Africans during the colonial history of this country with the death of Crispus Attucks which set off the Revolutionary War.”

“But there has been no war fought within or without the United States in which ‘African-Americans’ did not participate. From the Revolutionary War to the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, the World Wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War and the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.”

COL Todd Day, chief of G-3 Plans Division, echoed this with his remarks on this year’s theme: The quest for Black Citizenship in America.

He read the exploits of one William Harvey Carney which embodied this quest. Carney, born Feb. 29, 1840 – died Dec. 8, 1908, was an American Civil War Soldier and the first African-American to earn the Medal of Honor, though he was not presented with the honor until nearly 37 years after his act of bravery.

Carney served with the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry as a sergeant and took part in the July 18, 1863, assault on Fort Wagner in Charleston, S.C. He received his medal for saving the American flag and planting it on the parapet and although wounded, holding it while the troops charged. But recognizing the Federal troops had to retreat under fire, and with covering fire by only one white Soldier of the 101st New York, Carney struggled back across the battlefield, and although wounded twice more, returned the flag to the Union lines.

“When asked about his heroic actions that made him the first Black Soldier to receive the Medal of Honor he simply said, ‘I only did my duty,’” recounted Day.

The program concluded with a traditional West African dance performed by Oluwaseyi (God made that) an African folk dancer troupe consisting of Angela Boyce, Lisa Watkins and Jataun Meadows.

COL Michael Yowell, commander of the 100th Missile Defense Brigade (GMD) closed the ceremony by saying, “Americans have recognized Black History since 1926 on an annual basis, first as “Negro History Week” and later as “Black History Month.”

“What you might not know is that Black History had barely begun to be studied – or even documented – when the tradition originated here in the United States. Although blacks have been in America at least as far back as colonial times, it was not until the 20th century that they gained a respectable presence in the history books.”

“I invite you to make this observance more than just a ritual, something more than a ceremonial occasion that we get together on once a year. I’d like you to relate the conditions of the present to those of the past as Opalanga has taught us.

“This year in particular is a time for reflection and to call to action. Over the years we have held many celebrations to honor the contributions of ‘African-Americans’ to the rich history of our nation. These contributions include accomplishments that have enhanced the quality of life for everyone. However, as we have learned today too, we can no longer just celebrate the past, unless we also focus on the future. Once we understand why disparities exist, we can begin to wipe them out. We can’t change history, but we can change the present to impact the future.”