

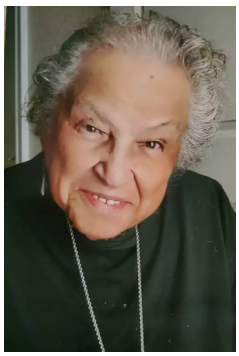

Doris “Lucki” Allen 1927-2024

Army intelligence specialist Doris “Lucki” Allen found out from her network of sources that the Tet Offensive was coming, and even knew the date. So, she filed a report from her Saigon office and waited for officers to take defensive measures.
She was still waiting when 50,000 enemy troops representing the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong forces mounted an attack exactly as she had warned, during the lunar New Year holiday at the end of January 1968.

Allen quickly deduced that her report hadn’t been taken seriously because she was just an enlisted soldier who was also a woman — and a Black woman, at that. But she did not turn bitter. She kept those intelligence reports coming and was credited with saving enough lives during the Vietnam War to earn her induction to the Military Intelligence Hall of Fame.

A career soldier, Allen lived in Oakland both before she volunteered for duty in Vietnam and after she retired at the rank of Chief Warrant Officer 3 in 1980. She came home with three Bronze Star Medals, for valor in a combat zone, and entered another dangerous field, as a private investigator in Oakland.
She would not talk about her work but was open to long discussions about the war and the Army, often while entertaining fellow Black female veterans at her home on Outlook Avenue in the Oakland Hills. They would sit on the patio or poolside on long afternoons watching the sun go down and twinkling bay lights come up, which is about as long as it took her to spin just one chapter out of her amazing life story.

“She was a messenger of hope and justice, and you’d never get bored listening to her,” said Jonelyn Whales, an Oakland Air Force veteran who often sat with Allen. “Due to her background in military intelligence she could just absorb information and recall it. She used to always tell me that everything she said was factual and I could look it up in Wikipedia. I would say 98% of the time she was correct.”
When the COVID pandemic hit, Allen, who lived alone and had mobility issues, made the decision to sell her house in the hills and move to an apartment in an assisted living complex.
Her death, June 11 at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Oakland, was announced on her lengthy biography page at the Military Intelligence Hall of Fame. She was 97.

“Dr. Lucki was my favorite human being in the world,” said Eurydice Stanley, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who met Allen through the National Association of Black Military Women. “She was so full of life. She never allowed anything to keep her down and was the embodiment of empowerment.”

Because Allen had been the first woman to graduate from the Prisoner of War Interrogation Course in the U.S. Army Intelligence School and had been the first black woman since the Civil War era to make the Military Intelligence Hall of Fame, she was often a featured speaker at association conventions, making new friends that way.

Doris Ilda Allen was born May 9, 1927, in El Paso, Texas, where she grew up. Both she and her older sister Jewel were musicians, and at some point a bandmate noticed that whenever something bad happened to Jewel something equally good happened to Doris. On the spot they were "Jinx" and "Lucky," nicknames that stayed with both of them through careers in the Army, which included time living together in Oakland.

Lucki, as she chose to spell it, earned the "Dr.," honorific by completing her Ph.D. in psychology at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, after she retired from the service. She was there from 1981-85 and, as was her way, still came by the school years after graduation.

"She was a notable figure. You knew it when she was in the building," said Wright Institute President Peter Dybwad. "She had a strong personality." Sometimes the receptionist would buzz and say, "Doris is here." That was a signal for him to stop whatever he was doing, because Allen would soon impart a life lesson he likely had not yet learned.

"She was a keen observer of life," he said. "Whatever the story was, it was smart."

This was made apparent in "A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of 26 Women Who Served in Vietnam," published in 1986 by Oakland author Keith Walker. In it, Allen recounted how she enlisted in the Women's Army Corps in 1950, and could have come in as an officer because she had a college degree from Tuskegee University and was employed as a schoolteacher.

But she chose to do it the hard way, working her way up through the non-commissioned ranks, which was an extra challenge because of her sex and race. She first encountered Army racism when she tried out to play trumpet in the WAC Band and passed the audition only to be told that no Black women would be accepted.

Instead she was made an entertainment specialist and performed in shows that toured bases. Her introduction to the Bay Area came when she played a concert with André Previn at the Presidio of San Francisco. Wanting to advance her rank, she attended language school in Monterey and switched her specialty to military intelligence, and was selected to interrogate POWs, making her the first Black woman to do so.

In 1967, at age 40, Allen volunteered for Vietnam "not to fight and not to shoot guns and not to kill people, but I looked at it that my intelligence would save lives as opposed to taking lives," she told the author Walker.

Allen was the only woman on a troop airplane that flew out of Travis Air Force Base and arrived at Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon on Oct. 14. She rose to the position of specialist-7 and was assigned to the Army Operations Center Headquarters in Long Binh.

As Allen recalled it in "Piece of My Heart," she had heard the word Tet and had no idea about the lunar holiday. She relied on her own field sources and her detailed notes and other reports to file a paper called "50,000 Chinese."

"What it said was 'we had better get our stuff together because this is what is facing us, this is what is going to happen, and it's going to happen on such-and-such a day,' around such-and-such a time."

She was wrong about the Chinese but right about everything else. The coordinated attack came out of Hanoi starting on Jan. 30, 1968, and hit a number of military targets in South Vietnam simultaneously. American and South Vietnamese forces sustained heavy losses before the assault was repelled nine months later.

Historians credit Tet as the episode that turned American public opinion against the war and convinced President Johnson not to seek reelection.

After her warning about Tet was disregarded, Allen followed it up with a report stating that a convoy should not be sent out due to possible ambush. Again her warning was disregarded, and again it ended in disaster. The ambush happened and five trucks were blown up, leaving five American dead and 19 wounded.

After that her reports were taken more seriously. Allen ended up spending three years in-country and rejected offers to be transferred stateside five times.

“There was a togetherness in Vietnam you wouldn’t believe,” she later said. “Most of the prejudices, for a while, went away.”

She probably would have kept rejecting offers to return to the U.S., but when she saw her name on a captured enemy document listing her as a person to be eliminated, she started carrying a loaded .45 caliber pistol, against regulations for WACs.

“It really got kind of scary,” she said. “I was getting skittish, getting nervous, and I might have blown somebody’s head off.”

Before that could happen, she went back home — accepting a transfer to be an instructor at the Army Intelligence School, first at Fort Holabird in Maryland and then at Fort Huachuca in Arizona, site of the Military Intelligence Hall of Fame.

Along the way, Allen had been stationed at the Oakland Army Base and in 1968, Lucki and Jinx bought the house in the hills where they would live full time after both retired from the Army. Jinx died in 2009, at age 85.

At age 60, Allen was out riding her moped when she was hit by an airport van. She was seriously injured and ended up requiring the aid of a cane or scooter, but still she got around.

In 2014, Allen published “Three Days Past Yesterday: A Black Woman’s Journey Through Incredibility,” a collection of prose and poetry relating to her time in Vietnam. She was active as a church mother at the City of Refuge United Church of Christ, and was always available to talk.

Among those who spoke to her, vet-to-vet, was Lt. Col. Quewanncoii Stephens, Sr. who taught military science at West Virginia State University and had been an Army Ranger who was seriously wounded in combat during the Tet Offensive that Allen had warned her superiors about.

“She carried the burden of those losses, even though they were not her fault, for the rest of her life,” said Stanley, who is the daughter of Stephens and used to patch him through on long telephone calls to Allen and listen in. Her Vietnam experiences were recorded for posterity by the Library of Congress, and are available on its web site.

“Dr. Lucki was brilliant, sharp as a tack, and had an incredible wit,” Stanley said. “There is so much still to learn from her.”