

A tropical landscape featuring several tall palm trees with fronds blowing in the wind. In the foreground, there is a body of water, possibly a lagoon or a flooded area, with some low-lying vegetation and a small wooden structure partially submerged. The sky is filled with dramatic, grey clouds, suggesting an overcast or stormy day. The overall scene conveys a sense of a remote, natural environment.

GDF WOMEN'S ARMY CORP LOST HISTORY

The purpose of this publication is to highlight, record and archive a significant portion of the history of Guyana's Women's Army Corp which is seldom recounted in its entirety and if at all, with accuracy.



FORCE Commander Col. Pilgrim accompanied by Platoon Commander 2Lt. V. Mentis is seen inspecting the winning platoon which comprised female soldiers drawn from Infantry Brigade, Infantry Training Command and Support Weapons Command.

2nd Lieutenant Verian Mentis wins first ever inter-service all-female drill competition inspecting platoon with Force Commander Ulric B. Pilgrim, 1978

The Women's Army Corps, itself, is iconic for being the first of its kind in the English Speaking neighboring region and full credit must be given to the initial batch of commissioned and non commissioned females whose service laid the foundation for its subsequent accomplishments.

Indeed, the service of every female soldier has contributed to the longevity and success of this female body.

But there is a particular period of this military existence that is repeatedly excluded when its evolution is recounted –an exclusion that significantly reduces the totality of this Corps' accomplishments and takes away from the women who served in the novel capacities of this 'lost era' which, undisputedly, adds a richness to the nation's chronicles.

As Guyanese around the world join in hailing the fiftieth year of their country's Women's Army Corps in 2017, it is imperative that they know of this piece of its history, of the contribution of these women that will forever add exceptional value to this arm of the country's Military.

By the time the Women's Army Corps was formed in 1967, the tone of politics in the country was to challenge imperialism in general and hegemony in particular.

Politics was in metamorphosis.

Chief of Staff Brigadier Clarence Price's visit to Yugoslavia and Israel shortly thereafter was, partly, to look at how these armies had incorporated

enlisted women into non administrative areas.

In 1970, three years after the forming of this body, then Prime Minister Forbes Burnham, already a regional political maverick, proclaimed the country a Cooperative Republic and embraced a politics that saw him pledging membership to the Non Aligned Movement, supporting the African Liberation Struggle and forging an alliance with Cuba.

These were all declared to be political actions that were strategic to the protection of the nation's



Prime Minister Forbes Burnham with President Fidel Castro Circa 1970's

sovereignty, its defense against threats of invasion from bordering neighbors and the implementation of an orientation of self reliance and self sufficiency.

The political barometer had shifted to the left with defiant definity.

Guyana was now part of a fraternity that had armies which included Female Commissioned and Non Commissioned ranks and in capacities that were not always in the traditional administrative or operational categories.

1975 offered more opportunity for statement.

The United Nations declared it International Women's Year and Women's Equality became a more visible and vocal part of the country's Social Revolution.

At the Women's Conference in Mexico that year, Guyana's Dr. Shirley Field- Ridley, then Minister of Information and Culture- in a paraphrased version- proclaimed that part of the Nation's thrust into Socialism was to solve the problem of unequal footing for

women; a sentiment echoed by Vilma Espin, wife of Raul Castro of Cuba – a country that Burnham was looking to for ideological inspiration.

It was with this vision in mind that Prime Minister Burnham had commissioned the recruitment of females into the Guyana Defence Force in 1967, when he said he gave an instruction to then Chief of Staff, Colonel Ronald Pope, that women should get first choice for traditional female roles but should know that they are soldiers and should be able to do everything the men did and possibly better.

Standard Officer Cadet Course Six of 1976 presented the stage for this challenge.

For the first time in the history of the country's military, women were selected from amongst the applicants to attend an Officer Cadet Course and proceeded on the rigorous six month training program, alongside their male counterparts.

The Guyana National Service, created in 1974, was, hardly coincidentally, expanding its mission and selected its highest number of Cadets to be trained as Commissioned Officers during this same year. This batch of trainees joined the sixth locally trained batch of Officer Cadets.

Standard Officer Cadet Course Six was, therefore, historic in size and composition, having been tailored to fit the political imperative that had become the overarching governing policy of the day.

Positioning women in nontraditional military roles was a sharp visual and a perceived carriage to overcoming the discrimination, sexism and oppression that came with the portfolio of the traditional woman.

Fidel Castro is famously remembered for this exchange : "How can we give rifles to women when there are so many men who are unarmed?", asked some of the men. "Because they are better soldiers than you are", Fidel replied. "More disciplined."

With Cuba as one of Burnham's political Muses, the women on Course Six went on to create expanded boundaries for females in the military; becoming part of the underpinning for the revolutionary transformation of women in Guyana's society.

So, though the Women's Army Corps of the Guyana Defence Force began in 1967, it can never be celebrated without revisiting the year 1976 and the input and impact of the Women of Officer Cadet Course Six who established additional pillars of history for the country.

1976 could have been singularly momentous.

It was a time of increased saber rattling by aggressive neighbors making territorial claims to the country and a time when Prime Minister Burnham was recalibrating politics to increase the awareness and readiness of Guyanese to defend their sovereignty. His shift in political orientation was palpable, as slogans consonant with socialist rhetoric consumed the nation. It was the era of 'every citizen a soldier'... 'molding the new Guyana man.'

The Military's Education Corps, formed in 1971, was expanded in 1976 with the intake of education professionals and the army was given a '60% education 40% soldiering' -(some recall 70/30)- mandate where education included teaching a specific political ideology. The Guyana People's Militia, the support body to the Military, was established in December of that year, too.

With this ostentatious expansion of the military canopy in 1976, it was fitting that in December of that year, Course Six, the largest class of Officer Cadets up until then, was commissioned, in keeping with Prime Minister Burnham's resolute march to Socialism.

And from this class came the six female graduates; the first women to successfully complete the grueling demands of Officer Cadet training alongside their male counterparts.

This accomplishment was singularly historic, as were the ensuing appointments that several of them held.

Yet, the historical narrative fails to capture how their success proved the capacity of women to elevate beyond the traditional administrative fields to representation in *all* military occupations.

Down playing this era of WAC history doesn't only bury the groundbreaking achievements of the female graduates of Course Six but it fails to highlight how their training propelled several of them into roles that had never been occupied by Female Officers, ever.

In this respect, the vision of Prime Minister Burnham was a success and should be immortalized for its contribution to shifting the tenor of women's service to their country.

Here are some of the trailblazing achievements; the standouts of the Female Officers who graduated from Course Six:

2nd Lieutenant Joyce Smith, Graduate Standard Officer Cadet Course 6, 1976:

Joyce has the distinction of being the first Female Officer, in the country's military, to conduct Basic Training/ Recruit Course in Tacama.

It was an appointment to which she brought her much needed experience and expertise as a former school teacher; approaching classroom sessions understanding that learning was done at an individual pace. She also brought her phenomenal athleticism- a gift that kept her in the higher percentile of physical training during Cadet Course.



2nd Lieutenant Joyce Smith at Commissioning Parade
Dec. 1976 (behind 2nd Lieutenant Christiani in Green)

Joyce was a phenom at the rifle ranges, often leaving the day's exercise as the person with the 'most hits' - outdoing both men and women.

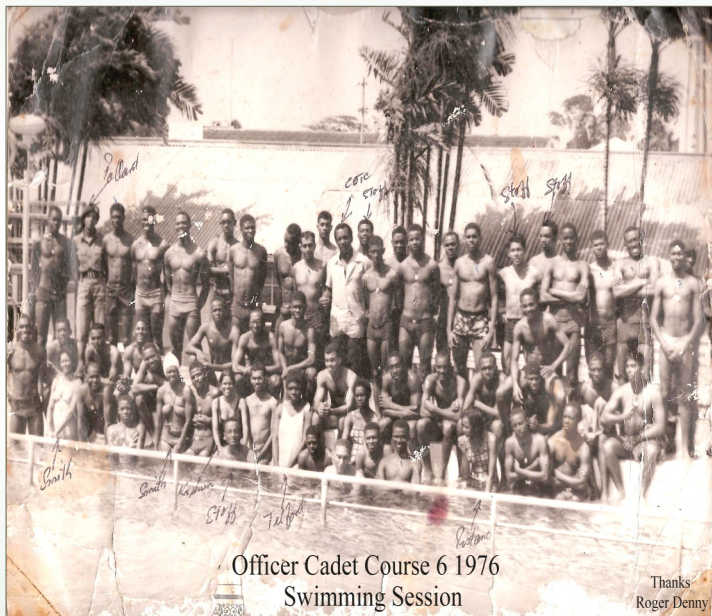
And, at a time when the role of Female Officers was strictly Administrative, when their typical form of dress was Olive Greens, Joyce was demonstrating that Female Officers could be equally as effective in positions traditionally held by men, wearing field khakis.

2nd Lieutenant Paulette Pollard, Graduate Standard Officer Cadet Course 6, 1976:

Paulette's passion was nutrition and finding a way to incorporate the country's rich vegetable and greens variety into the diet of soldiers - a diet she experienced, first hand, as a Cadet.

She was particularly interested in improving cooking and food service standards and on ensuring that the compensation for cooks was commensurate with their responsibility for improving the readiness of soldiers by keeping them healthy through their diet.

Paulette was assigned to Catering Corps with the remit of looking into Messing standards and the injection of requisite nutritional content into the soldier's diet.



2nd Lieutenant Jasoda Kishun, Graduate Standard Officer Cadet Course 6, 1976:

After leaving her job as a high school teacher to enroll in the *very first* batch of National Service Trainees, Jasoda made national history as the first Female Officer to be commissioned by the Guyana National Service.

She was a dogged contender during her Cadet training, proving that stature is no indication or match for determination.

After her Commission, she was assigned to Papaya where she oversaw the implementation of training

programs for non commissioned ranks.

She later became the first female Executive Officer of Guyana National Service, working under, then, Deputy Director General.



2nd Lieutenant Jasoda Kishun Green National Service Uniform
Commissioning Parade 1976

2nd Lieutenant Bridget Smith, Graduate Standard Officer Cadet Course 6, 1976:

Bridget came to the Cadet Course while serving as the Personal Executive Assistant to then Chief of Staff, Clarence Price.

Though her background was Administrative, it never impeded her resolve to be an able contender amongst the rest. She brought a discipline and determination to training that many of her peers drew from; with her often encouraging them to place dignity ahead of defeat.

After her commission, Bridget resumed her role as Personal Assistant to the Chief of Staff where, she was so famous for her efficiency, she was often spoken of as 'managing' her boss.



Officer Cadet Bridget Smith 3rd from right



Pilot Trainee Marilyn Telford (left) with colleague Barbara Adams during helicopter training in UK 1976

2nd Lieutenant Marilyn Telford, Graduate Standard Officer Cadet Course 6, 1976:

Marilyn has the distinction of being one of the first two Guyanese women to be selected to attend Helicopter Pilot Training at Oxford Air Training School in England – where they were the first women trainees, ever - but developed an unfortunate vision problem before graduation.

Recognizing that she was an intrepid contender, she was offered the opportunity to be amongst the first female Officer Cadet Trainees, to which she brought her singular excellence.

Her pragmatism won her assignment to Base Command, Ayangana, where she worked in a variety of Administrative positions, along with her seniors, to improve Administrative services for Commissioned and Non Commissioned ranks.

She was known for taking the preference - pulse of ranks so that, as far as possible, recreational programs and purchase decisions could be made with their desires in mind.

To Marilyn's credit, she is remembered not only as the Officer who did the job but as the person who did the job with the commitment and resolve that remains her signature.

2nd Lieutenant Verian Mentis, Graduate Standard Officer Cadet Course 6, 1976:

Verian holds the distinction of being the first Female Officer, in the country's Military, to conduct Trained Soldiers Course at Camp Acouri in Madewini.

She understood that the hard skills of military leadership were the backbone of the course but felt that there were certain soft skills that would enhance the leader; even at the junior level of Lance Corporal and Corporal.

She appended oral and written communication along with listening skills and analysis to the Trained Soldier's curriculum; added group discussion and speech making and encouraged Trainees to always think of presenting solutions to their superiors when seeking guidance on matters that were not dictated by strict protocol - radically transforming classroom sessions while garnishing a heightened level of interest and enthusiasm from participants.

Verian, also, holds the distinction of being the First Female Executive Officer of Training Command, the First Female Officer stationed at Support Weapons Command and the First Female Officer stationed at Farm Corps.



2nd Lieutenant Verian Mentis being commissioned by President Arthur Chung Dec.1976

And amongst her many accomplishments, Verian is, also, the first Female Officer to win an Inter Service, all female, Drill Competition 1978 ... a competition that had amongst its judges the first female Senior Superintendent of Police, Elaine Harper.

The history made by these military women as Officer Cadets and subsequently, Commissioned Officers, does not only reflect individual achievements but marks the point at which the Women's Army Corps shed its traditional role and leapt to that level of service capability that Prime Minister Burnham had envisioned for women in the country's fighting force.

Part of what has become the history of the Course Six is the synergy that was its unexpected byproduct.

There were two givens.

One was that males inherently have a physical advantage over females. The other was that course standards were not going to be compromised.

Though there was minimal adjustment to accommodate the physiological gender difference, the program kept pace, pushing everyone- women and men- beyond their limits. With women being placed in each section of the two platoons, there was an unspoken realization that achievement was a collective and not an individual reward.

Interface became routine as was cohort activity, all of which helped to identify the level of contribution of each cadet. Early morning physical training, rushed meals, countless weapons qualification classes, vibrant discussions on topics of the day, humor, impromptu talent shows and organized hang outs during stand down forged a kinship, as men and women pushed their brains and bodies to the hilt every day, in an environment that was not created to forgive.

It was this bonding together that carried many over the finish line; that developed a camaraderie that was singularly unique and was filtered and subsequently patented to become *Sixpritdecorps*.

In the end the six women who successfully completed Course Six demonstrated that females should be allowed to prove themselves based on their abilities and not their gender.



Historical Article Women's Inter –Service Drill Competition
Guyana Chronicle 1978

That Course Six resembled the composition of armies in the Non Aligned Movement is no coincidence.

Having taken that sharp political left, there was need to manifest changes in government machinery- the biggest piece of which was the military.

By this time, the essentiality of power was the grammar of politics and training female officers showed both power and partnership with Castro's rhetoric : *A people whose women fight alongside men are a people that is invincible*.

Training female Cadets, therefore, was a strategic trifecta; a purposed endeavor which conferred a

legitimacy on political leadership, governing ideology and the country's military.

This made the women of Course Six more than symbolic.

Their impact on the body politic served as a functional testimony to Burnham's declared allegiance to an ideology that was of the Socialist stripe.

Following the lead of other Non Aligned Movement Heads of State he had rhetoricised that there was potential for women in combat and the success of the women of Course Six provided the validation that he had only envisaged.

That it was subsequently decided that women were satisfied with traditional occupations and efforts to steer them into roles that were not parallel with the political revolution was abandoned, is a reflection on the change in politics, on the evaluation of those who made that determination and *not* on the capacity of women to complete the grueling demands of field training.

The pioneering efforts of the Women of Course Six have set a bar that will forever remain the history of the female arm of the country's military. They responded to the rigors of training within the boundaries of their physicality. A six mile run remained a six mile run, as was running with the weight of kit and the General Purpose Machine Gun.

But what didn't remain the same was genders operating as individual entities - for both realized that it was the combined effort of both men and women that determined success.

This was the ultimate intention of Prime Minister Burnham.

EPILOGUE

Historical amnesia is not typically an affliction but more of a conscious decision to prune the record in order to perpetuate a preferred recall.

That this careful selectivity suggests some sort of bias is a given.

The speculation is why.

I have long been curious as to why the commemoration of Women in the Guyana Defence Force seems anchored in the original entrants and cherry picks its way through specific personnel- really doing a disservice to those who look to history to measure progress and com-

pare success.

Static and preferential history is antithetic to *both* progress and success; confining memory to a chosen period and select individuals.

The accomplishments of the Course Six women came during the era of a blossoming Third World and a transformational ideology - when success at unconventionalism was a significant measure of progress and a momentous milestone.

This makes their contribution particularly pertinent.

Shoving history out as a set narrative suggests that the past can be synthesized into a standardized memoir of selected snippets or even a manipulated oral recount in the absence of hard records; except that in the Guyana Defence Force there was a Records Department ... and the part these women played in transforming tradition in the military and the country as a whole is more than just oral history.

At this time of recount on the Women's Army Corps, we should be more careful than ever about perpetuating stereotypes.

The *À la Carte* realities so often showcased as its history in toto interrupts the continuum that provided unmatched opportunities for women, created by a politics that discarded the usual prejudices and taboos.

And, churning out the same excerpts of its history during opportunities to show the ground breaking role this female body has played in advancing the lot of women in the national context tends to make it all very anecdotal.

It may be inadvertence that reduced the narrative of the first females to ever graduate alongside male counterparts in a locally run Officer Cadet course into three lines of recall, in a segment of what is represented as the Military's history.

But it will be gross dereliction and a national disservice to celebrate the Jubilee Year of this female body without making the correction by underscoring and duly publicizing these calcified legacies of the Women of Standard Officer Cadet Course 6, 1976.

This document has been prepared expressly for this purpose and will be submitted to local manuscript repositories to become a part of the community's collective memory.

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the Socialist goals of the
nation."

After the completion of
the course some of the
female officers will return
to their units and others
will be sent out as field
officers, as part of Army's
move to station women
soldiers in hinterland
areas.

Wednesday, May 19, 1976

Excerpt from article in Guyana Chronicle on political mission for historic Female Graduates from Course 6, 1976 subsequently fulfilled by 2nd Lieutenant Verian Mentis and 2nd Lieutenant Joyce Smith.



THESE TWO teenage girls have become the first women to train as helicopter pilots at the Oxford Air Training School, Kidlington.

2 Guyanese first women helicopter pilots in training

Two Guyanese girls will soon make history in Guyana by becoming the first female Guyanese helicopter pilots.

They are 18-year-old Barbara Adams, of Georgetown, and 19-year-old Marlyn Telford of Essequibo.

The girls who are cadets of the Guyana Defence Force, are among 10 Guyanese students at a helicopter pilot training course at the Oxford Air Training School in the English Midlands.

They are also the first girls

chosen for training as helicopter pilots since the school's Rotocraft Wing was established last year. This is the first time that Guyana has sent students to the school and they will be on training until the end of the year.

The training of female pilots is another step towards the Guyana Government's objective of equal rights for women.

Their training school is the largest professional pilot training centre in Western Europe and this year more than 250 pilots from 26 countries will graduate from it.

Over the past 15 years, the

school has trained some 3,000 pilots on behalf of 72 countries.

At present it costs about \$50,000 for a two-year pilot training course. A helicopter pilot takes about 10 months to train.

Speaking to a journalist in England, the girls said they were enjoying their training and look forward to return home to become active in the GDF.

Marlyn said: "The helicopters we train in are small by comparison to those we will eventually fly."

The two girls were at school together and have known each other for seven years. This is their first visit to Britain and they are living at the airport.

At the moment they are going through rigid ground training and will take their first flight shortly.

Marlyn added: "We don't have much spare time because we are studying hard. The first six weeks have been really tough but we also feel a lot is expected of us because we are the first women. We knew before we came that we would be the first women helicopter pilots at the school but we don't mind."

Govt launch long term for social style economic development

A SPECIAL Steering Committee responsible for giving overall policy guidance and co-ordinating the activities of the National Development Programme and Regional Planning Project has been set up.

The Steering Committee comprises 18 persons, with Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Works and Housing Cde. Gordon Marshall as Chairman. It will be addressed by Minister of Works and Housing Cde. Steve Naraine on Wednesday, April 14 at 3 p.m. in the new offices acquired for the project at 45-46 Robb Street, Georgetown.

The Cde. Minister, who sees the project as vital to the co-ordination and integration of all other development projects, will take the opportunity to brief the Steering Committee with regard to Government's long-term plans for implementing a truly socialist economic development programme as it affects physical planning, public buildings, the acquisition of land, and the development of housing schemes.

ASPECTS

It is envisaged that, after the U.N.D.P. personnel leave, members of this Steering Committee will be better able to advise on various aspects of developmental work in the various towns and communities. These will be related to various fields concerning the needs of areas, inclusive of recreational facilities, electricity, etc.

The Steering Committee will be charged with responsibility for co-ordinating the development projects and strategising various government ministries, departments, public corporations and other social and development activities in the Regions and in the centres of Georgetown, Amsterdam, and Matthew's Ridge. A comprehensive plan defining the long and future economic development areas are to be developed.

Co-op College to establish material publishing centre ...

THE Kuru Kuru Co-operative College is to establish a Training Material Publishing Centre to produce all material used by the Co-operative Movement in Guyana and the Caribbean.

This was announced yesterday by the principal of

Patrick, when he welcomed on campus 70 Guyana Marketing Corporation management personnel for a weekend orientation seminar.

He also revealed that a chapel for religious worship is to be constructed on campus and by self-help.



Standard Office Cadet Course Six 1976



President Arthur Chung Center, 2nd Lt. Verian Mentis on his left, 2nd Lt. Joyce Smith on his right GDF WAC



3rd and 4th from left, 2nd Lt. Lieutenant Verian Mentis and 2nd Lt. Joyce Smith respectively, with Officers from Training Command, notably Capt. Joe Henry 2nd from right circa 1977

THANK YOU

It is safe to say that for the past four decades the national history presented in this document was relegated to oral recall.

This is not to discount, in any way, that tool of curating memories because the very foundation of history began with narration.

For reasons that go well beyond the purpose of this publication, oral recall was subsequently seconded to documentation and printing and printed material was seen as the more authentic.

Ensuring the authenticity of Course Six women in both arenas thus became crucial.

The production of this portion of history was the easy part.

Finding the supporting data was the challenge.

So, on behalf of the women of Course Six I would like to thank all who helped with bits and pieces and particularly Colonel Cecil 'Pluto' Martindale whose oral recall, ironically, offered more information than is documented in the available written history.

Thanks to Pasquale Alpha, Martine Alary and Hannah Belz of CAE Oxford Aviation Academy for offering to help with information on Marilyn Telford and Barbara Adams who were the first women, ever- I found out - to go to that institution for helicopter pilot training. CAE is currently documenting its 70th anniversary, this 2017, so these two women, I suggested, should be mentioned in their history, as well.

I will, also, thank the Guyana National Library and will single out Ms. Fazila Hussein whose efforts to find news clippings from tattered news papers are bested only by the courtesy, tolerance and patience she displayed over the course of my many calls and correspondence to find this lost documentary.

And like every time we celebrate the uniqueness of Course Six, I extend gratitude to our male counterparts with whom we exchanged triumph and pain until we breasted the tape not only as women but as the historic Course Six.

My Distinct Honour,

verian-mentis-barker



Adopted Course Insignia GDF Standard Officer Cadet Course Six 1976