

Veterans Oral History Project

Delores A. Belin Burns

November 16, 2023

English 562-81, Dr. Lauren Rule Maxwell

FEATURE ARTICLE

Private First Class Cromwell, RN, MSN, CNOR, had a self-fulfilling prophecy of Military Service. In reflection of her early years, Elise stated, “We lived in constant survival mode for our basic needs.” From an early age, she envisioned a way to help her family financially, believing that the military was the key to improving their living conditions in segregated South Carolina.

The Cromwell family’s household of six members endured extreme poverty, lacking sufficient resources for necessities such as shelter, clothing, and healthcare. Elise, the fifth child, was born October 30, 1960, to Mr. Samuel and Mrs. Mary Cromwell at the Medical College Hospital, now known as the Medical University of South Carolina.

Elise’s parents had participated in the Great Migration to the north for financial gains, with the oldest three siblings born in New York and the remaining three born and raised on James Island. Her parents acquired one of the McLeod houses on James Island, previously part of the McLeod Planation where slaves resided during slavery. Mr. Samuel, a skilled construction worker, used his wisdom and skills to restore this historic structure into a home for his family, while Mrs. Cromwell worked as a domestic.

As an adolescent in my community, Elise observed that elders in the African American families in impoverished neighborhoods expected the young people to get an education and secure good employment for self-improvement and community betterment as a cultural norm. When elders asked, “What do you want to be when you grow-up?”, Elise consistently responded with her aspiration to join the military, expressing, “I want to be a part of the military to help my parents out of poverty, help people through nursing, and travel the world.”



A Courageous Warrior

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After graduating from high school in 1978, Elise's initial preference for military service was to enlist in the Air Force. However, not achieving the required score on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) after two attempts led Sgt Allen, the recruiter, to suggest Army enlistment.



The Army Slogan "Be All You Can Be," resonated with Elise's goal. Enlisting before her 18th birthday, requiring both parents' signatures, Elise began her military journey at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where she received the Oaths of Enlistment and underwent a physical. Reflecting on this ceremonial event, Elise expressed, "It was frightening and exciting at the same time. I realized I was embarking on a new chapter of my life, on my way to protect and serve my country."

Military History



Upon arriving at Fort McClellan, Alabama for basic training, Elise encountered a culture shock with drill sergeants yelling and belittling recruits. Despite initial uncertainty, Elise gathered the courage needed for the journey. Basic training was comprised of rigorous routines, including early wakeups, drilling, physical training, and the challenging Gas Chamber experience. Elise vividly recalled feeling as if she might die in the chamber, reciting prayers to get through the terrifying ordeal.

Advancing to Advanced Individual Training (ATI) at Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas, Elise specialized as a Dental Assistant/Chairside Assistant with Bravo Company, 44th Battalion. Trained by exceptional dentists, she advanced to E-3 rank. Her first duty assignment at Fort Stewart, Georgia, as a Dental Assistant lasted over a year, marking a period of adjustment and enjoyment of military life. Subsequently, Elise was stationed in Landstuhl, Germany (LLARMC), where she faced racial discrimination and same-sex harassment from a superior officer, leading to encounters with depression.

Elise's Educational and Employment History

Ms. Cromwell received an honorable discharge in 1983 and worked as a nurse's aide at Roper Hospital. She enrolled in Trident Technical College, earning a Licensed Practical Nurse Diploma. Pursuing upward mobility, she became a full-time student at Trident Technical College's registered nurse program, obtaining an associate degree in nursing. Elise further pursued her education at Walden University, earning bachelor's and master's degrees in nursing. She graduated Magnum Cum Laude as an undergraduate and Cum Laude in her graduate program.

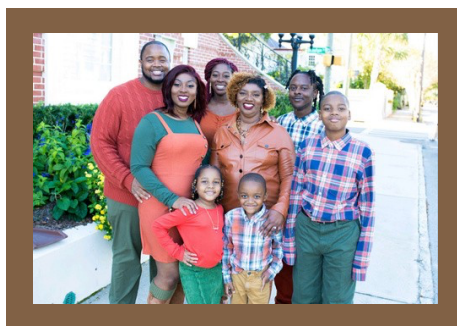
Elise has served the Medical University for over 40 years, with 28 years as a Surgical Nurse. Elise's stated vision as a nurse involved "having passion for superb care and quality healthcare for all people. Her continuous drive to gain knowledge and education for growth in the nursing profession allowed her to become the nurse leader who strives to have influence in the lives of the patients, family, and community." She also worked at several local hospitals, including Bon Secours St. Francis, Roper, and the Medical University, where she is currently employed. Elise, a mother of three and grandmother of five, has faced challenges, including the loss of her common-law husband.

Community

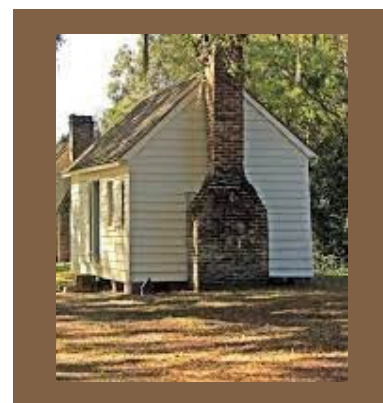
Elise is an active member of James Presbyterian, USA, participating in the Choir, the Presbyterian Women's Group, and the Church School, as well as being a member of the Charleston Area Justice Ministry. She recently joined VFW Post 45, supporting disabled veterans' families, highlighting her commitment to community service. Elise's integrity and generosity have been evident to those who know her, including me; I have been her Church School Teacher for several years. Elise expressed her honor to be a part of this history making project: We are the first two African American female interviewer- interviewee pair who participated in the Veteran Oral History Project at The Citadel. "It is great to know that I matter as a female veteran," she told me.



**Mrs. Mary Cromwell,
Elise's Mother**



Elise's Family



McLeod Plantation

<https://tourpass.com/destinations/mcleod-plantation/>

Overall, it may be said, Elise Cromwell, Private First Class, U.S. Army, is a remarkable woman of resilience and perseverance, influencing those around her with her story. Honored for her service during peacetime, Elise's journey, from childhood aspirations to military service, nursing, and continuous education, paints a portrait of a courageous and accomplished individual. As a veteran, Elise's journey unfolds as an inspiring story of resilience, perseverance, and courage.

