

FORT LEAVENWORTH, Kan. – In a Thursday speech celebrating Black History Month, University of Kansas Chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little praised the military for helping to break down racial barriers.

“The U.S. military is a shining example of an organization where merit is valued above all other qualities in choosing leaders,” she told a luncheon audience of 200 at the post’s Frontier Conference Center. “The expression of that idea is what made great change possible in America.”

Gray-Little, KU’s first woman and first African-American chancellor, said the change made it possible for Gen. Colin Powell to become the nation’s top military officer and President Obama to become the nation’s commander in chief.

She recalled the achievements of blacks and others on the battlefield even while facing discrimination at home. She noted the African-American soldiers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who protected the frontier.

“The Buffalo Soldiers - who called Fort Leavenworth home and who are honored by a monument here on post - fought for a nation that still considered them second-class citizens even after many of their brothers fought and died to preserve that very nation,” Gray-Little said.

During World War II, she said the Tuskegee Airmen fought Nazi oppression, but returned home to segregated fountains. She also remembered the heroism of Japanese-American soldiers.

“The men of the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team returned from combat in Europe as the most decorated unit in the armed forces,” Gray-Little said. Yet those Japanese-American soldiers’ families were interned during World War II.

Gray-Little said the heroism of these soldiers and airmen helped pave the way for civil rights, noting that President Truman ordered the desegregation of the armed forces in 1948 while many U.S. institutions remained segregated.

Quoting Truman’s order, she said, “It is essential that there be maintained in the armed services of the United States the highest standards of democracy.” Later Truman wrote, “It is a privilege and responsibility of every citizen to make the maximum possible contribution to our national strength,” Gray-Little said.

The KU chancellor told the audience composed mostly of soldiers: Each of you make that contribution every day.

The luncheon was hosted by Fort Leavenworth’s Combined Arms Center – Training, which supports and develops training throughout the Army.

If you have questions, please contact CAC-T Stratcom Officer Mike Casey at 913-684-8016.