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Col. West A. Hamilton: Soldier of Note

National Guard Honors Vet With Rank of General

By Barbara J Graham
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"Mr. President, I'm [Colonel West A. Hamilton](#), an old soldier," he said, saluting smartly at the White House presentation in his honor Thursday.

Sunday, the old soldier, at 96, became the first person to receive the honorary rank of brigadier general from the D.C. National Guard.



"He should be awarded more than one star," Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh Jr. said at the ceremony. "As a human being, he's a five-star person."

Former D.C. Mayor Walter Washington called the promotion "long overdue."

[Hamilton](#), in a full dress uniform weighted with medals, walked slowly to the stage at the D.C. Armory, a nurse holding one of his arms.

"I look around and see we have a sizable group of men. It's been a pleasure for me at my grand age of 96 to be associated with them," he told 500 well-wishers after recounting his military exploits. "You have my earnest prayers and help in carrying on."

He then recited several lines from "In Flanders Fields."

[Hamilton](#)'s 45 years of military service spanned two world wars and included decorations for heroism, making him a role model for black officers at a time when there were few.

"He demanded and got excellence and superior performance on everyone's part," said his friend of 55 years, H. Minton Francis. "He encouraged even the slowest and the dullest to, as they say in the Army advertising, be all you can be."

During the 1916 Mexican border conflict, [Hamilton](#) served alongside General John (Blackjack) Pershing. In World War II, he commanded the 366th Infantry, an elite regiment of black soldiers.

Though "The Colonel's" hearing is not as sharp as in 1905 when he enlisted in the National Guard, his health is good, he said. "I go out to Walter Reed and have 'em look me over."

His conversations sometimes ramble. But his speech is clear and the words reminiscent of the fiery

rhetoric with which he often captivated meetings of the city school board, of which he was a member for 21 years.

In many ways, West Alexander [Hamilton](#)'s history parallels that of middle-class black Washington from the turn of the century.

He attended the old M Street School (later Dunbar), the city's black academic high school. He graduated from Miner Teacher's College, then taught at Armstrong High. For 60 years, he and his brother Percy ran the Hamilton Printing Co. at 1353 U St.

"He's done so many things, it's hard to recite them all," said Francis, the grandson of the Hamilton family's physician.

[Hamilton](#) is known for his tenacity and the habit of boldly speaking his mind, even when to do so invites controversy. In 1967, as the only black school board member to vote for retaining Supt. Carl F. Hansen, [Hamilton](#) angered many civil rights activists who wanted to oust Hansen and a controversial track system.

While his rhetoric was explosive, his style was not. Militant young blacks called him an Uncle Tom, charging that he should have done more on the school board for blacks.

"He felt example was the best way. He was no Stokely Carmichael," said William Waters, who met [Hamilton](#) more than 30 years ago when [Hamilton](#) served on the D.C. Board of Elections.

The son of the late Julia West Hamilton, a distinguished Washington civic leader, [Hamilton](#) joined St. Luke's Episcopal Church on 15th Street at age 16. He later became one of the youngest members of the church's vestry.

The Rev. William VanCroft remembered [Hamilton](#) as a church warden when VanCroft became rector of St. Luke's in 1952. "He's always been supportive of the clergy," VanCroft said. "And he still comes to church every Sunday."

[Hamilton](#) married twice, but had no children. His second wife, Caroline, died five years ago.



Maj. Gen. Calvin Franklin, the commanding general of the D.C. National Guard, left, and Secretary of the Army John Marsh Jr. pin the insignia of an honorary brigadier general on 96-year-old Col. West A. Hamilton.

Although he only spent a few minutes with the president last week, [Hamilton](#), a lifelong Republican, said he is a "great admirer" of Reagan's.

Although he spent half his life in the military and the other half embroiled in the politics of District education, [Hamilton](#) found time to actively support the 12th Street YMCA, American Legion, Elks and other groups. At 69, he became one the oldest persons to receive a master's degree from American University.

The energy, said his younger sister, Josephine Pettie, runs in their blood. "All of us get it from my mother. She had quite a bit of drive. We were always interested in helping the less fortunate," explained Pettie.

In recognition of [Hamilton](#)'s lifetime of helping, one friend offered in summary: "He went out of his way

far more than most people to touch lives."



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