

members to send monies to support the local VFW in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria, and to financially assist individuals and families during the government shutdown of 2019, the longest US government closure in history. Similarly, the national VFW matched funds of local posts up to \$5000 to the Coast Guard servicemen and women whose mission required them to work without pay.

### State Commander

As she had while serving as the State's Senior Vice Commander, Mrs. Perry leads the Maryland VFW's legislative efforts in Annapolis and Washington, DC. In a November 2018 interview on WMAR-TV, Commander Perry identified areas where the state and nation need to change current policy for female veterans, noting that the number of women in the VFW had risen to 20,739 out of the 1,140,215 members.

Of special interest is a current proposal



*Commander Perry taking VFW oath, 2018*

Page 4

to provide appropriate treatment to women who suffered sexual trauma while in the military. Also, legislation to increase VA care for newborns from seven days to 42 days. Perry remarked, "The changes needed are coming."

As for being State Commander, Mrs. Perry emphasized the need for leaders and members, "Not to pre-judge people." The VFW is no longer what it was during its earlier years. The age and racial demographic of the VFW is largely white males over 65 years. Most have never interacted with a Black woman, especially one in a leadership position, and they tend to adhere to their preconceived notions. She urges everyone to "try always to be as transparent as possible...to help other people... to be honest, dependable, and to keep your word." She advises young people to consider the benefits of a career and a life focused on serving others and helping shape "your community into whatever you want it to be."

Americans, Marylanders, and residents of Harford County are fortunate to have had Denise Elaine Perry serving their interests in the four decades since that long-ago Graduation Day at Aberdeen High.

Page 5

Author: Margaret Ferguson

Copy Editor: Jim Chrismer

Reviewers: Chetta Hebron-Byrd, Jerome Hersl, Bernadette Low, Stephen Smith & Joan Wiggins

Website: [aahhcp.com](http://aahhcp.com)

## African-American History of Harford County, Maryland©



### Denise Elaine Perry State Commander Maryland Veterans of Foreign Wars

Part 2

Pamphlet 0109  
February 8, 2019



Sharing Our History  
Through Research and  
Discussion

**Cover: Denise Elaine Perry, State Commander, Maryland Veterans of Foreign Wars, elected June 2018.**

## **Introduction**

In 1918 American military veterans of World War I (WWI) came home, often in need of help. Countless soldiers arrived wounded or sick and without medical care or veterans' pensions. Many turned to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), a nonprofit private veterans organization created in 1899 to secure rights and benefits for combat veterans.

In subsequent years the VFW developed into America's largest veterans service organization with chapters across the country. A century after the conclusion of WWI, members of the Maryland State VFW elected Aberdeen's Denise Elaine Perry as its first female African-American State Commander. Mrs. Perry, one of the organization's younger leaders, advocates for a progressive direction to the century-plus organization.

## **The First Family**

Denise Hairston met Dwight D. Perry in 1974 at a party at Aberdeen High School (AHS). She was a junior at AHS, and he was a senior at Edgewood High School, the son of Mrylene Richardson Perry and George Walter Perry.

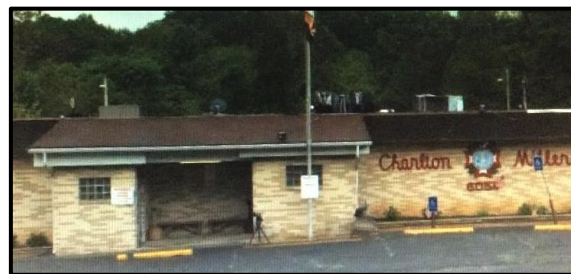
Both Denise and Dwight enlisted in the military after completing high school.

Unaware that each other were scheduled to leave the same day to enter the Army; Denise went to Alabama and Dwight was sent to El Paso, TX. Coincidentally, after basic training they wound up at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, TX. Dwight was enrolled in Combat Medic Specialist training, while Denise entered Dental Specialist training in 1976.

From that first meeting in the mid-1970s, Denise and Dwight's relationship grew more serious over the years, and in 1987 they married in a ceremony in Havre de Grace. They had three children, Maya Perry, Rhia (Perry) Marshall and Rashaad Hairston (deceased at age 13).

## **Career Objectives**

Following her discharge from the army in 1980, Mrs. Perry went on to hold several positions in the federal government. While on active reserve she secured a job with the United States Postal Service in Delaware. From there she moved to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and then to the Veterans Administration (VA), from which she retired in 2013. In all,



*The Charlton-Miller VFW Post 6054 in Perryman.*

Denise years of active military duty and 28 years as a federal employee. During that time, she went to the University of Maryland and received a BS degree in Business Management with a focus on accounting, allowing her to become an IRS Agent. These accounting skills proved valuable in assisting VFW Post officials with duties involving bookkeeping.

Commander Perry's home post is Charlton-Miller VFW Post 6054, on Spesutia Road in Perryman, where she was the local commander from 2015-2016. In the years before the civil rights laws, as Commander Perry explained, many "VFW posts wouldn't allow black combat veterans to join. So, in 1952 they started their own."

Post 6054 keeps busy with a variety of programs. It provides free Thanksgiving dinners, participates in Toys for Tots, and sponsors Christmas, Halloween, and Easter parties for the community. A favorite program involves interacting with patients at Perry Point Veterans' Hospital in setting up Bingo games and providing prizes and refreshments.

Education is another focus. The Spesutia Road Post recognizes worthy Harford County teachers and provides a scholarship program at the local level for high school and middle school essay contest winners, who then become eligible for state and national competition.

In addition to its community efforts, Post 6054 likewise engages in special relief activities. Recent challenges prompted