



Army Heritage Center
Foundation
*Telling the Army Story...
one Soldier at a time*

Voices of the Past

Part of the Army Heritage Center Foundation's Educational Series

WORLD WAR II

Highlights:

- The reality of World War II made policy makers realize that the military needed to tap the underutilized resources of American women to support the war effort.
- The Army created the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, which eventually became the Women's Army Corps, to train women to fill vital positions.
- Women received technical training and served as mechanics, telecommunication operators, medical technicians, and other support roles in every theater of the war.
- The Women's Army Corps gave women the opportunity to prove their abilities and opened the door to social changes for women in and out of the uniform.

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Supporting the Nation: The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps & Women's Army Corps

(United States, 1941-1945) In May 1941, Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts introduced a bill to create the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). Spurred on by the attack on Pearl Harbor, Congress passed the bill on May 14, 1942. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the bill into law on May 15, and on May 16 Oveta Culp Hobby was sworn in as the first Director of the WAAC.

The WAAC, officially established "for the purpose of making available to the national defense the knowledge, skill, and special training of women of the nation," would provide women to fill support roles and free up more men for combat duty. The WAAC adopted the symbol of Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of victory and womanly virtue – wise in peace and in the arts of war.

The WAAC accepted women between the ages of 21 to 45. No one expected women to go into combat, so Basic Training for WAAC recruits was an abbreviated version, consisting primarily of marching drills, military customs and courtesies, map reading, company administration, and supply and mess management.

The first WAAC trainees arrived at Fort Des Moines, Iowa on July 20, 1942, and were met with considerable public interest. The group included 125 enlisted women and 440 officer candidates (40 of whom were African-Americans) for the WAAC Officer Candidate School (OCS). WAACs soon proved to be good Soldiers, and



The WAC adopted Pallas Athena as their symbol and lapel insignia. Image courtesy of the USAHEC, Women in the Service Photograph Collection

mastered their training with ease. After training, a WAAC would either remain at the training center to replace a male member of the cadre, or transfer to a 150-woman table of organization (TO) company to serve as clerks, typists, drivers, cooks and other unit cadre.

Stateside, the basic rate of pay for enlisted women and men was the same, \$21.00 per month. Women did not receive overseas pay, were ineligible for government life insurance, and their next of kin could not collect their death gratuity if they were killed.



Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, first Director of the WAC, 1942-1945. Photo courtesy of USAHEC, Women in the Service Photograph Collection.



WAC Soldiers take over some of the communications work behind the scenes of the 8th Air Force Fighter Station somewhere in England, 11 Jan 1944. Photo courtesy of USAHEC, Women in the Service Photograph Collection.

They were eligible for treatment in Veteran's hospitals if they became sick or wounded.

From the outset the WAAC exceeded its recruiting goals, and by the end of September 1942, the WAAC Training Center at Fort Des Moines was training to capacity. The Army created four additional training centers to handle the demand. By June 1943, recruitment had fallen. Higher paying jobs in civilian industry, lack of equal benefits, and attitudes within the Army itself – long an overwhelmingly male institution – were factors. The War Department investigated complaints about the male Soldiers' behavior and confirmed some of the complaints were warranted.

On July 1, 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed legislation that changed the name of the corps to the Women's Army Corps (WAC) and made it part of the U.S. Army Reserves. Oveta Culp Hobby became the first Director of WAC, with the rank of colonel.

The U.S. Army is, and always has been, a reflection of American society and values. American society was racially segregated in the 1940s, so too was the Army – and the WAC. That fact did not prevent minority women from serving their country. Black WACs served in units like the 6888th Postal Battalion, and on segregated posts such as Fort Huachuca, AZ, Fort Riley, KS, and elsewhere. Japanese-American WACs served their country with pride even though many of their parents were confined to relocation camps in the West. A battalion of Puerto

Rican WACs served together at the New York Port of Embarkation. Other Hispanic and Native American WACs also served with distinction.

During World War II, WACs served with the Army Air Forces (AAF), Army Ground Forces (AGF), and the Army Service Forces (ASF). While job opportunities were limited at first, a wider variety of positions opened up as the war progressed. The AAF assigned WACs as weather observers and forecasters, electrical specialists, sheet metal workers, flight-simulator instructors, control tower specialists, airplane mechanics, photo-laboratory technicians, and photo interpreters.

The AGF assigned WACs to Armor and Cavalry Schools and as radio mechanics. They took care of records and requisitions involving radio equipment, and, repaired and installed radios in tanks and other vehicles – both in camps and in the field. They also trained men in field artillery and coding and decoding messages. Over 100 women worked as parachute riggers at Fort Benning's Parachute School

The Signal Corps assigned women as telephone operators, radio operators, teletype operators, cryptographers, cryptanalysts, and photographic experts. The Technical Service employed WACs in the Transportation Corps to assist in processing troops and mail. Women served as medical and surgical technicians or in other capacities within the Medical Department. The Adjutant General's Corps, Chemical Warfare Service, Quartermaster Corps, Finance Department, Provost Marshal, and Corps of Chaplains all used WACs for administrative services. One of the

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most important projects WAC units were assigned to was the atomic bomb projects "Manhattan District."

In July, 1944, LST landing craft put the first WACs ashore on the Normandy Beachhead. WACs were already overseas in other theaters, having first arrived in England in July 1943. The women of the Corps went where they were needed – to Oro Bay, to Hollandia, to Casablanca, India, Egypt, Italy, Chunking, and Manila. By the end of the war, women had served in almost every corner of the conflict. The country had called, and the women of America answered.

WACs had few options in the post-war world. The law provided no re-employment rights after the war, and the Army had no peacetime component for women. On Aug. 9, 1946, Congress passed legislation providing re-employment rights for WAACs and WACs.

In World War II, 160 women in the WAC died from various non-combat causes, and WACs received over 639 including the Distinguished Service Medal, Legion of Merit, Soldier's Medal, Bronze Star, Air Medal, and the Purple Heart. Three WAC units received the Presidential Unit Citation for meritorious service in Europe.

World War II and the establishment of the Women's Army Corps were watershed moments in the women's rights movement. Military service has always been an important step for any group seeking equal rights. Common military service breaks down social barriers, builds respect, and leads to a sense of camaraderie among people who would otherwise remain strangers.

Article adapted from: "WAAC/WAC."
<http://www.army.mil/women/wac.html>.



From left to right, WAAC Officers' Pinks & Greens, WAAC Officers' cotton khaki, and WAAC Enlisted women olive drab. All wearing hobby hats. Photo courtesy of USAHEC, Women in the Service Photograph Collection.



U.S. Army WAACs marching in the Tri-Nations parade ceremonies in North Africa 2/14/43. Photo courtesy of USAHEC, Women in the Service Photograph Collection.