

Pioneers, Patriots, and Ladies: Origins, Social Issues, and Impact of The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps

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The good position of women in today's society seems undisputed to the casual observer. In many fields we enjoy equal pay, equal employment, and equal respect from our peers. We take for granted our voting rights and freedom to express our discontent or opinions. However, achieving women's equality was difficult to accomplish and it is hard to impress upon the general public how much controversy surrounded the ground-breaking social transformations that have changed women's lives. The initiation of women into the United States military was one such controversy, and from the beginning, its proponents challenged what were well-established views of female passivity and inferiority to males. In doing so, these advocates of change created a new image and ideal of the American woman.

America, at its entrance into World War II, was a nation in turmoil. Even the most indifferent bystander felt the tides of change sweep through his or her exclusive world, whether because of the sudden call to duty of a friend or family member, burdensome increases in the cost of living, the prevalence of frightening newspaper headlines, or the warnings and pronouncements of politicians and authorities. With grim certainty we set foot in the cauldron which was boiling away overseas; unsure of success, we nonetheless mobilized our young men, willing and unwilling, for departure and dispatch into harm's way. As they vanished from sight, those left behind were forced to accept the reality of wartime and the changes that went along with it. American women, being by far the largest segment of the population to be excluded from these drafts, no doubt felt more frustrated than ever (Sherman 52). They'd had their first taste of freedom and equality; they were just beginning to infiltrate workplaces all across America as a career-driven, independent labor pool, earning and spending their own wages. They demanded and won respect in many areas for the first time in history. So it was natural that the Armed Forces be their next target in the great push for women's rights, recognition, and liberation. Many, according to E. Doben (a WAAC veteran), questioned the value of their pre-war occupations, at a time when a man's work was being classified as necessary or unnecessary for the war effort. The young women, particularly, felt abandoned and restless as eligible husbands were sent in droves overseas, and they were left to enter adulthood unbetrothed—a grim fate for a girl in the 1940s.

They had not long to stew in useless worry and fret over the fates of their men. After all, the 19th amendment (granting women the right to vote) was still fresh, and feminist leaders had been trying since the 1920s, albeit unsuccessfully, to establish an official female presence in the armed forces. It is hypothesized by some that if the first World War had gone on for much longer, the U.S. would have had no choice but to enlist its women as auxiliaries in the service (Treadwell 6). Anita Phipps, then acting as Director of Women's Programs, United States Army, proposed to create a band of women soldiers, trained according to army regulations, to serve as "low-grade personnel," i.e. clerks, stenographers, laundry workers, janitors, messengers, seamstresses, and other skilled and unskilled workers (Treadwell 12). The intent was twofold: to appease and befriend the newly-formed women's groups who, as recently commissioned voters, had taken a decidedly anti-military stance; more practically, it would release men for combat duty in the event of future conflict (Treadwell 10). Phipps's suggestion was met with immediate disdain; her position was summarily abolished, and her tentative plan buried in paperwork (Sherman 50). Military duties, no matter how trifling, were men's work, and in spite of the hundreds of women who volunteered their efforts during previous years, the army and the government refused to officially incorporate them into the service. They had, in 1901, begrudged the title of "Army Nurse Corps" to the group of indispensable and valiant women who healed those wounded on the front lines; however, ambiguous organization and restrictive clauses kept them essentially separate from the military and prevented them from receiving pay or other benefits equal to their male counterparts (Sherman 49). Many were able to overlook these biases and do their jobs out of pure patriotism and love for the country which insisted on keeping them as second class citizens. (Interestingly, these women were volunteering their services in the armed forces before being granted the right to vote!) For many more, though, this was not enough.

British and Canadian women had already proven their worth during World War I; both countries enlisted women as auxiliaries, successfully increasing the numbers of (male) soldiers sent into the fight, and eventually driving back the enemy (Treadwell 32-34). The contributions of these ladies were considered indispensable; the British even went so far as to draft their women into the service (Sherman 52). In China, women were known to have joined the communist rebellion, often out of extreme poverty and mistreatment by their families. The Communists provided them with clothing, food, and training, and these newly liberated women fought alongside the men to overthrow Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist forces (Young 93-99). Rebellious ladies had found their way into the Russian military, as well, as Barbara Engel explains:

Most of these women fought at the front, about 200,000 of them in the air defense forces; thousands more fought the Germans as rank-and-file soldiers. ...and as driver-mechanics in tank units. A few female officers led battalions of men into battle. ...Although Russian women had served at the front and taken up arms at earlier stages of the nation's history, in particular during World War I and

the civil war that followed the Bolshevik revolution, they had never before served in such numbers, nor had their role been so important to military success. (Engel 139)

Following the lead of the British and Canadian military, Representative Edith Nourse Rogers introduced a bill in 1941 (Bellafaire) to provide for the creation of a women's "semi military corps...to serve with the Army in noncombatant capacities anywhere in the world" (Baldwin). This was not the first such bill ever to be seen in Congress; along with Phipps's proposal, three others had been voted down or simply stalled into futility in previous years (Fisher). But circumstances were changing quickly for the army and other military organizations. The attack on Pearl Harbor left Americans no choice but to plunge headlong into the Second World War, and the army's resources and troops were being stretched to their limit. The advances in communication and motorization created new jobs in the air warning service, telephone and telegraph operations, radio signal transmission, transportation, and more (Bellafaire). An increasingly bureaucratic system meant the creation of hundreds of army clerical jobs, which, by army regulations, would necessarily be staffed by men trained otherwise for combat (Meyer 52). And these men were suddenly in short supply. The agencies in the government that had so staunchly refused women entry into their domain began to eye with interest their fairer counterparts who clamored for the chance to do their share in the war effort. The army was forced to admit its predicament: vast numbers of men serving clerical, administrative, and other non-combatative purposes could be easily replaced, if not surpassed in efficiency, by women; the increase in numbers of troops available for combat could potentially turn the tide of the war and lead the allies to victory. Though there was some amount of controversy surrounding their inclusion—one senator is quoted as saying that the idea "casts a shadow on the sanctity of the home" (qtd. in Baldwin)—the women were in. The real struggle and eventual proving ground lay ahead.

The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, or WAAC, was formed as the Rogers bill was signed into law on May 14, 1942 (Rasa). It stood as the only group of women that had ever been sanctioned to serve with the United States Armed Forces on active, military detail (Treadwell 45). Basic height and weight regulations were established; in addition, it was required that a WAAC be between 21 and 50 years old, in good health, and a high school graduate (Rasa). It was preferred that she be unmarried and without dependents. Black women, while allotted a certain number of positions in the volunteer corps, would be segregated from whites; an amendment which called for no racial discrimination of any kind was rejected, supposedly to speed the bill's passage through Congress (Baldwin). For some WAAC members, this was their first experience with segregation (Adams 76). For most it was an all too familiar reality.

The first applicants to the Corps began their six-week basic training as Officer Candidates in 1942 (Treadwell 63). This initial group was slated for the task of training and commanding the future WAACs, in addition to receiving specialized instruction in other fields. Many details required adjustment at first; for

example, the uniforms issued were designed on a male model and fitted poorly on female figures (Rasa). Drill regulations, too, had to be rewritten; where the regulation called for the thumb to be aligned with the seam of the trousers, there were no trousers; where regulation required that soldiers align themselves by the second button on the shirtfront of the soldier to the left, the shirtfronts were so varied and uneven that efforts to form a straight line became almost comical (Adams 38). The competition between companies during basic training was intense; under the command of Major Charity Adams, the segregated black troops consistently proved themselves superior to the whites in their precise marching and drill formations (Shea 90). Additionally, "They entered...the school with dignity and pride and conducted themselves in a manner that commanded respect from their white contemporaries and from the officers and enlisted men with whom they came in contact" (Shea 89).

Other problems existed on a deeper level. Racism and bigotry were far from eliminated by the excellence of the Negro contingents alone (Adams 206). Religious discrimination among recruits was unavoidable as well, as American girls of the 1940s were not as open-minded as they are today (Meyer 72). Elayne Doben, who enrolled in the WAAC in 1943 to become an Auxiliary First Class, was one of the few Jewish members of the Corps. She recalls "snide [anti-Semitic] remarks from some of the girls...If you were smart, you just ignored them and didn't associate..." The men, too, created problems for the new recruits. According to Mrs. Doben, some men thought the women were there mainly for their "entertainment," resulting in stricter rules regarding privacy and association between men and women on the base (including the first-ever army regulation window shades!). Later on, overseas, troop leaders in the South West Pacific Area (or SWPA, where 5,500 women were eventually deployed) even resorted to the use of barbed wire to maintain separation between the sexes (Fisher). As more women attained officer status, however, this became less of an issue. Women began to train and command other women.

The most persistent and prevailing obstacle was the resentment which the male soldiers harbored against the newly enlisted WAACs, as noted by Mrs. Doben, WAAC veteran. These women were unabashedly challenging their masculinity, replacing them in their secure administrative and secretarial positions, unseating them as mechanics and telegraph operators, ousting them as cooks and bakers, and sending them off to the front lines of the battle to fight! This was not always a pleasant surprise for a soldier who had been happily stationed at home in the U.S., typing up supply orders and authorizations in a comfortable, albeit militarized, office setting (Bellafaire). There was some additional amount of jealousy present, as well; the women received more than their fair share of media attention. Of course, the press was not altogether supportive:

From the beginning, a frivolous press focused on the trivial and the sensational, including how GI underwear would have to be modified, whether makeup would be issued, and if female enlistees could date male officers or vice versa. The WACKies...were lampooned mercilessly. (Sherman 60-61)

Change never does come easily.

As more and more women rose through the ranks, from Auxiliary to Lieutenant to Captain and even as far as Major and Colonel, the problems of acceptance into the male-dominated army world continued (Meyer 73). The attitudes of soldiers, as well as the general public, were altered undeniably, forcibly, and historically, particularly with regard to women's leadership (Treadwell 669-670, 681-685, 699). It was unprecedented in American society that a man be subservient to a woman. Even everyday customs, such as holding doors or walking on the curb side of a street, were subject to role reversal in light of army regulations (Shea 174-176). Rank preceded gender on every level, beyond question. Soldiers had no choice but to respect their superiors, regardless of sex. It was the beginning of equal opportunity!

In spite of all the obstacles, the WAACs persevered in their work, contributing countless hours to aid the war effort. They served as secretaries and stewards, mechanics and machine operators. They learned Morse code and telegraph operations, convoy transport, and aircraft warning signals. They were trained in how to pack parachutes for skydivers and to draw weather maps and topographic maps (Shea 14-23). By the middle of 1943, after only one year of existence, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps was considered essential to the success of the Allies. At one point, a suggestion was made to include women in the draft (Treadwell 95; Sherman 53). With no further doubts as to their capabilities as soldiers, a new bill was proposed dropping the auxiliary status and further integrating the women's corps into the regular army:

After more posturing about American womanhood, the traditional sexual order, the sanctity of the home, and, most important of all, concern for the possibility that women might command men, Congress agreed that the WAAC had been an experiment which had conclusively proven women's value. They deserved the "equal protection of the uniform and a recognized military status." (Sherman 57)

With the transition in status from WAAC to WAC, all enlistees were given the choice of remaining in the service or opting out. About twenty-five percent chose to leave; some expressed dissatisfaction with the organization; others, such as Mrs. Doben, wished to marry (in her case, a soldier) and pursue a different lifestyle. Still others reported feelings of isolation, unfriendly commanders or hostility from male enlistees as their reason for accepting discharge (Treadwell 227-229). Those who chose to remain were rewarded with full military status, which included access to many army benefits that were previously unavailable to women ("Waacs Come of Age ...").

By the end of World War II, there were over 99,000 WACs serving in nearly all capacities of the army, with the exception of combat duty (Treadwell 765-767, 770-771). All other branches of the military had also incorporated women into their ranks, with female navy, air force, and marine contingents to be found overseas as well as stateside (Sherman 56, 58; Treadwell 772-773). There were many casualties, and many more injuries in the line of duty. When victory was

finally declared, 657 women were, for the first time, decorated for their valor alongside the men (Bellafaire). They could no longer be called exclusively homemakers or housewives; they could no longer be categorized as shy, timid, or submissive creatures. These women proved to America and the world that they were as decisive and capable of leadership as any man. Their discipline could not be questioned. It was a milestone in women's history, however tainted with bloodshed and grief.

My grandmother, Elayne Doben, joined the WAACs on January 30, 1943, exactly one day after her twenty-first birthday. She enlisted seeking adventure, travel opportunities, and a sense of purpose in life. As a Jew hearing reports of the Nazi advances and the massacre in Europe, she, like most of the women, hoped that her efforts—in her case, as an administrative aid—would bring the Allied forces to a swift, decisive victory. While necessity forced military leaders to accept women into their ranks, the WAAC's unparalleled vigor and indispensable skills paved the way for a changing country to recognize the value of a woman in uniform. But their success in this arena was only one aspect of a larger success: the continuing emancipation of women from the restrictive roles they had played for centuries, the palpable shift in attitudes of America and Europe towards the previously unchallenged dominance of men in the social structure, and the re-evaluation of custom and tradition with respect to male/female relationships. As historian Mattie Treadwell writes, "In a world where new frontiers had been hard to find, they had found one; in an age where pioneers and their problems were a memory, they had been pioneers" (764).

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