



By Heike Hasenauer

The idea of uniformed women wearing helmets, carrying weapons, crawling in the mud and barking commands didn't sit well with politicians and most military officials in 1941—until the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

Then, what seemed to be an idiotic image quickly became a plausible plan. The prospect of women filling critical support roles to free up more men for combat became extremely attractive to War Department planners, and Congress established the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) on May 14, 1942.

The Army's goal was to enlist 25,000 women, ages 21 to 45, for noncombat duty. In February 1945 it surpassed the goal, and Secretary of War Henry Stimson set a new target—150,000 WAACs. By the end of the war almost 139,000 had enlisted—just short of Stimson's goal.

Training began with the enrollment of 440 women at the newly created, six-week WAAC Officer Candidate School at Fort Des Moines, IA, in July 1942. Thereafter, 150 prospective officers entered OCS every two weeks.

Simultaneously, a four-week basic training program for some 125 enlisted women was conducted that included training in military skills like map reading, military customs and courtesy, drill and ceremony, and first aid, said retired SGM Grace Mueller, who underwent enlisted basic in October 1942.

As the first WAAC training center, Des Moines was special, said Mueller, who only a day before she left her home in Indiana told her parents she'd enlisted. She was among the first dozen Indiana women to do so.

"We were guinea pigs, of course," said Mueller, who had worked as a payroll clerk in a furniture factory. "But we were treated like celebrities. Reporters from the local Des Moines paper were always coming out to interview and photograph us." The Chamber of Commerce even printed up "Des Moines—Home of the WAAC" postcards.

Most WAACs didn't join for the money, Mueller said. Until Nov. 1, 1942, female basic trainees pocketed \$21 a month. Thereafter, the pay was \$50, same as the men's.

"Because we were an 'older' corps then—21 to 45—most of the women had a year or two of college or had worked several years after high school," she added.

Enlisted WAACs averaged 24 years of age and 60 percent were high school graduates compared to their officer candidate peers who were 40 percent college grads and had an average age of 30.

Mueller, who retired in 1973 after nearly 30 years' service said "I never intended to make the Army a career. All of us were in for the duration of the war, plus six months.

"We never thought about being anybody important or making history, although we certainly felt what we did was important," she remembered.

From basic, Mueller had attended the four-week adminis



Far Left: WACs board a troopship in England en route to France in 1944. A World War II-era WAC cleans her mess kit near Normandy.

tration school conducted in a downtown Des Moines hotel, and her first duty assignment landed her with the first WAAC company that served at Fort Sheridan, IL.

From there, she returned to Des Moines for OCS and served on the home front as an officer for the rest of the war. She got out in 1946, then re-enlisted in 1947. But, because there just wasn't a need for personnel officers after the war, she returned as an E-6, one notch below the highest enlisted grade at the time, because she had more than a 90-day break in service.

"The best job I ever had was as an instructor of basic trainees at Fort McClellan from 1963 to 1964," she recalled. "There was so much camaraderie among the women. They were all so eager to learn about the Army and to serve their country."

COL Elizabeth Branch, who had been among the first OCS candidates at Fort Des Moines, echoed those sentiments.

"WAACs were so proud of serving their country. *Esprit de corps* really characterized the WAAC," she said.

When President Roosevelt established the Women's Army Corps on July 1, 1943—granting women the same ranks as men by removing former titles of 1st officer, 2nd leader and auxiliaries, expanding the enlistment age from 20 to 29 and authorizing the same pay and benefits as those received by men—over 60,000 women had enlisted. By that time, additional training centers operated at Ft. Oglethorpe,

GA, Fort Devens, MA and Camp Ruston, LA.

But even with the dramatic move toward equal military rights, the WACs continued to be treated differently, Branch said. Because fraternization became a grave concern, only women continued to command WAC units and socializing between enlisted and officer was strictly forbidden. Marriage was actually discouraged in Europe where, when soldiers married, one spouse was quickly shipped elsewhere.

In the Southwest Pacific Area and China-Burma-India Theater, marriage was forbidden unless the woman was pregnant, and if she was, she was immediately discharged.

Additionally, in order to receive pay for dependents, a WAC had to prove that a child or family member was dependent upon her for support; male soldiers with dependents automatically received extra money.

"WACs required separate housing. They couldn't be assigned as cooks, waitresses or janitors or be associated with frivolous non-military duties," said retired COL Bettie Morden, who enlisted in the WAAC in 1942 and served throughout WWII.

As the Army changed through the years so did the WAC. Perhaps the greatest change came in October 1978, when the Army dissolved the WAC in order to fully integrate women throughout the Regular Army.

The move brought a whole new array of opportunities for women. Every career field and MOS (except combat arms) opened to them.

That change actually began earlier in 1972, when Congress anticipated the end of the draft and launched an intensive recruiting campaign to enlist more women for a truly all-volunteer Army.

WAC strength grew from 13,269 in June 1972 to nearly 53,000 in September 1978. In 1972 WACs became eligible to participate in ROTC; defensive weapons training for women began; and mandatory discharges for pregnancy ended. Then, in July 1976, the U.S. Military Academy opened its doors to women for the first time in history.

Today, women in the Army boast a proud heritage of faithful service. Alongside their male counterparts women helped shape history in Grenada, Panama, the Persian Gulf and Operations Other Than War (OOTW) missions such as those in Somalia and Haiti. Women numbered 26,000 in the Persian Gulf War and four died in combat.

In 1973, women in the Army (excluding medical officers) comprised 1.6 percent of the total force. Today they constitute about 12 percent of the Army's strength and their contributions to the defense of the nation have similarly increased. ■

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"...you have a debt and a date. A debt to democracy, a date with destiny..."

Ovela Culp Hobby, first WAC director

When the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps began in 1942, there were no women NCOs. But, month by month, as women graduated from basic and advanced individual training, the leadership ability in some rose to the top and they were assigned to lead and train others.

Women became platoon sergeants, supply sergeants and first sergeants. In their duty sections, they supervised enlisted men and women and were praised for their organizational skills, their attention to duty and their loyalty and reliability. Within six months, women NCOs had replaced all the male NCOs at the WAAC training centers.

By the end of WWII, WAC NCOs worldwide deservedly earned promotions to the highest enlisted grades (E-1, -2 and -3 in those days). Those heroic WWII NCOs were in large part responsible for the Corps' achieving Regular Army status in 1948. Since then, women NCOs have served faithfully and diligently in MOS after MOS, through every war and national crisis in which our nation has been involved.



The Army soon realized its women soldiers were capable of becoming more than typists.

The Army added two NCO grades in 1959—E-8, master sergeant or first sergeant and E-9, sergeant major. Carolyn H. James was the first WAC promoted to master sergeant and in 1960 she was the first to be promoted to sergeant major. Later, in 1968, when the Army Chief of Staff created the position of command sergeant

major to serve as enlisted assistant to commanders at battalion level and above, Yzetta L. Nelson, assigned to the WAC Training Battalion, Ft. McClellan, was the first WAC sergeant major to be appointed to hold that position and wear the CSM rank [see page 45].

In 1972, WACs began participating in NCOES that provided progressive training at service schools and NCO academies at all skill levels. Both DA and major commanders scheduled enlisted soldiers for resident, extension and OJT courses from primary technical courses to the Sergeants Major Course. The first WACs to graduate from USASMA at Ft. Bliss, TX, were MSG Betty J. Benson (Class 1); MSGs Helen I. Johnston (Class 3) and Dorothy J. Rechel (Class 3). All three later became command sergeants major. ■

[Editor's Note: For a more in-depth study of the WAAC and WAC read COL (Ret.) Betty J. Morden's book The Women's Army Corps, 1945-1978, CMH Pub 30-14, 1989.]

Career manager

Rise of a P

By Dr. Robert Bouilly

In modern mythology we are tempted to look back at the old "Brown Shoe" Army with admiration and perhaps longing. The Army wore brown shoes until 1958 but most people associate the term with the interwar Army of about 1920 to 1940. It was small and poor. Yet it possessed a long-term cadre of officers and NCOs who worked well together. The Army was efficient and everyone knew his role. To use the words of a much later Army chief of staff, GEN Carl E. Vuono, the officers 'commanded' and the NCOs 'ran' the Army.

The trouble with this mythology was that the small interwar Army was not the Army which fought World War I. Sure, those officers and NCOs were still there. It's just that they were swallowed up by the massive influx of civilian-turned-soldiers during the war. There weren't enough of time NCOs to go around.

Hastily devised training programs produced more NCOs primarily trained to fight rather than lead soldiers in garrison duty. The small number of divisions fielded in World War I (89) meant there was little chance for divisions to leave training for extended periods to train. The attrition of infantry soldiers was particularly high. A common evaluation of the Army by the end of the war was that the NCO Corps was not particularly good.

Rapid demobilization after the war only made the situation worse. A point system determined who could go home first. In effect, more experienced soldiers and NCOs tended to have the highest number of points and left quickly. Occupation units in Europe quickly found themselves stripped of the leadership expertise which had carried them through the war. Their solution was to establish training schools for both NCOs and officers.

The war had hardly ended, for example, before the 88th Inf Div established perhaps the first NCO academy on Lido Island in Venice, Italy, late in 1945. The Constabulary Brigade in Germany did much the same with its academy, first at Sondhofen in 1947 and then at Munich in 1949. The schools sprang from a deeply ingrained belief in American society that education and training represented progress.

These schools were also the answer to an immediate problem. European units could not wait years for the maturing of junior leaders through on-the-job training as had been the case in the interwar Brown Shoe army. They had to have competent leaders quickly. The Army came to believe that leadership could be taught to NCOs much as it had been taught to officers for many years.

The NCO academy movement grew over time. By 1949 about 18,000 NCOs were graduating each year from 17 academies in the states besides those being trained in the 7