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The Women's Army Corps During the Vietnam War (1961-1975)

President Richard Nixon once said, "No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now. Rarely have so many people been so wrong about so much. Never have the consequences of their misunderstanding been so tragic." The Vietnam War was the longest and most unpopular military conflict in United States history. This conflict claimed the lives of more than 58,000 Americans, with over 150,000 Soldiers wounded. The Vietnam War was fought from 1959 to 1975, and involved the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front (NLF) in conflict with United States forces and the South Vietnamese army. The United States was involved in this conflict from 1961 until the last American troops left the country on April 30, 1975, at 8:35 A.M.

The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was established seventeen years prior to the start of the war. This Corps did not provide women a military status. One year later in 1943, the WAAC was discontinued and the Women's Army Corps (WAC) was created. Unlike the WAAC, the WAC allowed women to receive the same rank, title and pay as male Army Reserve Soldiers. From the beginning, the Corps' insistence upon high entry and retention standards kept it one of the elite groups of the Army. The Corps accepted only women who were well educated, physically and mentally fit and who had high moral standards. These entry and retention qualifications, the career obstacles and

assignment restrictions, and the continuing battle for acceptance by the men created a bonding effect on the women.

Training was a very important part of the WAC. Basic training was an eight-week course that included subjects such as military courtesy, personal hygiene, first aid and safety measures, map reading and physical training. After graduating from basic training, some enlisted women who had exhibited outstanding leadership traits were chosen to attend a six-week leadership course. This training enabled the women to serve as platoon sergeants. The women that did not receive leadership instruction entered training similar to what is now called Advanced Individual Training (AIT). The women were also taught how to wear their uniforms properly. During the war, the service women wore the green cord uniforms every day until 1968. In 1968, the WAC's began wearing the lightweight fatigues.

Deployment of women to war began with a request from the personnel officer of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), General William C. Westmoreland to the Director, Women's Army Corps, Colonel Emily Gorman. He requested some WAC's to assist in planning and developing a Women's Armed Forces Corp (WAFC) in Vietnam. The request clearly stated that intelligent, extroverted and beautiful women were needed. Colonel Gorman replied that she would do her best because the combination of brains and beauty were common among the WAC. In January 1962, the first WAC officer, Major Anne M. Doering, was assigned to Vietnam. Three years later, two WAC advisors, Lieutenant Colonel Kathleen Wilkes and Master Sergeant Betty L. Adams arrived. Both of these advisors had experience in WAC training, recruiting, administration and command. The WAC advisors were replaced annually.

Saigon, Vietnam, was a very dangerous area to live and work because it was subject to frequent terror attacks. In the fall of 1965, a WAC detachment of ninety enlisted women was created at Headquarters, United States Army, Long Binh, Vietnam. Although most women were assigned to clerk typist positions, there were a variety of Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) that included specialists in communication, personnel, finance, automatic data processing and intelligence. This detachment was located twenty miles from the dangerous area of Saigon and remained until October 1972 when the United States troops began to withdraw from theater.

In April 1966, the United States Army, Vietnam (USARV) Deputy Commanding General, Lieutenant General Jean E. Engler, requested that a WAC detachment be assigned to his Headquarters (HQ). He wanted the detachment to consist of one hundred clerk typists, whose duties also included stenography and administration. He housed the WAC's inside the military cantonment area at Tan Son Nhut. Normally, WAC's received no additional weapons training because of their noncombat status. Weapons training had been eliminated from the WAC in 1963 when the M1 carbine, a light rifle, was declared obsolete and Army trainers considered the M14 rifle too heavy for women. Many of the women had never received any weapons training. Lieutenant General Engler ensured that the women received small arms weapons training while assigned to his detachment.

One of the first women service members to arrive at the USARV Headquarters was SFC Betty Benson. She would later be the first female to graduate from the Sergeants Major Academy at Ft. Bliss, Texas. The WAC's that were assigned to the USARV had an average of twelve months of service and were between the ages of nineteen and

twenty-five. Six months later, this detachment moved to Long Binh with the first detachment. While assigned to these detachments, the WAC's found charitable work to do in their spare time. They adopted a catholic orphanage nearby in Tan Heip and maintained their support of the orphanage during the entire timeframe they were assigned to the detachment.

With all the movement of women into theater, many questions were being asked. The biggest question was "Would higher recruitment goals create pressure to lower WAC enlistment standards?" The answer was, "No." There were plenty of qualified women to join the WAC. Because changes were being made every day, the WAC was dealing with the normal turmoil of war and conflict. In the midst of this conflict, the seventh director of the WAC, Lieutenant Colonel Elizabeth P. Housing, was announced in June 1966. She hailed as the Commander of the WAC Center and Commandant of the WAC school. Two months later, she was promoted to Colonel. In the meantime, while United States bombers attacked the supply routes and depots in North Vietnam, the Army directed an immediate increase in the WAC strength. The numbers rose from 9,958 to 10,592. The reenlistment rate rose 55% in 1966. During this same period, discharging women who married while in the WAC was eliminated. The WAC detachment moved into permanent barracks at Long Binh in December 1968. Their new home consisted of four two-story buildings which included laundry facilities and a swimming pool. The new buildings provided security for the women and allowed privacy for the first time since they had reached Vietnam soil.

It was no mystery that war brought new challenges. Many women were faced with being assigned to Vietnam to serve with their husbands. Effective May 28, 1969, the

Deputy Chief of Staff, Personnel (DCSPER) barred the assignment to Vietnam of all married service women whose husbands were serving in Vietnam. The main reason was that housing for married couples was not available. During the years that women served in Vietnam, only eight females were sent home for pregnancy.

War created casualties. Many of the service women received scrapes and bruises from incoming fire because the Depot at Long Binh was a major threat to the enemy. Only one WAC, Army 1LT Sharon Ann Lane, was actually killed during combat action. This attack occurred in Chu Lai in 1969. No other serious injuries were noted. Although eight nurses died in Vietnam, only one died as a result of combat. The WAC's served in Vietnam for more than seven years. More than 700 WAC's served in Vietnam. There were no service women taken prisoner or reported missing. During their tour of duty, the morale of the WAC's appeared high and their work was very satisfying. The commanders ensured that the service women were always well housed, clothed and fed. By the end of March 1973, all the WAC's had left Vietnam. The strength of the Corps was over 39,000. Over 9,000 trainees joined the WAC in FY 1973. The reason for this was that men were slower to volunteer and women cost less to train and maintain.

The War also created heroines. Many WAC's received meritorious service awards for their contributions during the Vietnam War. On January 24, 1970, with no apparent regard for her own safety, SP5 Karen Offutt risked her life to rescue Vietnamese adults and children from a burning building. Even though debris fell, she repeatedly entered the burning building to rescue the children. She did not receive her Soldier's Medal for Heroism until April 7, 2001. At the time of her action, she received only a certificate because she was told women could not receive Soldiers' Medals.

SP5 Sharon L. Green received the Purple Heart. She was the only WAC to have received the award since World War II.

Captain Catherine A. Brajkovich received the Army Commendation Medal for heroism because she alerted residents of an officers' hotel in Saigon that it was on fire. Major Gloria A.S. Olson, a journalist and photographer with the Office of the Chief of Information, MACV, received the Air Medal for having flown the equivalent of 127 aerial combat missions totaling 198 air hours during her tour in Vietnam.

Women were a very important aspect of the Vietnam War. They had served their country in World War II and the Korean War. Their commitment was no different in this War. One may often wonder how many women actually served in Vietnam. Although the military is well known for keeping accurate records and statistics, they can not accurately state the number of females that served on Vietnam soil. The Army sent women to war but failed to count them. One of the reasons why the correct number is unattainable is that military records failed to reflect the gender of the person that was deployed. The estimated number of women that served in Vietnam is between 8,000 and 12,000.

Every woman who served in Vietnam was a volunteer. There had been a time when the idea of drafting women was discussed, but it never happened. Many military women specifically asked to go to Vietnam and others went even though they did not want to. No matter what the reasons may have been, a strong dedication to duty enabled these women to raise their hands and sign up for the military. These extraordinary women worked six to seven days a week and many extended their tours of duty. Several of these women returned to Vietnam for second and third tours. General Engler stated that

participation of the WAC's in Vietnam was "superb". He also said, "They handled clerical and management assignments in headquarters Vietnam in an outstanding manner. It would have been a serious mistake not to use their skills. The decision to deploy the WAC's to Vietnam was correct." The Vietnam War was the last time that the women were together as members of a separate Women's Army Corp of the United States Army. The WAC discontinued on April 26, 1978. Service women were now going to be called Women in the Army.

The WAC was the only way that women could join the ranks of the military. The Corps instilled important values, high standards, dedicated service and extreme loyalty. Whether they remained in the Women's Army Corps for three years or for a career, the women knew the constraints and difficulties of working in a man's world, but they found satisfaction in their work, travel, friendships and camaraderie. They became dedicated to the Corps and to the Army. The women that served had a spirit of mutual understanding, cooperation and love for each other that grew as fast as the Corps. As long as the United States Army have women to serve, that everlasting spirit will be alive and preserved forever. Because of the effort of the strong, determined women before us, our present and future continue to be bright.

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