

Women's Army Corps NCOs

featuring

CSM Cynthia A. Pritchett

by

MSG Ofelia Webb

SGM Jose Villazon

Faculty Advisor, L14

25 May 2004

Women's Army Corps NCOs
featuring
CSM Cynthia A. Pritchett

In May of 1941 Edith Nourse Rogers, a congresswoman from Massachusetts introduced a bill into the United States Congress designed to create a Women's Corps in the United States Army. This Corps was to be completely separate from the Army Nurse Corps, which was the only way a woman could serve in the Army during that time. A year later on 14 May 1942, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps was formed with Mrs. Oveta Culp Hobby appointed to be the organization's first director.

During the war, women were contracted to work as communications specialist and dieticians along with the soldiers in Europe. During World War I, Congresswoman Rogers served as a contract worker. Serving as civilians in a combat zone, American women were forced to provide their own food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. Upon their return following the war, they were not afforded the same disability benefits or pensions that members of the Army received. Congresswoman Rogers never forgot the treatment she and other women received after World War I and vowed to ensure that American women would not be treated that way again.

The bill did not pass easily and was not exactly what Congresswoman Rogers envisioned. The Army's top brass were extremely resistant to allowing women to be absorbed into the all male rank structure. The only way to ensure the bills survivability would be to find a compromise that would protect American women and would not be blocked by the Pentagon. The final version of the bill stated that the WAAC would work with the Army for the purpose of making knowledge, skill, and special training of women

available to the national defense. In exchange, the Army was required to provide the WAAC with uniforms, living quarters, pay, medical care, and food for approximately 150,000 women. The WAAC had women officers that were equal in rank to lieutenants and captains, but at that time female officers were not allowed to command male soldiers.

Although the bill gave women status within the military many benefits and protections, it failed to completely and adequately care for the “auxiliaries”. In other words, the foot was in the door, but there was still along way to go. Women were not authorized overseas pay, government sponsored life insurance, medical coverage for their veteran status, or the same death benefits afforded to their male counterparts. The journey of the bill to reach final passage required far too many compromises to fully realize Congresswoman Rogers’ dream.

The job of building the women’s program was a monumental task and it seemed only logical that Mrs. Oveta Culp Hobby was the perfect choice to lead the WAAC. Major Hobby had to assemble the Woman’s Army Auxiliary Corps, while satisfying a skeptical public and Congress. She started her career by earning a law degree in Texas, tying herself to the Texas House of Representatives and working as the Assistant City Attorney in Houston. Major Hobby realized that in order to recruit the women who were skilled as clerical workers, teachers, stenographers, and telephone operators she had to win over small towns and middle class America. She had to carefully consider every single aspect of how to present the WAAC, in order to be accepted by the American public in the 1940s.

The single most important perception that the WAAC and Major Hobby had to portray to America was that the Corp’s role was “noncombatant”. Each trainee would be trained

for a noncombatant role, which would free up another male soldier for combat. By serving in noncombatant roles, American women could make both individual and significant contribution to the war effort. A popular theme used by Major Hobby in recruitment speeches was, “The gaps that our women fill are in those noncombatant jobs where women’s hands and women’s hearts fit naturally.”

The WAAC became an indispensable part of the war effort in World War II and was so important to the Army that in 1948, it became the Women’s Army Corps and a permanent part of the Regular Army. The WAC continued to support the Army throughout the Korean War and Vietnam; the WAC supported the combat forces in a variety of different roles. Finally in 1978, the WAC was abolished and women were fully assimilated into all but the combat branches of the Regular Army, thus being entitled to the same benefits as their male counterparts.

In 1973, a young female soldier joined the WAC and ultimately served during the transition from the WAC to the Regular Army. Throughout her tenure in the military, she would continue to push for greater equality of women in the Army. In fact, she continues to have a tremendous impact not only on women but also on all soldiers serving in the military.

Who is Command Sergeant Major Cynthia A. Pritchett? What makes her a Command Sergeant Major that deserves distinction from the rest of her peers? How did CSM Cynthia A. Pritchett impact the Army thru her personal successes, mission successes, and battlefield successes? Lastly, what were her goals when she came into the WAC and how have they changed over three decades of military service?

A native of Concord, New Hampshire, CSM Pritchett's career began when she entered the Women's Army Corps on 2 July 1973. Upon completion of Advanced Individual Training, she was assigned to a WAC Detachment where she served as a company supply specialist. Due to her hard work and dedication to duty, she received an accelerated promotion to Private First Class. CSM Pritchett's accelerated promotion to Private First Class was one of many to come and the start, of what one might say the beginning of what would be considered an extremely promising and distinguished career.

Since joining the Women's Army Corp in 1973, CSM Pritchett has served in variety of duty positions to include: Squad Leader, Section Sergeant, Drill Sergeant, Platoon Sergeant, Army Recruiter, Operations Sergeant, First Sergeant, Instructor at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Battalion Command Sergeant Major, Installation Command Sergeant Major, Student and Faculty Battalion Commander, Combined Arms Center (CAC) Command Sergeant Major culminating in her most recent selection to serve in Afghanistan alongside Lieutenant General Barno.

CSM Pritchett is a proud member of the US Army Europe Sergeant Morales Club and was a member of the Women's All-Army Softball Team "1979" and "1984". On 18 June 1998, she was appointed as a Distinguished Member of the Quartermaster Regiment and awarded the Distinguished Order of Saint Martin, and on 24 August 2001, she was awarded the Distinguished Order of Saint Maurice.

CSM Pritchett's career as a leader began the day she graduated from Drill Sergeant School on her 20th birthday. The fact that she was barely 20 years old and the average ages of her trainees was between 25 and 27 years of age made her job "on the trail"

somewhat difficult. However, it was that job, serving as a Drill Sergeant that ultimately won her over to a career in the Army.

Mission success for CSM Pritchett and many women in the military has been an incredible journey. CSM Pritchett served in the Women's Army Corps until 1978, when its existence as a separate corps was abolished and women were fully assimilated into all but the combat branches of the Army. Prior to its abolishment, the Women's Army Corps was successful because its mission, to aid the United States in time of war, was part of a larger national effort that required selfless sacrifice from all Americans.

For at least three decades, success in the military has not been an easy venture. CSM Pritchett has not only witnessed, but has also experienced first hand women having to prove first that they possessed the ability and capability of handling a job or position prior to being accepted or afforded the opportunity to assume position, unlike her male counterparts. CSM Pritchett stated and I quote, "In most instances men were given a job or position without a second thought." Only when a man proved himself unable or incapable of performing at the level expected, was something said or done to rectify the issue at hand.

In attempting to reach higher echelons, CSM Pritchett and many women have had to perform their duties better than their male peers. Most women in our Armed Forces have had to focus on their current position, never looking forward or thinking about what might be next. Over the last three decades, women have trained and developed in order to be qualified and capable of competing at the senior levels based on their qualifications, abilities, and capabilities. The days of quotas for promotion selection by race and gender are long gone. Where women are concerned, it is about whom is best qualified based on

merit, ability, and capability, but there is one question that still remains: Will there always be those who believe otherwise and carry such biases? More importantly, will they sit in positions where they can influence the system and cause it to revert to the old days? Of course there will be, humans beings are imperfect beings, and so will these biases be in existence.

In November 1996, Sergeant Major of the Army McKinney appointed CSM Pritchett to serve on the Secretary of the Army's Task Force on Extremist Activities, from which the Army initiated the Army's Human Resources Action Plan. CSM Pritchett was later appointed to serve on the Senior Panel for Sexual Harassment. The findings and recommendations from both of these highly regarded commissions have had a monumental impact on the Army. As the only noncommissioned officer on the panel, CSM Pritchett was fully aware that once the investigation began, she would find that sexual harassment was a problem that had and would continue to affect mission success unless soldiers' awareness level were broadened. CSM Pritchett believed that sexual harassment pamphlets, tapes, and policy cards would help, however it was not going to solve an Army wide problem.

CSM Pritchett was selected to be the Senior Enlisted Military representative for the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in Services for the Army. She represented the interest of women service members impartially and aggressively, thereby enhancing service opportunities for all of America's future women in military uniform.

In June 1993, CSM Pritchett demonstrated her ability on the battlefield by serving as the Battalion Command Sergeant Major for the 561st Support Battalion, as it deployed to Somalia. She along with many leaders prepared the battalion for deployment with

virtually no advance notification. As recent deployments show, there's little or no time for train-up. This deployment like many others will continue to add some unique challenges to combat readiness. CSM Pritchett's stated, "tasks and standards don't change, but the conditions in which we execute them do." The battalion's mission was to provide logistical support functions to the United Nation Forces (UNOSOM II) deployed to Somalia to ensure relief supplies would get to the starving and sick Somali people without rebel interference. Her battalion's ability to execute their daily mission was not a major concern-their ability to survive on the battlefield was. The battalion as it was deployed was essentially a Task Force with many attached units. The battalion was composed of two Transportation Companies, a CSE Engineer Company, Water Purification Detachment, POL Supply Company, Mortuary Affairs Detachment, Postal Detachment, Civil Affairs Section, U.S. Marine Corps CI Team, and a Bangladesh Infantry Company. The 561st BN responsibilities encompassed hauling cargo, water, and fuel; producing storing and issuing water; receiving, storing, and issuing fuel; processing remains, and providing engineer services.

The challenges and dangers that she and her soldiers faced moving in and around Mogadishu were overwhelming. They endured convoy ambushes, mortar attacks, mined roads, sniper fire, and lastly the threat of children armed with grenades and explosives nearly on a daily basis. Convoys had to often be rerouted due to large and violent crowds, congregating in premeditated positions within the city. Throughout the four months that the battalion was deployed proved to be challenging, but manageable. CSM Pritchett's overall battlefield success was measured by the fact that she deployed and redeployed over 1,100 soldiers without the loss of life. .

CSM Pritchett has witnessed The United States Army drastically change over the last three decades. For example, immediately following the Vietnam War, the U.S. Army reached a low point, which brought about the birth of the NCOES and the subsequent rise in the professionalism and knowledge of noncommissioned officers and the NCO Corps.

The future is very bright in the Army, according to CSM Pritchett, particularly in the education area. “If soldiers want training, it’s there, but not in the traditional sense that you and I are accustomed to. Soldiers today understand the power and capability of the Web and that the Web holds the key to their educational goals” exclaims CSM Pritchett.

CSM Pritchett states, “Retention is very good, even in the forward deployed units, but it’s likely that changes in reenlistment will result from the War on Terror”. The impact that deployments will have on the recruiting and retention of Reserves and National Guard has yet to be determined. The days of one weekend a month and two weeks in the Summer is long gone. Since the Korean War, Reservists have seen very little in the way of deployments. Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom has shattered those views on how our wars will be fought and brought a new reality.

In conclusion, CSM Pritchett’s leadership record speaks for itself. Squad leader, recruiter, drill sergeant, first sergeant and an instructor at the United States Sergeants Major Academy. Not bad, one might say, especially for a female who has had to repeatedly prove herself from the very beginning of her military career. CSM Pritchett believes, “Women have not and do not seek special treatment or status, but only equal and fair treatment.” All female leaders want is the opportunity to be an integral part of our service-as we serve to protect and defend the United States of America. Nothing more-nothing less.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bellafaire, Judith A. "The Women's Army Corps: A Commemoration of World War II Service." www.army.mil/cmh-pg/brochures/wac/wac.htm 11 May 2004: pg. 1-18.
- "561st Support Battalion Trains for Survivability." NCO Journal Winter 1995: pg. 11.
- McCarthy, Kara A. "Bridging the Gender Gap." Women's History April 1998: pg. 5.
- Matanic, Rebecca. "561st Support Battalion CSM seeks best in self, soldiers." Somalia Sand Paper 30 August 1993: pg. 1-2.
- "Oveta Culp Hobby" www.ssa.gov/history/hobby.html 14 May 2004: pg. 1.
- "Oveta Culp Hobby" www.famoustexans.com/OvetaCulpHobby.htm 14 May 2004: pg. 1.
- Pritchett, Cynthia A. Personal Interview 27 March 2004.