

The Women's Army Corp

(1942-1978)

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Class 56

Women in the United States served their country in numerous wars, failing to receive recognition for the parts that they played, often denied benefits received by males. It was not until Congresswoman Rogers pursued legislation to petition congress on behalf of women who served were the role of women serving taken seriously. Finally, as the US prepared to invade Europe, women were actively recruited to serve in the military.

In July 1942 the first applications for volunteers to enlist in the auxiliaries (enlisted women) corp were received, some of these women had applied as officers and were denied entrance so they stayed on and did not have to reapply. The first group of enlisted trained for four-weeks in Fort Des Moines, and were assigned to Aircraft Warning units. By October 1942, enlisted women were performing duties up and down the eastern seaboard. Initially the auxiliaries worked clerical and motor pool jobs until they transferred to other jobs. Enlisted women were ranked differently than men they were ranked in descending order such as chief leader, a position comparable to master sergeant in the Regular Army, through junior leader comparable to corporal, and down to auxiliary, comparable to private.

Assigned jobs as clerks, typists, telephone switchboard operators, secretaries and motor pool drivers the first group of WACs in Europe consisted of 557 enlisted women with the Eight Air Force. The second set would reach Europe between September and October. A continued increase in the demand for typists and switchboard operators made it necessary to recruit an additional two classes of approximately forty-five women to attend a three-week basic training in England, with the WAC officers doing the jobs of executive secretaries, and photo

interpreters. During this time in France with the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force(SHAEF) 300 WACs worked as stenographers, typist, translators, legal secretaries, cryptographers, telegraph and teletype operators, radiographers and general clerks. These enlisted women assisted in the preparation and planning of D-day and other attacks to defeat Germany. One little known enlisted WAC was Ruth Blanton assigned to G-2, Intelligence Section of SHAEF, held a typical assignment of recording and translating reports from the French underground. These reports received over short wave radio, then decoded, and made available for the planning of the invasion of France, this information contained information about the number and location of bridges and railroad facilities, the movement and strength of the German troops occupying France and the activities of the German officers vital in the preparation for D-day.

In July 1943, the first Battalion of WACs reached Europe arriving in London, these 557 enlisted women served with the Eight Air Force, working as telephone operators, clerks, typist, secretaries, and motor pool drivers. On 23 February 1944, a bomb struck the WACs area when the compound located in Bushey Park near Kingston came under attack. The bomb caused heavy damaged to the WAC billets, company office and the mess hall. The WACs responded heroically, once the all clear was given, they began putting out fires and soon had the area back under control, showing that they were capable of surviving in this hostile environment. On 03 June 1944, again German missiles hit the quarters of American soldiers and WACs in London. The WACs administered first aid, operated the mess and drove jeeploads of soldiers to the hospitals, again showing

there strength and important in the war effort.

WACs worked long and tedious hours; plans were changed constantly so there was continuous typing of critical changes and alternate plans and routed them through the Allied command. During the war, three enlisted women were assigned to hospital ships. WACs were trained to replace men as radio operators on U S Army hospital ships. The Larkspur, the Charles A. Stafford, and the Blanche F. Sigman each received three enlisted women near the end of 1944, this proved successful and women were assigned as secretaries and clerical workers to hospital ships.

In February 1945, the first battalion of Black WACs received orders to travel overseas. The 6888th Central Postal Battalion arrived in England where they remained for three months and then eventually settled in Paris. The Battalion redirected mail to all U.S. personnel in the Theater of Operation. The first major task was to clear out the backlog of Christmas mail, which demanded that the WACs work three eight-hour shifts seven days a week. Although WACs were limited in their range of jobs, many gave up promotions to serve overseas. The 6888th kept updated information on each person, updating files frequently because personnel moved often working three eight-hour shifts seven days a week. The workload for each shift was over 65,000 pieces of mail, even with the heavy workload, morale was high knowing that they were keeping spirits high at the front.

The Southwest Pacific Area Command the last theaters to request WACs received drivers and mechanics to fill the positions of office workers, these women

had to be retrained once in theater, a tremendous challenge because there was over 5000 WACs on station. The winter uniforms, worn were too hot for the climate, and the Khaki trousers ordered worn to protect against malaria mosquitoes, were in short supply. Most women did not have enough uniforms or shoes to laundry clothes properly. Within the next Nine months, the WACs increasingly got sick causing many to leave the theatre for health reasons. The remaining WACs sick and losing weight kept their morale high living a highly restricted lifestyle. With the large number of male troops, some who had not seen American women in eighteen months the WACs were behind barbed-wire compounds, unless being escorted by armed guards. The women not allowed leave and passes, left them feeling as though they were children or prisoners, causing them to resent the guards.

In July 1944, 400 WACs arrived in China-Burma-India to serve with Maj Gen. George E. Stratemeyer who had fought against Lt. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell to have WACs serve in his unit. He needed stenographers, typists, file clerks, and telephone and telegraph operators.

The Army recognized the contribution of the WACs during World War II by presenting Sixty-two WACs the Legion of Merit for duty performance. Of these, SGT Maxine J. Rohkar received her Legion of Merit for “devotion to duty in administering classified documents pertaining to operations at Salerno and Anzio”. SGT Lettie F. Ewing, who “initiated and put into motion new methods of processing quartermaster requisitions.” Three WACs received Air medals among those to receive this most prestigious award was SGT Henrietta Williams, she was assigned as an aerial reconnaissance. Ten women received the Soldier’s Medal for heroic

actions (not involving combat). Sixteen Women received the Purple Heart, during World War II, and the Bronze Star was awarded to 565 women for meritorious service overseas. SGT Elizabeth Wilson a WAAC assigned to the Corp of Engineers participated in the Manhattan Project while stationed in Los Alamos, New Mexico running the cyclotron, used in the experiments in connection with the atomic bomb.

Eighteen years after the first enlisted women joined the women's auxiliaries, the US Army promoted the first female sergeant major. Command Sergeant Major Carolyn H. James enlisted in 1945 one of the first two WACs to serve in theater during the Korean War. She was assigned to Eight Army headquarters as a stenographer in Seoul. In 1960, she became the first female sergeant major.

Finally thirty years later the first Black woman was promoted to the rank of Sergeant Major. Command Sergeant Major Mildred C. Kelly enlisted in 1950. Before enlisting, she was a high school teacher from Tennessee. She served tours of duty as a personnel administrator at several Army post around the country and a two-year deployment to Japan. She was promoted to Sergeant Major in 1972 while serving at the Pentagon, becoming the first black female to achieve the highest enlisted rank. Command Sergeant Major Kelly, along with five male first sergeants advised then Army Chief of Staff William C. Westmoreland on proposed guidelines for non commissioned officers in the all-volunteer Army. She became a command sergeant major in 1974, and became the first woman to hold the highest-ranking enlisted job at any major Army installation with a predominantly male population. During her distinguished career, she received the Army's Meritorious Service

Medal, two Army Commendation Medals, and The National Defense Service Medal with oak leaf cluster, and the Good Conduct Medal with eight awards.

Class 56 here at USASMA has the largest population of females in attendance since the school started, clearly letting the world know that women will continue to have a vital role in the defense of this great nation. **ULTIMA!**