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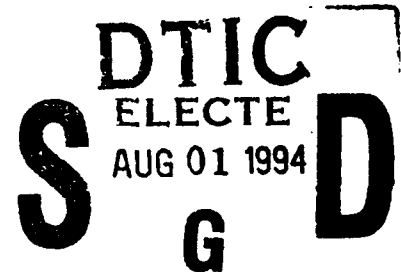


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African American Women Who Served Overseas During World War II: Towards a Life-Course Analysis

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**AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WHO SERVED OVERSEAS DURING WORLD
WAR II: TOWARDS A LIFE-COURSE ANALYSIS**

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AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WHO SERVED OVERSEAS DURING WORLD WAR II: TOWARDS A LIFE-COURSE ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

Background:

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the United States' involvement in World War II. It has also been fifty years since the inception of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), a vehicle by which the United States War Department recruited extraordinarily large numbers of women to actively participate in the war effort. By the end of the war approximately 100,000 women served in the WAAC, which in July 1943 was converted into the Women's Army Corps (WAC).¹ Official records of the Department of the Army reveal that 8,316 women served in the European Theater of Operation during the war, 850 of whom were Black. Very few systematic studies have been done on the implications of recruiting and mobilizing relatively large numbers of women during the Second World War. Concomitant with the reviewed interest in veterans who served during World War II is an effort among military scholars to launch systematic studies of military women to fill the void that currently exists in the literature. This report documents preliminary findings of a research effort to collect data on Black women who served overseas in England and France during the Second World War.

African American women constitute a particularly interesting unit of analysis because of their recent, disproportionately high representation among women in today's All-Volunteer Force (Moore, 1991). A recent study revealed that African American women were joining the military at a faster pace than other racial and ethnic female groups in the United States and that they were concentrated in the Army (Moore, 1991). Yet there have been virtually no studies about the historical experiences of Black women in the service of their country. The Six-Triple Eight (6888) Central Postal Directory Battalion is an intriguing military unit because it was the only group of Black WACs to serve overseas and reflects the race and gender segregation that characterized the United States Army during the forties (Moore, 1992). It also embodies the socio-political struggles that took place during the 1940s, in an effort to allow African American women to serve in all facets of the Women's Army Corps (Moore, 1992).

¹ Legislation that changed the status of the corps from an auxiliary to a component of the U.S. Army was enacted by Congress on June 29th and signed by the president on July 1, 1943.

Objectives:

The purpose of the study is to establish a basis for a life-course analysis of African American women who have served in the U.S. Army. During the summer of 1992, some of the women who served in the Six-Triple Eight Central Postal Directory Battalion were located and interviewed about their lives before, during and after military service. Military service is the event² under scrutiny in the lives of these women. The four main objectives are as follows:

- 1). Describe the Six-Triple Eight Central Postal Directory Battalion, and discuss the circumstances under which it was established.
- 2). Gather information on the demographic characteristics of the women who served in the unit.
- 3). Ascertain the motives, incentives and key influences of the members of the 6888 for joining the Women Army Auxiliary Corps.
- 4). Begin exploring ways of expanding the study for a life-course analysis of the long term effects of military service on members of the 6888.

² An "event" is defined as a "sharp disjunct between what preceded and what followed." See: Paul D. Allison Event History Analysis: Regression for Longitudinal Event Data (Newbury Park: SAGE Publ, Fifth Printing, 1990, p. 9).

TECHNICAL DISCUSSION

Source of Data:

The fact that there is so little written about African American women in the military made it necessary to go out into the field and begin collecting and consolidating data on the topic. Archival documents on women and minorities in the military during the World War II Era were examined at the: National Archives, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in N.Y.C., and WAC Foundation at Ft. McClellan, Alabama. Additionally, as mentioned above, women who served in the 6888 were contacted and interviewed. At this phase of the research, data collected from the fifteen women who were interviewed during the summer have been added to data collected from thirty-five women in a previous study (Moore, 1992). Thus far fifty former members of the 6888 have been contacted and interviewed.

Method of Collection:

Techniques specified in literature on qualitative research were used in the data collection and preliminary analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As a result of an examination of archival documents at the Military Reference Branch of the National Archives, some of the names of African American women who served overseas, in England and France during World War II were obtained. These women were later contacted and interviewed. A questionnaire which had been designed by the investigator in a previous study on Black women in the military was used in the data collection. Women were queried about their lives before entering the military, the types of military occupations they were trained in while they were in the military, and what they have done since they left the military. Interviews were conducted by telephone, and in some instances in person.

A preliminary analysis of the data was done through a process known as coding. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), there are basically three types of coding in grounded qualitative research: a). Open Coding, b). Axial Coding and c). Selective Coding. Open coding entails breaking down, examining, comparing, and categorizing data. The data is reassembled during axial coding by making connections between categories and classifying concepts. During the final step of coding, selective coding, the central themes which have emerged from the data are systematically related to other categories, thereby validating those relationships and filling in categories which need further refinement and development. Open and axial coding were the processes employed in this study.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

A Plan for Training Colored Officers at the WAAC Training Center:

African American women participated in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps from its inception. Nonetheless, the notion of recruiting Negro women to serve in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps created tension within the United States War Department because of the racial and gender exclusion policies that had only recently changed³. There was initially a great deal of confusion within the War Department about how to utilize black women in the WAAC. That bewilderment was reflected in many of the correspondences written to and by the War Department. On May 14, 1942, for example, the Executive Director of the WAAC, Major Harold P. Tasker, sent a memorandum to the Director, Ovetta Culp Hobby, informing her of a strategy to admit 40 Black women to the first OCS:

It was originally planned to admit twenty-three (23) colored women to the Officer Candidates' Course. Information from the Engineer School at Fort Belvoir indicates a very high percentage of failures from the colored group in the Engineer Officer Candidate Course. It is, therefore, believed that the number to attend our first officers' school should be increased to 40...Based on that figure, and assuming for sake of argument that there will be no losses, the following plan is offered as a workable solution from all angles, including training and housing facilities⁴.

The overall plan was to train just enough Black women to fill two companies consisting of three officers, 20 NCO's and a little over 127 auxiliaries. These companies were to be subsequently assigned to Fort Huachuca, Arizona, the

³ The Selective Service Training Act of 1940 expanded opportunities for blacks in the military by prohibiting racial discrimination against volunteers and draftees. The legislation stipulated that "any person, regardless of race or color, between the ages of 18 and 36, shall be afforded an opportunity to volunteer for induction into the land or naval forces..." (Lee, 1966: p.73). The creation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), was a result of Public Law 554, passed May 14, 1942.(Treadwell, 1954: p. 45).

⁴ Memo, Maj Tasker, GSC, to Col Hobby, Director of WAAC, May 14, 1942, G-1 File, National Archives.

largest Negro Army post at the time. At the end of the training period there were to be no Negro WAACs left at Fort Des Moines, Iowa.

The plan proposed by the Executive Director, however, never materialized. The Battalion Commander of the 6888, for example, remained at Fort Des Moines, Iowa until she was assigned to overseas duty a little more than two years later. History reveals that 39 Black women participated in the first WAAC Officer's Candidate School, graduated on August 29, 1942, and were commissioned third officers, the equivalent to the Army's second lieutenant⁵. The women were carefully selected from among the pool of eligible Black women. All of them had at least some college before entering the military, and many were college graduates. Mary McLeod Bethune, President of the National Council of Negro Women, and member of the Civilian Advisory Committee for the Women's Army Corps, helped to select the first Black women who would attend the officer candidate school in the WAAC.

Of the first thirty-nine African American women officers, six were among the thirty-one officers later assigned to the 6888. Information was collected on three former members of the 6888 who had also graduated from the first WAAC OCS Training Center. All three of the women interviewed had graduated from colleges before entering the military. The Battalion Commander of the 6888, for example, graduated from the first WAAC OCS and stated that she had graduated from Wilberforce University with majors in mathematics, physics, and Latin, and a minor in history before going into the military. She had been teaching mathematics and general science in Columbus, Ohio for four years, and was taking graduate courses at Ohio State University when she received a letter of invitation to apply for the WAACs (Earley, 1989:p.9). The letter stated that she had been recommended by the Dean of Women of Wilberforce University---Dean Teal---to be a candidate (Earley, 1989). The Executive Officer of the 6888, also a graduate of the first WAAC OCS, had completed four years of college at Tuskegee Institute, and worked as a school teacher before joining the military⁶. Similarly, the Special Service Officer of the 6888, another graduate of the first WAAC OCS,

⁵ Chicago Defender, August 1, 1942 p. 6 lists 40 names of black women who had successfully completed OCS. Charity Adam Earley (1989) stated that only 39 black women attended the first OCS class. She also indicates that all had successfully completed.

⁶ Interview with A. Noel Campbell Mitchell, 2/92.

graduated from Sargent College in Boston before entering the military⁷.

The first all black WAAC Training Company began training at Fort Des Moines on 21 September 1942, and graduated 4 December 1942. Upon graduation they formed two companies: (1) 32d WAAC Postal Company, and (2) 33d WAAC Postal Company. Both units were assigned to Fort Huachuca, Arizona on 4 December 1942 (Earley, 1989). Although the first two Negro WAAC companies were assigned to Fort Huachuca, African American WAACs were subsequently assigned to various Army and Army Air Corps installations throughout the United States. While most of the estimated 4,000 African American women serving in the Army during World War II went through basic training and served in racially and genderly segregated units, some of them served in units where they constituted the only Negro personnel.

The African American woman's military experience was often unique because of the varying policies directed toward race and gender. For example, Black and White Wacs were billeted in separate quarters. Similarly, unlike Black male units which were generally led by white commanders, Black female units were commanded by Black women officers. Black women officers, however, were not assigned to command white enlisted women regardless of how qualified they were. While Black men, and later, White women were being assigned to the European Theater of Operation, Black women were initially excluded from such assignments.

Establishing the Six-Triple Eight Central Postal Directory Battalion:

Although the First Contingent of WAACs went overseas to England in July of 1943, African American WAACs were not authorized to serve in the European Theater of Operation until the War Department acquiesced to socio-political pressures in 1944. On one side of the negotiating table were officials from the War Department; on the other side were the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, The National Council of Negro Women, founded by Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, and such black publications as the Pittsburgh Courier and the Crisis Magazine (Moore, 1992). The ethos of black reformist was that all American citizens, regardless of race or gender, should be afforded the opportunity to actively participate in the defense of the nation at all levels. After being directed by the War

⁷ Obituary of Mildred E. Davenport Carter, October 1990, St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church, Roxbury, Massachusetts.

Department to accept Negro WACs, officials of the European Theater requisitioned 800 Negro WACs to set up half of a central postal directory (Treadwell, 1954 p.599).

Assembled at the extended field service battalion, third WAC training center, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, members of the 6888 received training and outfitting for overseas duty. At the end of January, 500 Black WACs boarded a train and went to Camp Shanks, New York, for final processing. The Battalion Commander, Charity Adams and her Executive Officer, Abbie Campbell received orders to fly to Europe so that they could prepare for the unit's arrival. The First Contingent of the 6888 went by ferry to the dock of the Isle de France which they boarded on 3 February 1945. Accompanied by an armed convoy of ships, the First Contingent arrived in Scotland on 12 February where they boarded a train for Birmingham, England. Fifty days later the Second Contingent of the 6888 arrived in England. The unit was housed in an old English boarding school for boys known as the "King Edward School."

The primary mission of the Battalion was to sort and redirect mail, which before their arrival was serviced by white Wacs assigned to the First Base Post Office at Sutton Coal Field (150 miles from London). In the words of the Battalion Commander:

The 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion was responsible for the redirection of mail to U.S. personnel in the European Theater of Operations. The total number of U.S. personnel involved was estimated to be about seven million...This number included people in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Corps, and seabees, uniformed civilian specialists and technicians, non uniformed specialists, congressmen and their aides on inspection trips, Red Cross workers, and every person involved in and with military and paramilitary activity in the ETO (Earley, p.148).

Because so many of the Army units were moving from one combat area to another, combined with the fact that there was a civilian and military manpower shortage, mail had been accumulating in British warehouses. After three months in England, the battalion was moved to France. They crossed the English Channel by ship and docked at Le Harvre, and then went to Rouen by train. In Rouen they were housed in the Caserne Tallandier, which was surrounded by an eight foot wall with a high iron gate. In September 1945, the battalion was moved to Paris and lived at the Bohy Lafayette Hotel, near Sacre Coeur.

Just how well the unit performed overseas is still a subject of great debate. All of the women who were interviewed for the study stated unequivocally that the unit performed its mission outstandingly well. Former members are still disappointed that they did not receive recognition when they returned to the United States by being awarded a unit citation. While in England, the unit received great accolades in the British press, for their performance as soldiers, as well as for their social conduct (Moore, 1992). An official document suggests that while the unit may have performed well while it was full strength, the performance level dropped when the unit's size was reduced.

In November of 1945, Major Frances A. Clements and Captain Velma Griffith inspected WAC units in the ETO. The 6888 was inspected on 15 November. According to Major Clements evaluation report, the strength of the 6888 had fallen from 850 to 558 WACs, 210 of whom were eligible for discharge by 1 January 1946. Major Clements further stated that morale of the battalion was low for the following reasons: a) The Battalion Commander was confronted with many problems and failed to counsel her women wisely, as she had done in the past, to help them over the difficult period they faced, b) The work load had fluctuated from heavy to light and then heavy again without adequate time for the WACs to adjust. The problem was further compounded by the big reduction in unit strength at the same time a big influx of holiday mail was received, c) Heating was extremely poor, creating poor working conditions. Major Clements recommended that the 6888 be returned to the states. She spoke with the ETO WAC Staff Director in Frankfurt, Mary Halleren, and later to the G-1 AG, about the problems she saw in the 6888. ETO officials, however, decided to retain the 6888, going against Major Clements recommendation (Moore, 1992). All of the members, however, were returned to the states in February 1946. The war had been over for a few months, and while many of the members returned to civilian society, some remained in the military and retired several years later.

Demographic Characteristics of the Members:

Members of the Six-Triple Eight ranged in age from 20 to 50 in 1945. Many of them had experienced and remembered the impact of the Great Depression. They each experienced living in a society in which racial segregation was practiced. Many of them recalled the stigmas associated with being a woman in a predominantly male organization; and recognized their unique status resulting from the interconnection of race and gender. Several of the women had at least some college. Most of the women who were college graduates, and who worked before entering the military were school teachers.

According to documentation of the War Department:

The unit contained 40 percent unskilled workers, as against 1 percent for White Wacs in this theater, and 40 percent in the two lowest AGCT grades as against 10 percent for White WACS (Treadwell, 1954).

The fact is that members of the 6888 came from all walks of life in the civilian world. They represented all geographical areas, all levels of education, and all talents and skills among African American women in the United States during the 1940s (Earley, 1989).

Motives, Incentives, and Key Influences for Joining the WAACs/WACS:

The motives, incentives and key factors influencing members of the 6888 to join the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps were just as varied as their social backgrounds. Of the women interviewed, many of them stated that they joined the military for patriotic reasons. Some of the women said that they were the only members of their families who were eligible to serve. One woman, as a case in point, stated the following:

I had no brothers, no sisters, and I thought somebody in this family had to work for the war effort, so that's why I went.⁸

Many women stated that they wanted to change the occupations they had in the civilian sector, and joined the military in the hopes of being trained in a more enjoyable career. Other women were looking for a change in their lives. Some

⁸ Interview with Enid E. Clark, 27 May 1992.

joined just out of curiosity. When asked why she joined the military, one of the women replied in the following way:

...Most of the eligible men that weren't 4F [disqualified from military service] were in the service and...I got tired of being hit on by a lot of old men...and money was so scarce.⁹

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Advantages in Applying A Life-Course Perspective to the Present Study:

The life-course perspective provides the analytical framework to examine both changes in the social environment and those that take place in the lives of individuals (Elder and Caspi, 1990). The essence of the life-course approach is to examine macro social changes as they affect lives at the micro level. Employing an event model, the life-course approach allows the investigator to examine consequences of social change. Perhaps the answer to why this approach is particularly useful in military personnel research is best summed up in the following statement:

The term lifecourse itself denotes age-graded life patterns, embedded in social institutions, that are subject to historical change (Elder, 1991). Trajectories and transitions are the central constructs of life course theory. Trajectories are the dynamic paths that major aspects of a person's life follow...Embedded within trajectories are the critical transitions, which affect the directions that these trajectories or paths follow. Finally, life-course theory also demands that we take into account any antecedents, predisposing variables that might condition transitions and affect how they further influence life-course outcomes (Gade, 1991).

Hence, by applying life-course theory to a study of African American women in the military during World War II, an examination of the institutional norms governing the utilization of Blacks and women in the military may be done at the same time that variables affecting the paths in the lives of these women may be explored. By seeking to understand the consequences of a type of social change for the life course, in the present case the expanded role of

⁹ Interview with Dorothy A. Bartlett, May 27, 1992.

Black women in the U.S. Army during World War II, a life-course paradigm also allows one to examine the implications of change.

While there have been previous studies on male, World War II Veterans, applying a life-course approach (Elder, 1986, 1987; Elder and Clipp, 1989; and Hastings, 1991), there have been no such studies of women veterans of World War II. Such an analysis would be a great contribution not only to military studies, but to social stratification and gender studies as well.

Five Principles of Life-Course Analysis:

An application of the life-course model to the present study may begin with an application of five principles which are defined by Elder and Caspi (1990). (1) Control cycles are cyclical processes of losing control and efforts to restore control over life outcomes. Social change creates a disparity between claims and resources, goals and accomplishments, and the corresponding loss of control prompts efforts to regain control. Reactance feelings occur whenever one or more freedoms or expectations are eliminated or threatened. Such feelings motivate efforts to regain or preserve control (Elder and Caspi, 1990).

Elder and Caspi (1990) speak about the following four phases which mark the relation between social change and control cycles: (a) The disparity between claims and resources may occur through increasing claims, declining resources, or a discontinuity between acquired and needed resources; (b) the experience of losing control over one's life situation evolves from the preceding disparity; the greater the disparity, the greater the sense of loss; (c) enhanced by a sense of personal efficacy, efforts to restore control involve adjusting claims, resources, or both in terms of their relation. Equilibrium is achieved when claims match resources. Once claims are realized, they may be raised, thereby setting in motion another round of equilibrating initiatives (Elder and Caspi, 1990). An example of this process is the struggle which took place during the Second World War to insure that African American women were afforded the opportunity to serve in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. Once that goal had been achieved, the next goal was to afford African American women the opportunity to serve overseas. Once that goal was accomplished there was additional pressure for racial integration in the Women's Army Corps (Moore, 1992); (d) potential alteration or recasting of the life-course occurs through new lines of adaptation and their consequences. For example, a school teacher, as in the case of Charity Adams

Earley, becoming a Battalion Commander (Moore, 1992). The precipitating event alters the balance between claims and resources. As the balance changes, the actor's control potential is threatened, and adaptive responses are called into play. Adaptive responses depend on current conditions, the structured situation in history. Responses to historical transitions and the loss of personal control entail choices among given options, and this constraint illustrates how a social institution, i.e., the military) might shape the life course (Elder and Caspi, 1990).

(2) The behavioral requirements or demands of the new situation are referred to as "situational imperatives"---the personality of the actor as it is shaped by the situation. Hence, both actor and situation must be part of the model to account for how aspects of the setting and organization are linked to the personality of the actor. For example, how aspects of basic training are linked to the personality of the worker (Elder and Caspi, 1990).

(3) The accentuating principle refers to the increase in emphasis or salience of already prominent characteristics such as the social and psychological resources people bring to newly changed situations during social transitions in the life course. As stated by Elder, "It refers to the accentuation of dispositions through the interaction of life history and the demands of the new situation." It refers to "coping-styles" (Elder and Caspi, 1990).

(4) The life stage principle states that the influence of historical event in the life course depends on the stage at which the individual experiences the event. The life-stage perspective focuses on families and children in terms of the interactions among historical, social, psychological and biological factors (Elder and Caspi, 1990). For example, the age a woman enters the military influences her historical, social, psychological and biological factors.

(5) The concept of interdependent lives represents a central theme of family systems theories and is borrowed by proponents of the life-course approach. Essentially this principle assumes that the family is a social group, and its functioning as a whole is different than the sum of its parts. This arises because properties of the family as a whole are derived from the properties of the relationships between individuals in the family and not just from the characteristics of separate persons. Changes within any individual or relationship may affect all other persons and relationships. Because each person's action is a part of the social context of other members, any change in a member's life constitutes a change in the lives and context of other members (Elder and Caspi, 1990).

The application of a life-course analysis would allow the investigator to elaborate upon these principles to further understand the implications of 850 African American women serving in the ETO during the Second World War. This notion is discussed further below.

Necessary Steps Towards Developing a Life-Course Model:

Applying a life-course perspective to this study will enable an examination of both societal change and changes in the lives of the women in the sample. An examination of the social patterning of events and the patterns of roles over the life span of members of the 6888 would be possible by employing the life-course model. There have been historical changes in the United States since World War II. While the military was an event that all of the women interviewed thus far have said changed their lives, such events as the Brown vs. the Board of Education, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Women's Movement are also important in explaining more recent changes which have taken place in the lives of these women.

To apply a life-course model to the present study it would be necessary to take the following additional steps: a) conduct additional interviews of women who served in the 6888, b) draw a sample of African American women who were of military age and met all of the requirements to enlist in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in 1942-1944 but did not serve, to be used as comparison group.

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APPENDIX

List of Abbreviations

AG	Adjutant general
AGCT	Army General Classification Test
AVF	All-Volunteer Force
Bd	Board
Bn	Battalion
CO	Commanding Officer
Comdr	Commander
ETO	European Theater of Operations
EW	Enlisted women
G-1	Assistant Chief of Staff for Personnel
M/R	Memo for Record
NCO	Noncommissioned Officer
OC	Officer Candidate
OCS	Officer's Candidate School
WAAC	Women's Army Auxiliary Corps
WAC	Women's Army Corps