

WAC

Over 150,000 American women served in the Women's Army Corps (WAC) during World War II. Members of the WAC were the first women other than nurses to serve within the ranks of the United States Army. Both the Army and the American public initially had difficulty accepting the concept of women in uniform. However, political and military leaders, faced with fighting a two-front war and supplying men and materiel for that war while continuing to send lend-lease material to the Allies, realized that women could supply the additional resources so desperately needed in the military and industrial sectors. Given the opportunity to make a major contribution to the national war effort, women seized it. By the end of the war their contributions would be widely heralded.

The Women's Army Corps started with Congresswoman Edith Rogers when she approached General George C. Marshall early in 1941. She wanted to introduce a bill establishing an Army women's corps, separate and distinct from the already existing Army Nurse Corps, so that women serving could receive the same legal retention and benefits as their male counterparts, since this had not been the case in WW I. The Army, on the other hand, did not want to accept women directly into the ranks. The final bill represented a compromise. The Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) was established. The Army would provide WAACs with food, uniforms, living quarters, pay, and medical care, but WAAC officers could not command men and were paid less than their male equivalents.

The first WAAC units to reach the field went to Aircraft Warning Service units, since the Army Air Forces couldn't rely on volunteer civilians to man stations 24-hours a day. Initially, most WAACs worked as file clerks, typists, stenographers, or motor pool drivers, but eventually each service discovered an increasing number of positions WAACs could fill. Demand for WAACs steadily increased as more and more personnel became convinced of their value in the military.

At the same time, by early 1943, the number of women volunteering for the WAACs dramatically dropped due to a public backlash against the use of women in the armed forces, but by then it was the *Army* which was demanding the conversion of the WAAC into the regular Army. The demand for WAACs was larger than the Army could supply, and the eventual European front brought up the issue that WAACs had no legal protection if captured. On July 3, 1943, the WAAC became the Women's Army Corps. WAACs were given the choice to sign up with the regular Army or return to civilian life. 75% signed up...but the crisis in recruiting was still there. Renewed recruiting campaigns partially fixed this problem, but the initial levels of new recruits were never reached again. In the same month, the first battalion of WACs arrived in London, 557 enlisted women and 19 officers assigned to the Eighth Air Force.

The WACs, as the WAACs had done, performed above expectations. WAC Director Oveta Hobby received the Distinguished Service Medal, 62 WACs received the Legion of Merit, 3 were awarded the Air Medal, 10 received the Soldier's Medal for heroic actions (not involving combat); 16 received the Purple Heart, and 565 received the Bronze Star. In 1948, the WAC became a permanent part of the Regular Army, a testament to the success of the concept of women in the armed forces and their indisputable military value.

