

75TH ANNIVERSARY COMMEMORATIVE PAGE

WWII

Image from a WAVES recruiting poster during World War II. WIKIPEDIA

WOMEN JOIN THE RANKS

WAAC, WAVES established 75 years ago

By **John Sucich**
More Content Now

Rosie the Riveter. Hollywood actresses selling war bonds or entertaining the troops. The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. These might be the first images that come to mind when you think about women and their role in World War II.

There's been no blockbuster movie or lasting iconic image of the WAACs or the WAVES, but perhaps these groups should be the first to come to mind, as they paved the way for the permanent role women have played in the military ever since.

In May 1941 a bill was introduced to establish the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, or WAAC. After much debate in Congress, the bill was approved by the Senate a year later, in May 1942, and signed by President Roosevelt. Shortly after that, in July, the Navy established the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, known as the WAVES, and the Coast Guard, Marines and Air Force each established its own women's entity by August 1943.

"Keep in mind World War II is not the first time women are involved in the military," says Melissa Ziobro, a specialist professor of public history at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey. "In the 18th and 19th centuries, the United States military utilized women in what it considered gender-appropriate roles. Civilian women cooked and mended for military men during the Revolutionary and Civil wars. Some nursed, some spied, and some dressed as men in order to serve as soldiers."

HISTORY

During World War I, thousands of women worked with the U.S. Army as translators and telephone operators in France as civilians, and performed clerical duties as full members of the Navy and Marines. After the war the women's units were disbanded, and none of those who served were given the military benefits the men who served in the war received.



An image from a Women's Army Corps anti-rumor propaganda poster (1941-45)

Leading up to the time the United States became involved in World War II, lawmakers serving on the Naval Affairs and Military Affairs committees and military leaders realized the need for women to be involved in the war effort, and named Maine Rep. Margaret Chase Smith and Connecticut Rep. Clare Boothe Luce to those committees, respectively.

The Army bill allowed for the inclusion of women in auxiliaries to the Army — in other words, as civilians serving with the Army. The WAVES, on the other hand, accepted women into the Navy. By 1943 the WAAC became the Women's Army Corps (WAC), granting its members full military status. During World War II, more than 150,000 women served in the Army and about 86,000 women joined the Navy as WAVES.

REACTION

There was much resistance to the idea of women serving in a field that for so long had been dominated by men.

"Bipartisan objections to women's military service abounded," Ziobro says. "Republicans and Democrats alike denigrated the idea, with one senator going so far as to claim that the bill 'cast a shadow on the sanctity of the home.' The military went on a public relations campaign to



A group of WAACs (Women's Auxiliary Army Corps) receives instruction in tire structure and care as part of the automotive preventive maintenance course all Army men and women were required to take at Holabird Ordnance Depot, Baltimore, Maryland. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

convince nervous Americans that allowing women into the military would not tear apart the fabric of society."

Within the military some women were subject to sexual harassment, and there were many cases of discrimination. There were restrictions on the roles women could play — only WACs could serve overseas during World War II, and women serving in the other branches of the military were restricted at first to the continental United States, though before the end of the war they were given access to American territories such as Hawaii, where there was a great need for increased military members.

Some women felt their time in the military was more restrictive than the working lives they led before enlisting, while others felt liberated by their military service, because of the opportunity to earn money or travel in ways they hadn't been able to before. Ziobro, who is also the former command historian at the United States Army Communications-Electronics Command in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, says, "Often it was a mix of patriotism, adventure and opportunity that drew women to military service," as opposed to the other working opportunities that became available to women in America when the men went off to fight in the war.

IMPACT

Just as the industrial workforce

changed permanently after women made their mark on the scene during World War II, so too did the gender roles in the military, though that wasn't necessarily the expectation. The "E" in WAVES, for example, was included to stress this was an unusual "emergency," temporary action — not a permanent one. But throughout the 1940s the role of women in the military increased and slowly those women were granted additional rights.

Despite the presence of women in the military in various forms since the creation of the United States, "World War II saw huge numbers of women serving both 'with' and 'in' the military," says Ziobro. "While they were expected to be involved for the duration, they wound up never leaving. So this is the beginning of the military's modern formal use of women, and they have only been breaking down barriers since."

OTHER BRANCHES

In all about 350,000 women served in the military during World War II. In addition to the WAC and the WAVES women served in the:

- SPAR, which stood for "Semper Paratus, Always Ready," the Coast Guard's Latin motto and its English translation.

- WASP, which stood for Women Airforce Service Pilots, formed when the Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron (WAFS) and the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) merged.