

Everything But Carry a Rifle:
An Article Examining the Members of the
Women's Army Corps and their Relationship to Guns

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The Women's Army Corps toed a complicated gender and political line as female soldiers through the lens of the complicated and partially secret arming of WACs during WWII. More than 150,000 women served in the Women's Army Corps during World War II¹, many serving overseas in the European Theater of Operations (ETO), Pacific Theater of Operations (PTO), the Mediterranean Theater of Operations (MTO), and stateside. WACs were created to be support personnel for the traditional Army. The Women's Army Corps paved the way for women in the United States Army today and set precedents for how the military women are allowed to handle weapons and are assigned to combat zones.

Throughout 1942, U.S. Army officials repeatedly told the press and general public that the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACs) would not handle guns or serve in combat situations. Captain Gordon C. Jones, training director at Fort Des Moines in June 1942, told the International News Service, "A girl will do everything in the Army but carry a rifle."² Yet a few short years later, two WACs stationed in England with the 8th Air Force are photographed leaning on a Jeep with sidearms in holsters clearly stamped "U.S."³ What changed between the creation of the WAACs, the transition to WAC, and assignments overseas that led to these two individuals to possess and be photographed with pistols?

Lieutenant Colonel Ira Swift of the War Department made it clear during his testimony to the House committee in January 1942 that WAACs could not be deployed for combat service. "The law restricts this thing [overseas service] to noncombatant service. They cannot send them into combat zones for combat duty."⁴ Eventually, the law debated in January 1942 became Public Law 554 and was signed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt on May 14, 1942, to create the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. With the

¹ Judith A Bellafaire, *The Women's Army Corps: A Commemoration of World War II Service*. CMH Publication 72-15. U.S. Army Center of Military History.

² International News Service, "Women Face Busy Time at WAAC School," *The Washington Post*, Jun 29, 1942. Accessed March 23, 2021.

³ Imperial War Museums, "United States Womens Army Corps in Britain During the Second World War," Accessed March 1, 2021.

⁴ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Military Affairs, *Women's Army Auxiliary Corps*. 77 H.R. 6293, January 20-21, 1942. (Washington DC: GPO, 1942), 24.

wording that the WAACs were "...for noncombatant service with the Army...."⁵ Declaring WAACs 'noncombatants' barred them from handling weapons or being sent into actual combat.

The transition from WAAC to WAC is a complex moment in the Women's Army Corps history and an extremely vital moment in the topic of women and guns in the United States military. Converting from an attached auxiliary unit to an official Army corps came with a name change, regulation changes, pay scale modifications, postage benefits, and other legal status changes.

The law that transitioned the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps to the Women's Army Corps neglected to specify that the WACs would be noncombatant.⁶ A possible reason is that it was simply easier to allow the Army leniency in assignments for WACs by omitting this. The training of WACs for pay role purposes is a prime example of the Army taking advantage of this omission.

The transition from Auxiliary to full Army was reported to the American Public as a chance to beef up the Army and 'free men to fight.' Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, the director of the WAAC and WAC until mid-1945, is quoted as saying, "For every woman who comes forward to do a military job, one more father will be enabled to remain at home with his family." in a *Washington Post* article.⁷ That same *Washington Post* article included quotes from Auxiliaries, "I think most of the girls look on our jobs as important because we release men to shoot the guns." This quote from WAAC Mary Nelson implies that the WACs will continue to be noncombatants who don't handle weapons.⁸

Both Morden and Treadwell discuss this idea and other variations of "Free a man to Fight" that were repeated during the recruitment campaign and various public relations efforts. The posters created

⁵ U.S. Congress, Public Laws, *An Act To establish a Women's Army Auxiliary Corps for service with the Army of the United States*, May 14, 1942. Public Laws, 77 H.R. 6293, 77th Congress (Washington, DC: GPO, 1942), 278-282.

⁶ U.S. Congress, *U.S. Statutes at Large, Volume 57, 78th Congress, Session 1* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1943), 371-372.

⁷ Emily Towe, "600,000 Women Needed for Army: WAAC Or WAC, Army Girls Will Keep on Serving Country." *The Washington Post*, Jul 05, 1943.

⁸ Towe, "600,000 Women Needed for Army: WAAC Or WAC, Army Girls Will Keep on Serving Country." *The Washington Post*, Jul 05, 1943.

for the recruitment campaign continued to push forward concepts of “free a man to fight,” other posters urged young women to join the Army and other branches with snazzy variations of the phrase.⁹

Notably, despite the ‘noncombatant’ status and Hobby’s blatant statements that WAACs would not handle weapons, one group of WAACs were arguably assigned to handle one of the biggest weapons the Army could have given them: an Anti-Aircraft Artillery gun. The Bofors gun is the artillery weapon that the WAACs of Battery X became familiar with during their time as part of an experimental mixed tactical unit.¹⁰

After the transition to full Army corps, there are more direct instances of women soldiers handling weapons. One of the first more public instances of WACs with guns would be an article published in the June 29, 1944 issue of *The Bayonet*, the base newspaper for Fort Benning, Georgia.¹¹ The article reports on the first class of WACs to receive weapons training at Fort Benning for the purpose of handling payroll. The article notes that the training is for both officers and enlisted WACs and lists the first training class's names. It specified that these WACs are being trained on M3 submachine guns, pistols, and carbine rifles. This article was published in a base newspaper aimed at military members and not the general public.

The article is accompanied by a photograph (Figure 1.1) showing a male officer training a WAC on the M3 submachine gun. The photograph is an official U.S. Army photo made by the Infantry School at Fort Benning. The blurry photograph is difficult to make out; however, a slightly different article with a cleaner photo on August 31, 1944, unmistakably shows a WAC aiming a pistol.¹² These two articles published only a few months apart with photographs are extremely telling at how it was not a secret within the United States Army that WACs were handling weapons.

⁹ Mattie E Treadwell, *The Women's Army Corps* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1954.)

Bettie J. Morden, *The Women's Army Corps 1945-1978*, Army Historical Series (Washington, DC: United States Army Center of Military History, 1990)

¹⁰ Treadwell, 301-302.

¹¹ N/A, “In Order To Qualify,” *The Bayonet* (Fort Benning, GA), June 29, 1944.

¹² N/A, “Capt. Jeannette Miller,” *The Bayonet* (Fort Benning, GA), August 31, 1944.

Two articles published in 1942 in *Chicago Daily Tribune* and *The New York Times* bears bold headlines with keywords like “Rifle Range Skill...” and “...Two Sharpshooters...” The *Tribune* article discusses how Lieutenant Lucille Rose Novak of Cicero is a WAAC, but the mention of a rifle is simply a headline grabber and not included in the article.¹³ Notably, it is one of the least sexist headlines that could have been chosen. The *New York Times* article quickly states that the “...sharpshooters...probably won’t get to use that skill in the WAACS...”¹⁴ The article is designed to publish and dramatize the new trainees at Fort Des Moines, with short biographies on some.

These articles' characterization and joking manner belie the unease most Americans felt about the idea of women in the Army and the deeper unease of women in combat situations. Both articles seem in direct contrast with how Oveta Culp Hobby and the WAAC wanted to be presented at the time; however, they quickly reframe these WAACs as being within the status quo.

In a January 1944 interview with The American Forces Network, Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby gave this quote “Our WACs will not carry guns or drive tanks, but after the lines are established it is certainly reasonable to believe that they will take their places at Headquarters as they did in Italy and Sicily.”¹⁵ The entire interview is designed to assuage the audience's concerns, not the general American public but the average GI serving in the ETO. Interestingly, at the



IN ORDER TO QUALIFY for authorization to carry weapons while handling WAC payrolls, certain commissioned and enlisted members of The Infantry School WAC Detachments were given a brief course of instruction in small arms by the Weapons Section this week. Pictured above during a “dry run” on the M3 sub-machine gun are (left to right) Cpl. Edwin O’Byrne, enlisted instructor, coaching Lt. Francis Van Nice, commanding officer of WAC Detachment Two, TIS; and Sgt. William F. Hanson coaching 1st Sgt. Mildred Smutny, also of WAC Two. Other weapons fired during the course were the pistol and the carbine. The class of WACs, the first to fire at the School, included Capt. Mary K. Moynahan, Lt. Gladys Schreck, and 1st Sgt. Mary C. Brooks, of WAC Detachment One, TIS; Lt. Bernice L. Marshall, of WAC Two, TIS; Capt. Margaret E. Riley, personnel adjutant of the Academic Regiment; and Lt. Marjorie J. Walsh, of the Weapons Section. The instruction detail, headed by Capt. J. F. Casey, was composed of enlisted men from C Company, Academic Regiment, on duty with the M1 Rifle Committee. (Official U. S. Army Photo—The Infantry School).

Figure 1.1 The image and occupying article printed in *The Bayonet* Fort Benning base newspaper.

¹³ “Rifle Range Skill Aids Cicero Girl in Career With WAAC.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov 29, 1942.

¹⁴ The Associated Press. “250 Recruits Begin Training as WAACS: Two Sharpshooters are Among Group Arriving at Fort Des Moines Officer Camp.” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Aug 04, 1942.

¹⁵ Oveta Culp Hobby, “This is the American Forces Network,” interview by Corporal Bryan, *American Forces Network*, January 16, 1944, Transcript. Oveta Culp Hobby Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

same time in Aberdeen, Maryland, WACs were routinely driving Tanks and test firing weapons as part of their duties at the testing grounds.

One of the first mentions of WACs around or near guns in the press is a newspaper article from the *Washington Post* dated October 10th, 1943. The caption reads, “Pvt. Mabel Trent, in her soldier-approved necklace of machine-gun bullets at the ordnance proving grounds at Aberdeen, Md.” Notably, she is not wearing the ammo like a necklace; she is carrying it draped over her shoulders, the only effective way to carry ammo in that amount. The language is chosen to feminize and trivialize what the Private is doing. There is very little reason to frame carrying ammo as a fashion choice when it could otherwise be proclaimed ‘that this WAC carries ammo as apart of her vital war work’. However, at the same time, the caption emphasizes that she has permission to handle ammunition by saying it is a “soldier-approved necklace.”¹⁶

Beyond the photo, handling guns is specifically referenced in a more serious tone with less trivializing terms. “Gun Interiors Are Checked... Corpl. Clara Paulick of Pittsburgh, Pa., makes the charts and writes reports ... on all types of new guns. [She] ... has become an Army expert on guns and their operation.”¹⁷ The wording of this article implies that WACs are handling and test firing guns themselves.

The *New York Times* reported on Aberdeen more than once, with dramatic headlines like “Monster Tanks and Light Rifles Among Arms Tested at Aberdeen....” While the article never questions that WACs are doing a job well away from combat, this October 1943 article states, “...Wacs drive trucks, grease tanks and fire guns.” The WACs are only mentioned in one line, the rest of the article is simply reporting in vague terms on weapons and equipment testing.¹⁸ The explicit language of this article directly stating that WACs are not only handling weapons but firing them is less vague than the previous article but doesn’t really challenge the concept of WACs being noncombatants. Testing firing weapons doesn’t go against the carefully constructed image of the WAC as it could easily be framed as ‘vital war work’ far from the front lines.

¹⁶ Emily Towe, “WACS Behind Guns -- and Fire them Now, Too.” *The Washington Post*, Oct 10, 1943.

¹⁷ Emily Towe, “WACS Behind Guns -- and Fire them Now, Too.” *The Washington Post*, Oct 10, 1943.

¹⁸ Hanson W. Baldwin, "Monster Tanks and Light Rifles among Arms Tested at Aberdeen: Thousands Employed in Proving Latest Weapons of War -- Enemy's Armament Studied -- Germany's Best of Axis Nations," *New York Times*, Oct 16, 1943.

The reason that the testing at Aberdeen is so often repeated in the media at the time yet doesn't appear to impact ideas of women handling guns has everything to do with what exactly is happening at Aberdeen. Weapons testing can be easily explained and justified as non-combat and far from the front lines. In its very essence, WAC weapon testing 'frees a man to fight.' Additionally, it is a way to handle weapons that didn't challenge the American conservatism of the 1940s, which was more comfortable with women having jobs as secretaries only until they were married.

Several groups and some individual WACs have been identified as handling guns. These groups and individuals were involved in stateside and overseas duty with varying justifications for handling guns.

The Fort Benning Infantry School documented its efforts to train WACs on rifles, pistols, and submachine guns with photographs that appeared in the base newspaper, *The Bayonet*. The article named the WACs involved and those that trained them, explaining that the purpose of this training was so these WACs could handle "WAC payrolls."¹⁹

Other than stateside payroll services and weapons testing, overseas weapons handling near combat zones becomes more complex. In the PTO, three WACs were issued pistols to defend classified material connected to their work with the Signal Intelligence Office and were then attached to the Office of Scientific Research and Development. One of these WACs, Elizabeth F. Petrarca, gave an interview to the authors of *A Few Good Women*. In addition to this interview, Petrarca also gave Monahan and Neidel-Greenlee a photograph of her with her sidearm, a Colt .45.²⁰

One significant primary source is a photograph held by the Imperial War Museum in London, England (Figure 1.2). This photograph is posted online in the Imperial War Museum's digital image collection. The photo shows two WACs, Private Theresa Smith and Corporal Fay Zimmerman, in England with sidearms, clearly stamped "U.S." on pistol belts examining a map on the hood of a jeep. This source proves WACs were issued guns in the ETO as a part of the Eighth Army Air Force. The photograph itself and accompanying caption do not fully explain why these WACs were issued sidearms. However, the wording of the caption does provide some insight, "US Women's Army Corps (WAC) drivers and couriers

¹⁹ N/A, "In Order To Qualify," *The Bayonet* (Fort Benning, GA), June 29, 1944.

²⁰ Evelyn M. Monahan and Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee, *A Few Good Women: America's Military Women from World War I to the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2011) 165-166.

Private Theresa Smith and Corporal Fay Zimmerman consult a map whilst on duty at an Eighth Air Force base in Britain.”²¹

If Private Smith and Corporal Zimmerman serve roles as drivers and couriers, they were most likely transporting classified or sensitive materials. Private is the lowest rank in the Army, and Corporal denotes a Noncommissioned Officer. Both ranks are relatively low in the Army ranking system; I find it telling that neither is a fully commissioned officer; this denotes a level of trust afforded the enlisted WACs. Although I have no information for the photographer, upon contacting the Imperial War Museum, I discovered that they have no additional information other than it came to their museum as a collection known as “American (US) Embassy Second World War Photograph Library: Classified Print Collection.” It is possible this photograph which seems like it may have been posed, was confiscated, taken with the intention to remain classified, or any other number of reasons.

Nancy Riddle Hinchliffe told how as a WAC in the Signal Corps, “...when we went overseas, every seventh girl had to carry a gun. So the ones that could shoot the best carried the guns.” Hinchliffe went on to tell how she was a terrible shot and didn’t want to embarrass herself in front of her husband, who happened to be one of the shooting instructors and took a leave pass on the qualifying day.²²

Based on Hinchliffe’s oral history, it seems that the reason every 7th Signal Corps WAC carried a gun is simply that they were overseas; however, based on memoirs and oral histories of other units, this is not the case. Other WACs assigned to the ETO as a part of the 8th Air Force, Forward Echelon Communications Zone (FECOMZ), or 12th Army Ground Forces²³ would have similar reports. These Signal Corps WACs were mostly likely issued guns to protect the classified and sensitive material they were handling.

Despite the fact that noncombat status was not officially attached to the WACs, the American public continued to believe that WACs were non-combatants. A 1945 column “G. I. Humor,” in the Fort

²¹ Imperial War Museum, “United States Womens Army Corps in Britain During the Second World War”

²² Nancy R Hinchliffe, Interview by Eric Elliott. April 17, 1999. Transcript. Nancy Riddle Hinchliffe Papers. Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, 18

²³ The WACs assigned to the 12th Army Ground Forces were the farthest forward WAC detachment in the ETO and the closet WACs to the front lines.

Benning Army Base newspaper, *The Bayonet* demonstrates this continued belief, “Henpecked husband: “But, dear you won’t like WAC service. It’s non-combat.” ”²⁴



Figure 1.2 Imperial War Museum photograph clearly showing two members of the Women’s Army Corps with pistols on pistol belts with “US” stamped on holsters reviewing a map on the hood of a Jeep.

²⁴ N/A, “G.I. Humor” *The Bayonet* (Fort Benning, GA), June 28, 1945.

Caitlyn Kelly illustrates neatly in *Blown Away* how women's places in the debate over gun control are not heard or are never considered. Kelly examines the reasons behind this exclusion of half the population, unless it is purely in opposition to guns, concluding that "[t]he image of a traditionally nurturing female bearing arms still scares many people...."²⁵ This is a sentiment from a 2004 book, and in the 1940s, this sentiment was quite strong as evaluated by Donna Knaff in her article "The 'Ferret Out the Lesbians' Legend: Johnnie Phelps, General Eisenhower, and the Power and Politics of Myth." Knaff discusses how the Women's Army Corps provided a safe space for lesbian and queer identities to develop, as we partially know them today before the Army started rooting out lesbians late in the war. Knaff also evaluated the change in the perceived sexuality of many women.

"Allowing women into the military, that quintessentially masculine organization, might permit women the ultimately symbolic, phallic power of a weapon. This crossed a line that the public was extremely hesitant to cross, because it denoted agency and increased women's societal threat. The source of much of this social anxiety was rooted in the association of "masculine" or "mannish" women with lesbianism and other kinds of implicit or explicit sexual agency."²⁶

This analysis is useful on two fronts. It examines Americans' deep fears about women in the military as a social threat. It also looks at worries that some women would become more masculine or even change sexual orientation by joining the military. This analysis can even be extended to the masculinity associated with firearms and the idea that women soldiers could give up their femininity twice by becoming soldiers and second by handling weapons.

If the American public could swallow the idea of women in the military, could they further accept the idea of women with weapons? The way the US Army chose to represent the WACs in the press suggests no.

It is easy to see why the American public thought and believed quite strongly that no American Servicewoman would handle guns during later parts of the war when the Army and the press constantly repeated these ideas. Quotes from Army personnel, like of Captain Gordon C. Jones, training director at

²⁵ Caitlin Kelly, *Blown Away: American Women and Guns*. (New York : Pocket Books, 2004), 33.

²⁶ Donna Knaff, "The 'Ferret Out the Lesbians' Legend: Johnnie Phelps, General Eisenhower, and the Power and Politics of Myth." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 13, no. 4 (October 2009): 415–30, page 418.

Fort Des Moines in June 1942, “A girl will do everything in the Army but carry a rifle.” only served to bolster the safe idea of an American girl serving far from combat.²⁷

The decisions of the 1940s, influenced by American ideas of femininity and conservatism, and made necessary by the realities of war, impacted the policies governing women in the army through the 1970s and the dissolution of the WACs in favor of a gender-integrated Army. And the eventual lifting of the combat ban on women service members in 2015. These influences still hold power with the exclusion of women from the draft and contributing to more significant policy issues.

The complex interaction of legal language and definition, depiction to and through the American press, public perceptions, and surrounding national culture all defined and contributed to how the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps and Women’s Army Corps trained and used or did not use guns during World War II. In short, yes, there were women soldiers during World War II who handled firearms. In essence, some girls in the Army did carry rifles.

²⁷ International News Service. "Women Face Busy Time at WAAC School." *The Washington Post*, Jun 29, 1942.

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