

Black WACs and Bad Times in the Good War: They Signed Up to Fight ...

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Black WACs and Bad Times in the Good War

They Signed Up to Fight America's Enemies, but Their First Battle Was on the Home Front

By RitaVictoria Gomez

AS WE OBSERVE Veterans Day tomorrow—which this year honors in particular the American soldier of World War II—we should find a moment to salute the 4,000 determined black women who fought almost unbelievable discrimination to serve their country in that conflict.

With war erupting throughout Europe and Asia in 1941, Congress responded to the military's overwhelming personnel needs by allowing women to be incorporated into the armed services. By war's end more than 400,000 would serve in almost every capacity short of

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combat—though in fact more than 200 were killed and many more were wounded and captured.

Enthusiasm for the new women's units ran high among civil rights leaders and the black community, which saw an opportunity for black women to prove their worth as citizens and to challenge both official segregation in the military and widespread discrimination in American civilian life.

But disillusionment began immediately. The Navy, Marines, Coast Guard and Army Nurse Corps announced they had no place for black women—only whites need apply. The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) alone was open to blacks, but even it limited their enlistments to the proportion of blacks in the civilian manpower force: 10 percent. Moreover, the WAAC would follow established Army policy; full integration was forbidden.

The first group of 40 black women, selected by compet-

itive examination from more than 4,000 applicants, entered the WAAC on July 20, 1942. They were formed into two companies, and officers were selected from among them. After basic training, some of the 40 attended the first officer candidate school for women at Ft. Des Moines, Iowa. For the others, recruiters' promises of opportunities to learn new skills that might lead to good postwar jobs quickly proved empty. Most were assigned to the motor corps or served as cooks, bakers and mess attendants—which usually meant long hours of kitchen police (KP) duties.

During the early days of the WAAC, blacks were too few to organize into separate companies, so whites and blacks lived and worked together. Even this limited integration produced immediate repercussions. As protests poured in from civilians, the War Department quickly ordered separate facilities for black Waacs and assured concerned congressmen that henceforth white and black women, even if they worked together, would not eat in the same mess halls or sleep in the same barracks.

Although the War Department and the WAAC continued to stress advancement for qualified black women on an equal basis with whites, segregationist practices were the reality. Black women were not assigned where they were not wanted, and most commanders refused to accept them. Black WAAC officers could only command black units. And under no circumstances could black officers supervise white officers junior to them in grade.

The War Department stood adamant against desegregation, proclaiming a public policy of "segregation without discrimination." The military, it stressed, was "solely in the business of winning the war" and had "neither the time nor the desire to engage in changing the existing social orders or customs"

Some WAAC training centers and many Army bases were located in the South, where public bus and rail transportation was totally segregated. Black military women traveling between North and South were not allowed to enter into dining cars of trains until all whites had eaten. They then ate with a curtain drawn around them. No menu was offered nor prices quoted. One black second lieutenant who refused to move from her seat on a bus in Montgomery was beaten, dragged off the vehicle, arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to 30 days in jail. (Many years later a black woman named Rosa Parks on another Montgomery bus set off a nationwide social revolution.)

Besieged by complaints and increasingly under fire from black activist groups and organizations, the War Department asked the U.S. attorney general for guidance. That office replied that the Supreme Court had found segregation on public transportation to be legal and that Army members must comply with regulations imposed by carriers. Local commanders rarely did anything to interfere with the prevailing Jim Crow laws.

Discrimination against black Waacs was bound to cause an explosion, and not necessarily in the South. In November 1944, a company of 60 black medical technicians in the now renamed Women's Army Corps (WAC) arrived at Lovell General hospital at Fort Devens, Mass. Although military hospitals were overcrowded and

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understaffed, black women were not allowed anything but the most menial tasks. Instead of being assigned to their military specialties, the 60 new arrivals were put to work washing windows and scrubbing floors. White civilians were quickly schooled in such routine procedures as temperature-taking, catheterization and physical conditioning, tasks which the black Waacs were already trained to do.

The women complained but were ignored. On March 7, 1945 all 60 began a sit-down strike and requested an interview with the hospital commander. At first he refused to meet, but finally did so and delivered a tongue-lashing. "Black girls," he told the Waacs, are "fit only to do the dirtiest type of work" because that's what "Negro women are used to doing." He would not have black Waacs serving as medical technicians—"They are here to mop walls, scrub floors and do all the dirty work"—and he hoped that the war lasted 25 more years. The women walked out on him.

On March 10, the 60 were officially commanded to return to work or be held in violation of the Articles of War for failing to obey a lawful order in wartime. Of the 60 strikers, four refused to return to duty and were arrested. The court martial brought out numerous instances of discrimination and inferior working conditions, and the four were repeatedly told that since they were black they were not to perform as medical technicians. The women were found guilty and could have been sentenced to death. But the court was lenient: It sentenced the women to a forfeiture of all pay and allowances, one year at hard labor and then a dishonorable discharge.

Black organizations, press, communities and congressmen now reacted. They found it unbelievable that with a nursing shortage in the midst of a world war, a hospital commander would hamper efforts by black Waacs to help nurse wounded soldiers—and that they would get a year at hard labor for trying. The uproar, the allegations at the trial and complaints to the White House ensured the War Department's prompt response. The convictions were reversed and the charges dismissed. Blacks wanted the Lovell commander investigated and punished, but the War Department closed the matter.

Despite black sacrifices and contributions, the Army held fast to its policy of segregation until long after the war against the "master races" in Germany and Japan had ended.