

Remembering Their Service

May is **National Military Appreciation Month**. The contributions and sacrifices made by the various branches of our U.S. Armed Forces for the defense of our country and preservation of our freedom cannot be overstated, and are worthy of the deepest gratitude of every American. Included among all those whose military service should be remembered this month are the WACs, the women who capably served in the Women's Army Corps.

Early in 1941, with war already being waged in Europe, Massachusetts Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers was preparing to introduce a bill to establish a women's corps that would be part of the U.S. Army, but which would function separately from the already existing Army Nurse Corps. The Army was initially skeptical of the idea, but a compromise was reached that would provide for a Women's Army Auxiliary Corps to work with, though not as part of, the Army. Its



purpose would be to make “available to the national defense the knowledge, skill and special training of the women of the nation.” The compromise bill failed to get any serious consideration by Congress. However, after the United States entered WWII, following the December, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor, it became clear to many that the extent of the war effort would eventually cause a manpower shortage, and there were critical, military-related jobs that could be filled by a recruited women's corps.

The bill was finally passed, and was signed by President Franklin Roosevelt on May 15, 1942. Oveta Culp Hobby, who had been an official in the Women's Interest Section of the War Department's Public Relations Bureau, was appointed as the first director of the WAAC. She firmly, and rightly, believed that American women could make significant contributions to the country's war effort, and that many of them would welcome the opportunity. Over 35,000 women applied for the initial WAAC officer training program, to fill 1,000 available positions. Several were widows of men killed in the Pearl Harbor attack. Within a year, five WAAC training centers were opened around the country.

Assignments for the WAACs included working with the Army Service Forces, Ground Forces, and the Army Air Force. Their duties ranged from clerical to highly skilled technical responsibilities. The abilities and competence of the WAACs were widely recognized. Both the demand and the need for additional WAAC recruits increased as the war progressed. Many would be needed for more assignments overseas. In 1943, Congresswoman Rogers introduced another bill to convert the auxiliary corps to the Women's Army Corps, making it an actual part of the U.S. Army, thus giving the WACs a more official status that would allow them pay, privileges and protections similar to those of servicemen. The bill was signed into law July 3, 1943.

More than 150,000 women served as WACs during WWII. Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, among others, praised the work done by the WACs, saying, "...their contributions in efficiency, skill, spirit and determination are immeasurable." As further acknowledgement of their many contributions to the war effort, the Army awarded the Distinguished Service Medal to Oveta Culp Hobby. Additionally, 16 WACs received the Purple Heart and 565 received the Bronze Star.

Following the war, the 1948 Women's Armed Services Integration Act made the Women's Army Corps a permanent part of the Regular Army. WACs went on to serve through the Korean and Viet Nam conflicts. In October, 1978, an Act of Congress disestablished the WAC as a separate corps of the Army, but many more women since that time have volunteered to proudly serve in America's military. This month and every month, we can remember and be thankful for the service of both men and women, past and present, in our Armed Forces, particularly those who have paid the ultimate price.

Priscilla Poese, *Americanism*

★ *Military* ★
APPRECIATION MONTH
MAY 1 - 31

