

IN THE NAME OF FREEDOM:
REMEMBERING BLACK WOMEN IN THE WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS

by

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ABSTRACT

IN THE NAME OF FREEDOM: REMEMBERING BLACK WOMEN IN THE WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS

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This thesis examines the double minority status of black women and their experiences in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps/Women's Army Corps during World War II. I argue that the combination of racial and gendered segregation directly influenced black women's service and contributed to an array of issues that complicated their relationship with the Army. I do so by investigating women's motivations for joining the WAC, structural and cultural barriers to black women's enlistment and service, instances where black women were barred from recruitment, the Army and War Department's approach and response to discrimination toward black women, the trivialization of black women's labor and bodies, and black women's advocacy for themselves in the face of continual discrimination from the Army and the WAC.

INTRODUCTION

I am writing you in regards of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.

I enlisted to give my Service to my Country the best I knew how, I did not enlist for no officers [*sic*] job but where I could serve my Country best.

...

I am a colored woman an American citizen of the U.S.A. I am speaking for my self and thousands of others. So I wish you would investigate please and let me know why they segregate [*sic*] or discriminate the colored women from the WAAC.¹

— Beulah Gibson to Eleanor Roosevelt

Soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Congress reluctantly approved a bill that allowed women to serve in the Army under a new corps: the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). Initialized on the fourteenth of May in 1942, the inclusion of women in the armed forces mirrored the growing diversity in the U.S. Army. Two years before, Congress passed the Selective Service Training Act of 1940 with the inclusion of a non-discrimination clause. The non-discrimination clause established that racial discrimination of any kind had no place in conscription. This clause became relevant to the Women's Army Corps (WAC) when it was finally included as a branch of the Army. It meant that the WAC would be held to the same standards in following the War Department's antidiscrimination policy. Despite this clause, the War Department upheld segregation in the armed forces, revealing that the Army did not increase diversity in a socio-politically substantial way, nor in a way that marked revolutionary racial progress. Because the military continued to segregate black men from white men per the

¹ Beulah Gibson to Eleanor Roosevelt, April 3, 1943, folder 103246-023-0001, Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0001&accountid=7090>.

policy of the War Department, the practice extended into the WAAC/WAC. The initial conditions of the WAAC bill excluded women from full participation in the Army by designating the Corps as an auxiliary branch. The combination of racial and gendered segregation directly influenced black women's service in the WAAC, contributing to an array of issues that complicated their relationship with the Army.²

This thesis examines the relationship between black servicewomen and the Army. Early histories of black women's roles in the WAAC/WAC have focused primarily on examining specific events and women to explore the role black Waacs/Wacs played during the Second World War.³ For the most part, scholarship on the participation of African Americans in the Army, while limited, has focused on black men. Still, literature on black servicemen is crucial in understanding black women's service during the Second World War. Thomas A. Guglielmo's examination of black Americans' relationship with service by looking at color lines in the military during the Second World War, for example, contextualizes and expands on the relationship between black Americans and the Army. Guglielmo argues in his book, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America's World War II Military*, that the military built and enforced complex racial divisions during World War II, and these divisions were enforced through a "black-nonblack line," or color line. The color line led black activists and their supporters to organize and protest the racialized treatment of black soldiers, which shaped

² Judith A. Bellafaire, *The Women's Army Corps: A Commemoration of World War II Service* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1993), <https://history.army.mil/brochures/wac/wac.htm>.

³ The WAAC was changed to the WAC after Congressional hearings in March 1943, during which Army leaders pushed for the Corps to be part of the Army rather than an organization that served alongside it. I mainly use the term WAC, unless the information I am citing specifically has to do with the WAAC, in which case I refer to the latter. When formatted in upper case, I am referring to the institution. Lower case refers to people. The lower case format is something that started with Leisa Meyer's work and continued into other WAC histories. Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2.

the experiences and outlooks of black personnel and Americans during World War II as they navigated their relationship with service.⁴

Matthew F. Delmont contributes to the literature on African American service during World War II by dissecting the nuances of service for black personnel as they contended with their socioeconomic status in white America in his book *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad*. He views World War II through the lens of African Americans who served and their experiences with all facets of war. Delmont argues that current narratives surrounding the Second World War neglect to include the experiences and contributions made by black servicemen and servicewomen, though the latter is not the primary focus of his work. He cites historian John Hope Franklin, who tried multiple times to apply to the Navy and Army but was rejected. Franklin expressed that World War II “raised . . . the most profound questions about the sincerity of my country in fighting bigotry abroad.” Delmont brings America’s sincerity in fighting bigotry to the forefront of his scholarship, which helps contextualize black women’s experience with bigotry in the WAC.⁵

Kimberly L. Phillips contributes to scholarship surrounding black service by examining black freedom struggles from World War II to the Iraq War in her book *War! What Is It Good For? Black Freedom Struggles & the U.S. Military*. She looks at black service through several wars and argues that the African American community’s push to fight alongside their fellow white Americans shows that civil rights and citizenship are closely tied to military operations and the right to serve. Her comprehensive examination of black service over several decades adds

⁴ Thomas A. Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Race and Resistance in America’s World War II Military* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2–3, 7.

⁵ Matthew F. Delmont, *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad* (New York: Viking, 2022), xii, xvi–xvii.

insight into the diverging attitudes within the black community over whether service *offered* opportunities for black Americans or if service exploited black freedom movements and the black community. It is important to consider Phillips's work when examining black Wacs' experiences and motivations for joining the WAC. Service presented a complicated and controversial path for black women to experience citizenship.⁶

Maggi M. Morehouse adds to the literature of black service in her book, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: Black Men and Women Remember World War II*. Morehouse argues that black servicemen and servicewomen have remained invisible in discussions of World War II memory and accomplishments. Her book represents a shift in scholarship from a WAC-centered focus to the combined experiences of black men and women during the Second World War. Morehouse extensively looks at segregation as a crucial component in narratives surrounding black Americans' experiences during World War II, and she sets the foundation for the works of historians like Guglielmo, Delmont, and Phillips.⁷

The research of historians Thomas A. Guglielmo, Matthew F. Delmont, Kimberly L. Phillips, and Maggi M. Morehouse on segregation, discrimination, and Jim Crow in the Army is crucial to historical analyses of recruitment, labor, and the willingness/motivations of black Americans to serve during the Second World War. Additionally, historians like Maureen Honey and Brenda L. Moore contribute to discussions of black women's personhood through their experiences during World War II both in and outside of the WAC. Leisa D. Meyer adds to the scholarship of black Wacs through her exploration of sexuality in the WAC. It was Martha S.

⁶ Kimberly L. Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For? Black Freedom Struggles & the U.S. Military from World II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2012), 4.

⁷ Maggi M. Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: Black Men and Women Remember World War II* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 235–236.

Putney and Sandra Bolzenius, however, who made the greatest contributions to scholarship on black Wacs through their research on the black Wacs' service in the Army and their resistance to discrimination. Kimberlé Crenshaw is another instrumental figure in the examination of the intersectionality of race and gender, a term that she coined to explain the crossroads of minority experiences. I add to the historiography of black Waacs/Wacs by further expanding on their experiences with recruitment, work assignments, and their own personal experiences in service. I do so by looking at WAAC/WAC correspondence contained in the NAACP Papers, official government documents, newspaper articles, and available records on black women's service. Previous WAAC/WAC historians have engaged with the archival material, but not to the extent that I do through government and NAACP communications, which have been made more readily available in this digital age through online databases.

I examine the double minority status of black women and their experiences in the WAAC/WAC and argue that black women's service redefined racial barriers and military service. I do so by investigating women's motivations for joining the WAC, structural and cultural barriers to black women's enlistment and service, instances where black women were barred from recruitment, the WAC and War Department's approach and response to discrimination toward black women, the trivialization of black women's labor and bodies, and black women's advocacy for themselves in the face of continual discrimination from the Army and the WAC. To fully understand the social significance of World War II for black women, it is necessary to acknowledge the discrimination they faced, in addition to black women's resistance. I do this in three ways. First, I look at black women's experiences with recruitment and how they navigated hurdles that discouraged them from serving. Segregation and discrimination impeded the attempts of black women to join the WAAC/WAC, leading to frustration and community

organization. Second, I examine the labor of black Wacs who were accepted for service and the discrimination they faced in their assignments. This discrimination was influenced by sexual and racial stereotypes held toward black women. Stereotypes impacted the kind of jobs they worked and the Army and black leaders' responses to black women's frustrations. Finally, I analyze the experiences, memories, and feelings of black women and the African American community over black women's service in the WAAC/WAC. This analysis allows for a better understanding of the stakes that came with service in the WAC—sexual and racial violence and gender and race-based discrimination. These stakes are significant in understanding what made service meaningful for black Wacs who chose to serve despite looming threats of discrimination and violence. Black women who served during the Second World War illustrate the complexity of race and gender in military history. This history reveals that, though the military was one of the most progressive institutions during the Second World War, “progress” was limited. Black women had to fight for a place in the WAC.

In a time of tumultuous uncertainty, joining the military allowed women to support themselves and their families, advance their careers, and hold positions of power they would never have been able to otherwise. Leaders of the WAC, like its director Oveta Culp Hobby, sought to enshrine the WAC as an avenue for American women to contribute to the war effort and earn some of the same benefits offered to men—or, more aptly, white men. African American women, who for generations experienced discrimination and exclusion because of their race and gender, saw an opportunity for their advancement through the WAC. As historian Brenda L. Moore observes, joining the WAC offered women a chance to earn benefits associated with military service, including those in the 1944 GI Bill after the Corps was no longer designated as an auxiliary. The GI Bill included benefits that offered accessible healthcare to

veterans, financial assistance for homeowners and businesses, and unemployment insurance.⁸ As the war raged on, benefits included more access to education and employment in a “typified racial-caste society.” These benefits were especially important to black men and women, who were historically excluded from socioeconomic assistance meant for white Americans, particularly white middle-class men.⁹

While the WAC offered all women these opportunities, they were especially important to black women. Historically, black women did not have access to resources or opportunities that aided them in assisting their community, family, and themselves. Serving in the Corps opened a path for black women to enjoy the benefits of citizenship, even if limited. The “benefits of citizenship” entailed the privileges enjoyed by (white) citizens—the chance for civic participation, protection under the law, and equal opportunities for advancement. The fight for citizenship connected to black freedom movements and patriotism. The relationship between citizenship and freedom made it even more imperative that African Americans’ service in the Second World War *guarantee* full citizenship. Full citizenship needed to include *all* people regardless of their race and gender. If America was truly fighting for democracy, as so many Americans believed, the Army needed to grant the benefits guaranteed to white men to the minorities fighting in the war, including black women in the WAAC/WAC.¹⁰

The fight for full citizenship was not the only thing black women contended with by joining the WAAC/WAC. The Corps faced scrutiny when it came to justifying its existence. It

⁸ Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, Public Law 346, 78th Cong., 2d sess. (January 10, 1944), <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/servicemens-readjustment-act#transcript>.

⁹ Brenda L. Moore, *To Serve My Country, To Serve My Race: The Story of the Only African American WACs Stationed Overseas During World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 11.

¹⁰ Delmont, *Half American*, 53.

threatened patriarchal systems in the United States. Men defended their families, their communities, and their country. Women, on the other hand, nurtured their families, their communities, and their country by performing their role as caregivers. To emphasize the “importance” of the domestic roles of women, an opponent of the WAAC Bill, Congressman Clare Hoffman (R, Michigan), asked, “[W]ho will then maintain the home fires; who will do the cooking, the washing, the mending, the humble, homey tasks to which every woman has devoted herself” if military opened service to women? Hoffman argued it was the job of America’s women to fulfill their roles as nurturing mothers to teach America’s children “patriotism and loyalty” so that their children might grow up to become men who, when called upon, “may march away to war.” *That* was how women contributed to winning wars. The idea of women serving in the Armed Forces challenged the traditionally male-dominated institution and gender roles since it was their job, in Hoffman’s opinion, to raise America’s future soldiers.¹¹

African American women in the WAAC/WAC faced even greater institutional resistance than white women because of their race. Race distinguished African American women from non-black women, just as their gender distinguished them from black men. Recruitment numbers reveal that the Army rejected black women at a disproportionate rate. HR 6293—the WAAC bill—established that no more than 150,000 women be enrolled in the WAC. Out of these 150,000 women, the War Department aimed for 10 percent of the Corps’ recruits to be Black women, similar to its 10 percent policy for the recruitment of black men into the Army.¹² The

¹¹ Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 19–20.

¹² The 10 percent quota for African Americans was structured in a way to limit the number of black applicants to a percentage proportionate to the population they represented in the United States in 1940 (approximately 12,865,518 out of 132 million Americans). For eligible black men in the age range from 20 to 35, they approximated 1.5 million out of 16,213,336 American males. George Q. Flynn, “Selective Service and American Blacks During World War II,” *The Journal of Negro History* 69, no. 1 (Winter 1984): 14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2717656>.

quota goal for the recruitment of black women established that the WAC needed a “percentage of colored women approximating the percentage of [the] population of the United States” enrolled “in the Corps”—a little over 6,500 by the end of the war.¹³ Recruitment numbers for black Wacs fell short with only four percent of black women total by the end of the war (See Table 1.1).¹⁴ Historian Martha S. Putney writes that of the African American women who applied for positions in the WAAC/WAC, “50 percent were rejected because of low aptitude test scores and for administrative reasons resulting . . . from personal interviews.” Additionally, “about 40 percent of all blacks were disqualified for medical and health reasons.” Only 22 percent of non-blacks were rejected for low aptitude scores and poor interviews, and 25 percent for health issues.¹⁵

Despite the WAC’s efforts to recruit, the WAC comprised only two percent of the total number of members serving in the Army. These numbers are important because they reveal that black women in the WAC were underutilized and underemployed. This practice led to complaints from the African American community, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and other organizations that the military’s non-discrimination clause was ineffectual in practice. The NAACP had a rocky relationship with the military that predated the establishment of the WAAC. As the election of 1940 approached, President Franklin D. Roosevelt called for a meeting with three black leaders at the insistence of

¹³ Wm. F. Pearson to M. Mossell Griffin, May 21, 1942, folder 103246-023-0600, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, MA, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0600&accountid=7090>.

¹⁴ Handbook for Servicemen and Servicewomen of World War II, 77th Cong., 3d sess., 1942. H. Doc. 822, 31, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112060725840>; Treadwell, *Women’s Army Corps*, 596.

¹⁵ Martha S. Putney, *When the Nation Was in Need: Blacks in the Women’s Army Corps During World War II* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 40.

his wife, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. The purpose of the meeting was to address “African Americans’ core concerns about the military,” with the additional motive of strengthening his position as president. He selected NAACP Secretary Walter White, the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters A. Phillip Randolph, and T. Arnold Hill, “a formal industrial secretary of the National Urban League,” for a meeting at the White House on September 27, 1940, to discuss the issue of segregation in the military. Also attending the meeting were Frank Knox, the newly appointed Secretary of the Navy, and the Assistant Secretary of War, Robert P. Patterson. At the meeting’s conclusion, White, Randolph, and Hill left the White House under the impression that Roosevelt was truly invested in their concerns over the enforcement of the Fish amendment—proposed by Congressman Hamilton Fish to prevent racial discrimination—in the Selective Service and Training Act, which Roosevelt had signed a little over a week before the meeting. White, Randolph, and Hill believed that Roosevelt would act upon their concerns over the Act’s explicit enforcement should he be reelected. However, what the men believed to be an active step toward integration turned out to be a political façade to win votes. What staggered White and the others more than their meeting being a bargaining chip for reelection were the statements made by the White House. The White House’s press secretary deceptively implied to the public that White, Randolph, and Hill expressed approval for the War Department’s segregation policy, henceforth dooming the relationship between black activists and the War Department.¹⁶

The low number of black WACs shows that the black women did not want to join, and that the Army’s failure to fill its ten percent quota stemmed from its shortcomings in handling the recruitment of black women. Even as black women faced low acceptance rates, WAC

¹⁶ Guglielmo, *Divisions*, 27–28.

recruiters made varying arguments in support of lower recruiting numbers for African American women. Recruiters commonly reasoned that better-qualified women might be available for the jobs. The Army and public also made claims that black men did most of the work noncombatant work black Wacs would do, so their presence in the Army was reductive to military interests.¹⁷ The double minority status of black women made it incredibly challenging for them to move past the limitations put in place to keep them from advancing. Some limitations were intentional, like discriminatory practices at recruitment centers to discourage black women from applying. Practices ranged from lying about recruitment dates, regional discrimination, and the Army's national enforcement of segregation. Black women constantly dealt with the military's habit of preaching against racial discrimination through a white lens. The military fundamentally believed that segregation was *not* racial discrimination, despite arguments made by black leaders that segregation was discrimination.

The disconnect between white America's understanding of racial discrimination and black Americans frequently landed in the hands of the NAACP, which constantly watched for cases of discrimination in the military. The head of the NAACP, Walter White, brought one such case to Hobby's attention. Yeolis Lynch, an African American woman who applied to the Officers' Training School of the WAAC, contacted the NAACP concerning her experience with discrimination at a recruitment center. Though she was accepted for inspection, when the recruiting officer called to the interviewing room, he told her:

Mrs. Lynch, your qualifications are very good and you made out very well in your examination. Now don't think this is because of the color of your skin but we feel we must reject you as other girls may have better qualifications. *We commend your courage*

¹⁷ Moore, *To Serve My Country*, 32; Sandra M. Bolzenius, *Glory in Their Spirit: How Four Black Women Took On The Army during World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 5, <https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctt22p7j8n>.

in applying (italics ours) and hope this won't deter you from joining the regular army in September. Perhaps you can earn your stripes that way.¹⁸

In essence, Lynch went through the entire process required for women to become officers only for recruiters to tell her at the last stage that, despite meeting the standard qualifications for admittance into Officers' Training, she did not warrant a position as an officer. Telling Lynch not to think of her rejection as a reflection of her race and that she could better serve her country as an enlisted soldier reveals that racial biases pervaded the ability of black women to serve their country fully. It did not matter that Lynch met all the qualifications expected of potential WAC officers. She was rejected because of her race. The disproportionate rejection of black women reflected the army's double standard of wanting more able-bodied *white* women.¹⁹

All decisions regarding black women rested with the higher power of the War Department. Some Army officials feared that putting black women in positions of public power would create racial disturbances. For example, Major Harold A. Edlund, the 1943 chief of the WAAC Recruiting Section, expressed this concern in a letter to Colonel Thomas B. Catron, a former member of the War Department assigned to the WAC. Major Edlund communicated his trepidations that "the use of Negro recruiting officers from a strictly recruiting point of view . . . is in some sections of the country a retardant to recruiting which more than offsets their [black women's] use in the Country as a whole." Edlund believed using black recruiting officers in the South would damage efforts to encourage Southern women to apply for the WAC.

¹⁸ Walter White to Oveta Culp Hobby, June 8, 1942, folder 103246-022-0134, Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942-1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0134&accountid=7090>.

¹⁹ Putney, *When the Nation Was in Need*, 48-49.

Table 1.1. Strength of Black Personnel in the Women's Army Corps: 1943–1946

End of Month	Total		Officers	Enlisted
	Number	Percent of Total WAC		
1943				
March	2,532	5.7	65	2,467
June	3,161	5.2	105	3,056
September	3,012	5.9	105	2,907
December	2,804	4.9	103	2,702
1944				
March	3,175	4.7	115	2,060
June	3,506	4.5	117	3,389
September	3,766	4.4	121	3,645
December	4,040	4.5	120	3,920
1945				
March	3,902	4.1	115	3,787
June	3,849	4.0	117	3,732
September	3,738	4.3	105	3,633
December	1,690	3.9	80	1,610
1946				
March	786	3.0	32	745
June	673	3.6	15	658
September	279	2.0	15	264
December	372	3.9	9	363

Source: U.S. Dept. of Army, AGO, Strength Accounting Branch, Strength of the Army (STM–30), 1 January 1949, table quoted in Mattie E. Treadwell, *The United States Army in World War II, Special Studies: The Women's Army Corps* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1953), 777.

African American recruiters did exist, but they were not utilized in the same capacity as white recruiters.²⁰ The exclusion of black women from recruiting positions implied that, to WAC leadership, the utilization of trained black Wacs was situational rather than necessary. Barring women of color from going out and doing the tasks they were trained for shows a greater concern for the impression black women were making by presenting themselves as public faces for WAC recruitment. Black women also faced a more challenging road to recruitment based on racial stereotypes in sections of the country that historically stigmatized them as lazy and promiscuous. Depending on the region of the nation where black women applied, the stereotype of black women as idle temptresses obstructed their attempts to distinguish themselves in positions of power in the military.²¹

Black women's assignments further separated them from white Wacs because black women's labor drew from racial stereotypes over their capabilities and sexualities. Black Waacs/Wacs were often relegated to menial labor such as custodians and mail carriers, even when applying to positions for which they were overqualified. An August 16, 1942 *New York Times* article documents the court-martial of four black women at Fort Devens for protesting racial discrimination after being assigned to scrub floors "when they had been trained for other medical work." Testimony from Private Alice D. Young—one of the four court-martialed women—revealed the extent of the discrimination when she cited Colonel Walter Crandall, the commanding officer at Lovell General Hospital, as having told her, "I don't want black Wacs

²⁰ Harold A. Edlund to Thomas B. Catron, August 1943, folder 103246-013-0244, Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, MA, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-013-0244&accountid=7090>; Treadwell, *Women's Army Corps*, 594.

²¹ Treadwell, *Women's Army Corps*, 595–596.

here as medical technicians. They are here to mop walls, scrub floors, and do the dirty work.”²² The official history of the WAC insists that “skilled Negro recruits . . . who met the intelligence requirements were successfully given specialist training” and “proved able to complete the regular course on the same terms as other Wacs.”²³ However, the court-martial of Privates Anna C. Morrison, Johnnie Murphy, Mary Green, and Alice D. Young shows that skilled black women were still assigned to menial labor. This issue, defined as malassignment by historian Brenda Moore, “was rooted in structural inequality perpetuated by the War Department.” The court martial ultimately resulted in a dishonorable discharge Morrison, Murphy, Green, and Young, rather than severe consequences for deliberately disobeying white officer’s by going on strike.²⁴

The sexualization of black women in the WAC influenced their experiences and the roles they took on while they served. Regulating women’s bodies was of eminent importance to the Army to police male soldiers’ interactions on the European front, yet at the same time, military officials also sought to use American women as morale boosters, motivators, and distractions for American GIs. The WAAC/WAC fought tooth and nail against public misconceptions of women’s motivations in joining the WAC to maintain a reputation of respectability and white femininity. Leaders of the WAC worked extensively to preserve its image as a respectable corps that would relieve men of “women’s work” and maintain the dignity of women associated with the WAC. Historically, African American women “were stereotyped as sexually promiscuous by

²² “Review of Court-Martial Given to Four Negro Wacs,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 21, 1945.

²³ Treadwell, *Women’s Army Corps*, 595.

²⁴ Moore, *To Serve My Country*, 69.

nature.” The sexualization of black women directly impacted the perception of white women by the military.²⁵

These racial and gender hurdles, as pervasive and crippling as they were, did not stop black women from organizing and working within the confines of their positions to foster improvements in the inclusion of women of color in the WAC. Black women fought against the limitations and stereotypes that kept them in static positions within the military by organizing and enlisting support from the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), NAACP, and Mary McLeod Bethune. Bethune founded the NCNW and later worked with the WAC in an official capacity. She assisted in handling discrimination toward black Wacs, was a huge proponent of black women’s advancement in the WAC. Bethune worked tirelessly to make recruitment as accessible as possible for black women, actively campaigned for integration between black and white women, and combated segregation in the WAC.²⁶

It was not the intent of the U.S. military to fully dissolve the lines of racial segregation or gender discrimination during the Second World War. Black and white soldiers remained segregated throughout the war, and women did not serve *with* men but among them. Martha Putney notes that even though the War Department maintained its policy that discrimination of any kind was not permitted, “segregation began for most blacks as soon as they entered the training centers in civilian clothes.”²⁷ Even with the shortcomings of the WAC and the War Department, black women continued to join the WAC to further their standing in a country that made social mobility nearly impossible for them. Organizations like the NAACP and NCNW,

²⁵ Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women’s Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 36, 21.

²⁶ Moore, *To Serve My Country*, 53–55.

²⁷ Putney, *When the Nation Was in Need*, 49.

and people like Mary McLeod Bethune and Walter White pushed for the success and advancement of black women in a segregated military. Deeply racist beliefs and ideologies persisted, but black women consistently corresponded with those who had the power to make a change while also protesting their treatment, regardless of punishment. Their experiences and interactions with the WAC and military illustrate a key component of World War II history and the memories of the marginalized in a war that called all to action.

CHAPTER ONE

Recruiting Black WACs

150. Question. What are the requirements for enlistment in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps?

Answer. Each member of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps must be between 21 and 45, not less than 5 feet tall, and weigh not less than 100 pounds; not over 6 feet tall or weigh more than 16 2/3 percent above the average, according to the national health chart; must be in good physical condition and be able to pass the same mental tests comparable to soldiers.²⁸

—Handbook for Service Personnel of World War II

When the U.S. Army and War Department finally opened military opportunities for women, neither intended to have the WAAC continue as a permanent institution, since only wartime necessitated its existence. The Army asserted that it held women to the same recruiting standards as men, albeit with gender-based adjustments that required “definite qualifications of leadership” in addition to “[c]onsideration . . . to general education, personality, appearance and bearing” alongside skills required for particular service positions. The army sought women of upstanding moral character for service in the WAC, with “appearance” referring to not only the women’s physical attributes, but also the air of respectability carried by women of moral fiber.²⁹ Such a qualification gave no indication that appearance referred to the race of applicants. From a surface level, it appeared that the WAC had a place for outstanding women regardless of race. Yet the “inclusion” of black women in the army reveals that recruitment was structured to keep

²⁸ Handbook for Servicemen and Servicewomen of World War II and Their Dependents, Including Rights and Benefits of Veterans of World War I and Their Dependents. 77th Cong., 3d sess., 1942. H. Doc. 822, 31, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112060725840>.

²⁹ Handbook for Servicemen and Servicewomen of World War II, 77th Cong., 3d sess., 1942. H. Doc. 822, 31, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112060725840>.

obstacles in their path to service. This structure, based on social attitudes in 1940s America and white people's understanding of race, prevented black women from experiencing the benefits of full citizenship in the eyes of the law. The rejection of black women at recruitment centers reveals that Americans' memory of the Army purporting its full efforts to preserve freedom and democracy for *all* is a misconception at best and fiction at worst. This chapter addresses the misconception of black women's service as irrelevant by examining recruitment policies and how they were—and were not—enforced. It begins by looking at civil rights leaders and their relationship with the military as they advocated for black WACs and called out inconsistencies in the War Department's stance that all branches of the Army, including the WAC, upheld its anti-discrimination policy. The chapter goes on to examine the shortcomings of recruitment and how the Army did not follow through on War Department policy regarding the inclusion of black women in the WAC by looking at training camps where black Wacs experienced firsthand discrimination, particularly in Fort Des Moines in Iowa. The chapter finishes by looking at black Wacs' experiences with segregation and how it impacted their motivations to join the WAAC/WAC. Each examination reveals that the negligence of the Army and the WAC to recruit black women and address their concerns did not necessarily come from a place of blind ignorance. The Corps wore a progressive façade but consistently upheld structural inequality. It promised to keep discrimination out of the WAC when it came to training and job assignment but perpetuated structural racism by upholding segregation.

The dire relationship between black leaders and the War Department had dangerous implications for black Wacs. Miscommunication between civil rights leaders and the War Department limited the resources and support available to black Wacs. Poor relationships and lack of communication made it difficult for African American women to address constraints to

service and integration. Roadblocks to service manifested through restrictions on the number of women who could serve. HR 6293, the WAAC Bill, established that the WAAC should comprise no more than 150,000 women. This quota was subject to the same policy established by the War Department for the recruitment of black personnel—black women should comprise no more than 10 percent of the Corps’ 150,000 limit because African Americans only accounted for 10 percent of the country’s total population. The 10 percent quota for black women was initially seen as a victory because it meant that black women would be included in military service to the same standard as black men. The quota only reached 4 percent by the end of the war, totaling a little over 6,500 black women. This low number caught the attention of the NAACP, whose leaders like Walter White were already interacting with the U.S. military concerning the civil rights of enlisted black men. White harshly critiqued the Army on its policy of segregation, arguing that it was the reason recruitment goals for black women fell short. In a letter sent on October 28, 1942, to Secretary of War Stimson and WAAC Director Oveta Culp Hobby, White relayed a conversation in which a Captain Kennedy from the Office of Public Relations at Des Moines asked why black women were not “volunteering for service in the W.A.A.C.’s as expected.” For White, the answer was obvious. “[W]omen with the character and self-respect which would make them officers of superior quality,” he explained, “are reluctant to volunteer because of segregation at Des Moines.”³⁰ White’s issue with the quota and with segregation had to do with the fact that the presence of both in the Army directly contradicted any and all claims the War Department made about its strict stance of upholding its antidiscrimination policy. Placing limits

³⁰ Walter White to Henry L. Stimson and Oveta Culp Hobby, October 28, 1942, folder 103246-022-0134, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0134&accountid=7090>.

on the number of black personnel who could join the Army and upholding segregation was discrimination, plain and simple.

Attempts to enforce segregation varied from branch to branch in the military—as did the severity of enforcement. Historian Thomas Guglielmo explains that, for the most part, it was easy for military leaders to follow policies of segregation because any “experimentation” with racial mixing posed the risk of creating a political mess. Still, it was ultimately up to military leaders to decide whether to experiment with integration.³¹ During Walter White’s trip to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, a training camp that was an exception to the staunch enforcement of segregation, he commented on the relatively positive relationship between black and white soldiers who lived together in hutments. He wrote that young black men “are quartered with, eat with, and study with white fellow candidates.” The conditions at Fort Sill served as proof that “men being trained together and associating with each other . . . do get along together if they are permitted to know each other as human beings and fellow Americans.”³² In the same letter, White compared the progressiveness of Fort Sill in Oklahoma to Fort Des Moines, where he noted a stark difference in how the WAC treated African American women in training camps. He observed “glaring aspects of discrimination,” where the camp segregated black and white women without exception. Even “[w]hite women who, for reason of friendship or convenience,” desired to eat with black “campmates” were “peremptorily ordered away from the ‘colored’ tables.” Unlike the men of Fort Sill, the women of Fort Des Moines were housed separately from each other. They had separate activity hours for the use of communal activity spaces and “separate service clubs”

³¹ Guglielmo, *Divisions*, 133.

³² Walter White to Stimson and Hobby, October 28, 1942, folder 103246-022-0134, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0134&accountid=7090>.

that were “out of bounds for women of the opposite race,” reducing black women to pariahs of training camps. Essentially, the Army expressed more lenience for racial mixing between white and black men than for white and black women.³³

FDR’s stance on the military’s segregation policy, the WAAC “quota,” and camp conditions catalyzed mixed stances in the African American community over whether black people should even serve a country that upheld a racial caste system that put African Americans at the bottom of the social ladder. Historian Maggi M. Morehouse explains that black leaders across the country encouraged African Americans at home to participate in the war effort to obliterate fascism “for Democracy at Home and Democracy Abroad” in what came to be referred to as the “‘Double V’ campaign.” By exposing the evils of fascism and fighting to obliterate it from the globe, black leaders hoped that the Double V campaign might end segregation and racial discrimination in a racialized society as an ultimate homefront victory.³⁴ Vehemently opposed to segregation in any form, most of the black community stipulated that serving in the armed forces might facilitate social changes on the homefront. By defeating the enemy abroad, black Americans stood a chance of defeating the enemy at home. Many eligible black men expressed that their core desire for enlisting stemmed from “patriotism, a spirit of adventure, and a hope for improved employment and educational opportunities.”³⁵ Such ideals were similar to black women’s motivations for applying to the WAC, which included military benefits, stable

³³ Walter White to Stimson and Hobby, October 28, 1942, folder 103246-022-0134, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0134&accountid=7090>.

³⁴ Maggi M. Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: Black Men and Women Remember World War II* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 9.

³⁵ Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army*, 11.

employment, advancement in education, and racial progress, in addition to patriotism.³⁶ The military's segregation policy did not change with the Double V campaign, and people felt that the lack of change was unfortunate. Black servicemen and servicewomen continued to wrangle with white America's refusal to acknowledge the connection between fascism as a threat to humanity and discrimination based on race, gender, and religion as a tool of fascism.

White America's willful ignorance was not the only factor that impeded the willingness of black women to join the WAC, even with the Double V Campaign. Another factor obstructing the number of black women accepted to the WAC concerns the limitations faced by recruiters when it came to *where* they could seek applicants. Geography greatly impacted the enforcement and severity of segregation at WAAC/WAC training camps, which directly affected the willingness of black women to join the Corps. Despite segregation in the South, black leaders like Mary Mcleod Bethune, the head of the NCNW who worked extensively alongside the WAC, advocated for greater efforts to encourage recruitment and appealed to the black press to join the cause.³⁷ When the black press *did* get involved with encouraging the recruitment of black women as it had done with black men, it presented women's "volunteerism" as necessary and heroic. Still, historian Kimberly L. Phillips argues that "many readers" held the stance that "black women who enlisted" faced the danger of labor exploitation by merit of their race.³⁸ Additionally, although black women expressed reluctance to be in training centers in the Jim Crow South, those who trained in the North knew camps to be just as discriminatory.

³⁶ Moore, *To Serve My Country, To Serve My Race*, 9–10, 13.

³⁷ Putney, *When the Nation Was in Need*, 31.

³⁸ Kimberly L. Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For? Black Freedom Struggles & the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2012), 52.

The Army possessed black WAC recruiters and, to a limited extent, used them. Putney claims that “recruiters were directed to the ‘colored colleges,’” located in the South. It did not help that black people in the South received inferior public education, which extended to college opportunities. The underfunded education available to black women in the South was practically the only chance for them to advance. Systemic racism in the South’s education system encumbered opportunities for “skilled” education and training. As a result, many black students at these colleges fell back on the career plans and “jobs waiting for them” upon graduation that offered more security. Black women were less enticed than white women to take a risk by applying for the WAC, where it was not guaranteed that they would be accepted. The attempt to obtain highly skilled black women by sending recruiters to the South failed and fueled the notion that skilled black women did not exist.³⁹

The racial discrimination reinforced at recruitment centers throughout the South discouraged and frustrated black women who desired to join the WAC. When Mary Eleanor White wrote to the WAAC, she described the difficulties she and other black women faced at recruitment centers. Personnel at the local recruiting office in Paducah, Kentucky, routinely told black women that the Lieutenant in charge of the recruiting was busy, out of the office for the day, or in White’s case, taking a three-week trip to another location. White explained that the Lieutenant being “too busy” to see black women “was not true at all.” The assistants at the recruitment center “were only trying to dishearten me,” and she heard from “a very reliable source they have been doing all Negro women that way.” White expressed her frustration that assistants at her local recruitment center did not want “colored Women in the W.A.A.C” and did not “want to sign them up as a candidate for the W.A.A.C.” She argued that the two women at

³⁹ Putney, *When the Nation Was in Need*, 30–31.

the recruitment center routinely sent black women on “a wild goose chase” when it came to the application process. White critiqued this conduct, pointing out that the WAAC didn’t have its required quota for black Waacs because of the behavior of recruiters like the ones in Paducah. “They are practicing discrimination and prejudice,” she wrote, targeting “African Americans” and disregarding democratic ideals. In essence, the Paducah recruiters practiced the same behavior the Allied Forces swore to stand up against.⁴⁰

Letters exchanged between black WACs, the NAACP, WAC, and War Department reveal that recruiters in Paducah were not the only ones to tell black women they needed to wait to apply. Black applicants routinely dealt with recruitment centers that falsely claimed that black women had later registration dates for applying to the WAAC than whites. In St. Paul, Minnesota, all black applicants were rejected and “not permitted to register,” despite the War Department and WAAC’s policy on the recruitment of black women.⁴¹ Two months before, G. F. Porter, a secretary of the NAACP in Dallas, Texas, confirmed an inquiry made by Truman K. Gibson, the Assistant Civilian Aide for the Secretary of War, about an incident of racial discrimination at the local Dallas recruitment center. It came to Porter’s attention that the two officials at the recruitment center rejected Glodine Sumrell, who had recently graduated from Prairie View College, and another applicant from Henderson, Texas. The officers, Mrs. Raines and Mrs. Peabody, told Porter that “Negros could not be accepted until later.” Porter continued that by the time the window for recruitment ended, “a gentleman who styled himself as the Chief

⁴⁰ Mary E. White to Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, July 1, 1943, folder 103246-023-0600, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, MA, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0600&accountid=7090>.

⁴¹ S. Vincent Owens to Hobby, July 17, 1942 folder 103246-023-0001, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0001&accountid=7090>.

Clerk of the Army Recruiting Station” said in no uncertain terms “that there was no place for Negro women as yet.” When the same Dallas recruiting office falsified its claim that “88 Negro women had been appointed to the Officer’s Training Camp,” Porter reported them to the Recruiting Office.⁴²

That people lied about the number of black officers successfully accepted into Officer Training schools should have alarmed both the WAC and War Department. Instances of such breaches of conduct occurring only reached their offices and ears when black women and advocates of black American progress brought it to the Corps and Department’s attention. In essence, the Black press was more effective at bringing discrimination to the attention of the Army than the WAC itself. More stories of discrimination at recruitment centers came to light as rejected black applicants appealed to the local press and the NAACP. A telegram sent by Earl G. Davis, president of the Winston-Salem Youth Council, to Hobby revealed that Sergeant Stephenson, a Winston-Salem, North Carolina recruiting officer, expressed that the WAC was “for white women only from this area,” which directly contradicted statements made by Hobby to the black press that black women could apply to the WAC. Hobby responded to Davis, confirming that black women “definitely may enlist” and that the “Commander Fifth Corps Area” reached out to Sergeant Stephenson to correct his “mistake.”⁴³

When black women in the North applied for officer positions, they faced the same “Paducah” challenge. Recruitment centers in New York, for example, frequently turned away

⁴² G. F. Porter to Truman K. Gibson, July 1, 1942, folder 103246-023-0001, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0001&accountid=7090>.

⁴³ Davis to Hobby, telegram, May 28, 1942; Hobby to Davis, telegram, May 29, 1942, folder 103246-023-0600, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, MA, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0600&accountid=7090>.

black applicants. One such instance occurred when Yeolis Lynch was accepted for an examination to see if she was eligible for the Officer's Training School of the WAAC. After her examination, Lynch was told: "she passed the mental alertness test, but was rejected after a personal interview with the recruiting officer." In that interview, the recruiting officer asked Lynch, "Would you have any objections to going to a white officers' school, or would you prefer a colored school?" Up to that point, Lynch's personnel interview went well, but when she replied, "she had no objections whatsoever," the recruiter ordered her to step outside. When called back in, the officer told her she was rejected, as someone with "better qualifications" might apply.⁴⁴

Lynch's rejection, it appeared, had less to do with her personality and qualifications and more with her willingness to train in a white space. Despite the WAC and Army's adamant that race did not play a large part in recruiters' decisions to accept black women and claims made by recruiters and WAC officials that most black applicants were unskilled, the numbers paint a different story. In New York alone, black women submitted over 2,500 applications for the available sixty-two WAC positions the city needed to fill its quota. It is hard to say how many black applicants out of the 2,500 women who applied were accepted. The availability of data pertaining to the exact number of black women accepted and turned away from the WAC is limited and requires further research. What *can* be surmised is that the number of black women who applied shows that many of them were willing to serve. The incident also shows that the bar set by the WAC and the Army for black women's recruitment constantly moved and made it

⁴⁴ Press Service for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, June 12, 1942; Walter White to Hobby, June 8, 1942, folder 103246-022-0134, Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942-1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0134&accountid=7090>.

impossible for black women to navigate. The War Department's non-discrimination policy became ineffectual. When it came to the participation of black women in the WAC, and the lack thereof, the NAACP blamed New York's failure to recruit black women on its almost exclusively "lily-white" branch offices.⁴⁵

The failures of recruiters to incorporate black women into the Corps persisted. On November 1, 1942—four months after Yeolis Lynch reached out to Walter White concerning the denial of her application to the Officers' Training School of the WAAC—she sent a letter to a Mrs. Hope concerning segregation and discrimination at Fort Des Moines. The letter revealed that of all the women who applied to the first class of the Officer Candidates School (OCS), not one black woman was selected. The complaint reached the NAACP, where Lynch expressed that Washington, D.C., thought their numbers were too small to be of any value in the program, citing black women's "lack of broad experience" with large groups as a factor in the decision. Lynch argued that this was an unfair assessment. "Ever since the first of September," she wrote, "white officers have been sent out recruiting. About 10 of our girls were trained for it [OCS] and had their orders to go out. Suddenly they were rescinded. . . . Why?"⁴⁶

At the time Lynch wrote the letter, "a grand total of 150 [black] auxiliaries and officers" comprised the WAC "against 3,000 whites."⁴⁷ Black women made up only five percent of the

⁴⁵ Press Service for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, June 12, 1942, folder 103246-022-0134, Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0134&accountid=7090>.

⁴⁶ Yeolis Lynch to Mrs. Hope, November 1, 1942, folder 001535-015-0302, Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 5: Education, Mobilization, and Conduct during Wartime, National Archives, College Park, MA, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001535-015-0302&accountid=7090>.

⁴⁷ Lynch to Hope, November 1, 1942, folder 001535-015-0302, Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 5: Education, Mobilization, and Conduct during Wartime, National Archives, College Park, MA, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001535-015-0302&accountid=7090>.

WAC at this time. Historian Mattie E. Treadwell, writing in 1953, attributed low recruitment numbers for black WACs to the scarcity of skill more than discrimination. She paraphrases a memo from Lieutenant Harriet West, saying that “rejected Negro applicants sometimes tended to blame discrimination rather than their own failure to pass aptitude or physical tests.” At the time, this argument was used extensively by recruiting centers that rejected black women at a higher rate than white women. Treadwell falls into the same straw man fallacy by asserting that skilled black women contributed to low numbers, but the Army acknowledged eight years prior to Treadwell’s comprehensive WAC history that segregation was a deterrent for skilled black women to apply at recruitment centers and join the Corps. It admitted that “[t]here is definite reluctance on the part of the best qualified colored women to volunteer in the WAAC. This is brought about by an impression on their part that they will not be well received or treated on posts where they may be stationed.” Leaders suggested that a potential solution to encourage skilled black women to apply for the WAAC might be “an intensive recruiting campaign with the idea in view of interesting the desired class of women in the project and arriving at a thorough understanding of their rights and privileges in service.” Preferably the WAAC could send qualified black recruiters “to colored colleges in order to secure the proper class of applicants,” but sending black Waacs to recruit came with problems.⁴⁸ As Lynch observed, black recruiters weren’t being sent out to encourage black women to join the WAC. Martha S. Putney argues that segregation nixed the attempts of recruiters to persuade “better-qualified blacks” to join the WAC. For recruiters sent to black colleges in the Deep South, too many of the desired, qualified black women “experienced firsthand or knew someone who had experienced the

⁴⁸ Treadwell, *Women’s Army Corps*, 592.

dehumanizing effects of segregation.” They had no desire to apply to a corps that reinforced the evils of segregation at its training centers.⁴⁹

The controversy surrounding the discriminatory and hostile behavior at Fort Des Moines reported by Lynch reached Mary McLeod Bethune, who became entangled in a false claim that she expressed her approval of segregation after an investigation into Fort Des Moines. Walter White handed a memorandum to Bethune during a conference at the War Department regarding the status of black women in the WAC on November 4, 1942, conveying that she and Lieutenant Harriet West, who worked under Bethune at that time, “were on the spot.” In the memorandum, “officers at Des Moines were alleging that the segregation [at Des Moines] had been approved by Mesdames Bethune and West.”⁵⁰ Bethune fervently denied such a statement ever being made. She expressed alarm that such information was relayed to the NAACP and “Negro members of the WAAC,” when time and time again, she made clear her “disapproval of segregation in any form” when she worked with the WAC.⁵¹ The interaction between Bethune and White reveals that the Army put words in black leaders’ mouths to justify segregation in training camps and that it was the fault of black leaders that WAC recruitment fell short.

Early on, the WAAC held that no discrimination took place, which contradicted the stark lack of recruitment for black women. Colonel William F. Pearson expressed the WAAC’s firm

⁴⁹ Putney, *When the Nation Was in Need*, 30–31.

⁵⁰ Walter White to Natalie Donaldson, November 4, 1942, folder 001535-015-0302, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 5: Education, Mobilization, and Conduct during Wartime, National Archives, College Park, MA, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001535-015-0302&accountid=7090>.

⁵¹ Mary McLeod Bethune to Walter White, November 4, 1942, folder 001535-015-0302, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 5: Education, Mobilization, and Conduct during Wartime, National Archives, College Park, MA, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001535-015-0302&accountid=7090>.

belief that “no actual discrimination” in the WAAC had been implemented “anywhere throughout the United States.” The Corps obeyed the War Department’s policy against discrimination “because of race, creed, or color” in the Army. Pearson admitted:

We have had isolated cases of complaints from both white and colored applicants that they did not receive fair treatment, but no case of actual discrimination against any particular individual because of her race, creed, or color has come to the attention of this Headquarters to date.⁵²

The War Department, the WAC, and many of the Army’s white leaders did not view segregation as discrimination. The NAACP, on the other hand, argued that segregation *was* discrimination, and the events at Fort Des Moines, recruiting centers, and the experiences of Mary E. White, Yeolis Lynch, Walter White, and Bethune refuted Pearson’s biased claim. Black leaders remained unconvinced that the WAC was doing everything in its power to encourage black women to join because of the enforcement of segregation.

Treadwell expresses that black organizations “strongly suggested” that the 10 percent quota set for black recruitment in the Army limited the enlistment of black women to “a few women who met the highest standards.” Had this ten percent policy not existed, black organizations thought there would be more African American women to serve voluntarily. By nixing the ten percent policy—in addition to the complete eradication of segregation in the Army—they hoped, the “burden of unassignable low-grade personnel” that the WAC complained of would be avoidable. The Army, however, felt that the 10 percent quota was generous and made no move to abolish it.⁵³

⁵² Pearson to William H. Hastie, July 24, 1942, folder 103246-023-0001, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0001&accountid=7090>.

⁵³ Treadwell, *Women’s Army Corps*, 601.

Despite the claims of white Army officials that the failure to recruit black women lay on black WACs and the African American community, White and Bethune believed that the segregation present in training camps and false statements made by the officers impeded the willingness of black women to apply for the WAC. Further discrimination observed in Des Moines directly contradicted efforts to enlist black women. When Edwin R. Embree and W. W. Alexander, the president and vice-president of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, visited Des Moines to observe the “criticisms” they received from the camp, Embree expressed that the only discrimination he observed was that caused by segregation. In interacting with the white and black personnel at the camp, he did not observe any racial hostility.⁵⁴ Relationships were amicable; black and white WACs had the same exact opportunities in the camp. The only “unfavorable” observations he and Alexander made revolved around segregation in the camp and how “particularly unfortunate” it was that “instances of segregation still persist.” Most notably, he explained in his report, “The recruiting of Negro auxiliaries has fallen off badly.” He attributed potential causes of low recruiting numbers for black women to “the resentment of the Negro group and the resulting unwillingness of girls of good quality to enlist,” as well as a “failure of recruiting officers to reach the Negro communities as effectively as they reach potential white candidates.” For Embree, the trouble at Fort Des Moines was the fault of recruiters and the black community.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ The Julius Rosenwald Fund was developed by philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, the son of a German-Jewish immigrant, in 1917 to “improve the situation of African Americans” through funding improvements in education. Embree became president in 1928. Jonathan R. Noling, *Encyclopedia of African American History 1896 to the Present*, s.v. “Julius Rosenwald Fund,” accessed June 24, 2023, <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195167795.001.0001/acref-9780195167795-e-0678>.

⁵⁵ Edward R. Embree, report, September 21, 1942, folder 103246-023-0600, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, MA, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0600&accountid=7090>.

Black WACs in Fort Des Moines expressed that recruitment efforts in Des Moines fell short *not* because of the African American community but because of the shortcomings of the WAC and recruiters who failed to adhere to the War Department's policy toward discrimination. One such instance of the WAC carelessly performing its duty to uphold the War Department's non-discrimination policy occurred when recruitment efforts by black WAC recruiting officers from Fort Des Moines crumbled in July of 1943. It came to the attention of Walter White that the camp relieved black WAC recruiting officers of their duties in a decision that he warned gave the impression that the WAC held no interest in continuing the recruitment of black WACs or their utilization as WAC recruiters.⁵⁶ After relaying this information to Hobby on July 12 through a telegram, she responded that the "RECRUITING OF NEGRO WACS HAS NOT CEASED" and that "NEGRO OFFICERS OF THE WAAC FORMERLY ASSIGNED TO RECRUITING HAVE BEEN REASSIGNED TO TRAINING DUTIES TO MEET A SHORTAGE OF NEGRO OFFICERS FOR SUCH WORK." She assured White that "NEGRO WAACS ARE BEING SHIPPED TO FIND JOBS AS FAST AS THEIR SKILLS AND TRAINING MATCH THE JOBS TO BE FILLED END SPWAR." Hobby believed she and other WAC leaders were proactive in making sure that great efforts were made to enlist black Wacs into the Corps, but this did not dissuade the fears of black leaders.⁵⁷

Despite Hobby's reassurance that no threats existed to recruiting efforts to encourage black women to apply for the WAC, a memorandum sent by Colonel C. C. Curtis to the Executive Office of the WAC the following month confirmed White's concerns. Given the

⁵⁶ Walter White to Hobby, telegram, July 12, 1943, folder 103246-022-0134, Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942-1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0134&accountid=7090>.

⁵⁷ Hobby to Walter White, telegram, July 19, 1943, folder 103246-022-0134, Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942-1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0134&accountid=7090>.

withdrawal of black recruiting officers, Curtis expressed his opinion that “Negro personnel not be used in the recruiting service” anymore “[b]ecause of adverse [white] public opinion” over their presence. Curtis added that removing black recruiters would not create a large public outcry. He believed there had been “no serious repercussions from them [black leaders]” since relieving black WACs of their recruiting duty and argued that the WAC would not face any pushback.⁵⁸ Curtis’s attitude over there being little to no serious repercussions to removing black WAC recruiters reflected the attitude of the 1940s. Charity Earley Adams, an officer in charge of the 6888th, believed that a “great effort was exerted to prohibit the appearance of Negroes in any activity that even smacked of the unusual, of being honorable, and especially of being first.”⁵⁹ The Corps’ compliance with segregation aligns with Earley’s commentary on American society in the 1940s. Compliance with segregation also explains why the Intelligence Division, in charge of changing public opinion toward the war and headed by Frederick D. Sharp, believed that the easiest way to correct public opinion and curb racial hostilities and rumors thereof was to invest in a “vigorous public relations program” to inform “white and Negro civilians how the Army had contributed more to Negro improvement and racial harmony than any other government agency.” Out of the Army’s self-interest, the Intelligence Division advocated for more preventative measures to subdue “false reports of non-existent racial incidents” to preserve “domestic peace” and “military activities.”⁶⁰ The casual and more-than-overt racism experienced by black women

⁵⁸ Colonel C.C. Curtis to Executive Office, August 13, 1943, folder 103246-013-0244, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-013-0244&accountid=7090>.

⁵⁹ Charity A. Earley, *One Woman’s Army: A Black Officer Remembers the WAC*, Texas A&M University Military History Series (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), 14.

⁶⁰ Intelligence Department, July 6, 1945, folder 103246-022-0734, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0734&accountid=7090>.

was often labeled as a simple mistake by the WAC and recruiters. No one *meant* to keep black women from serving—the military simply mirrored “the values of society.” And in a society plagued by systemic racism and segregation, it would follow that the military would simply uphold these values, regardless of the War Department’s attempts to convince WAC applicants that segregation was not discrimination. Black and white Wacs were separate but equal.⁶¹

Black leaders voiced the opinion that segregation was the greatest deterrent for black women who entertained joining the WAC by citing violence against black personnel. L. J. Adams, the acting secretary of the New Jersey Committee on Discrimination, expressed that, even though complete segregation was “an old army policy,” its enforcement discouraged black women from joining the WAC. The hardships that black women witnessed their brothers and husbands endure in a segregated army also impacted their willingness to join. Black women “read in the press or heard firsthand accounts of the mistreatment of blacks.” They heard horrifying stories from the South, where “black servicemen were set upon, beaten, and maimed by local police, mobs, or both.” The possibility of being assigned to a training center where conditions could turn deadly was enough to keep potential WAC candidates away. This is demonstrated through an incident at a Greyhound station in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, where police brutally beat Pfc Helen Smith for breaking the state’s Jim Crow laws and supposedly assaulting a police officer while she waited for the bus to Fort Knox. The attack left her hospitalized for a full week. Ostensibly, police assaulted Smith because “she dared to sit in a waiting room reserved for white people.” Even when it was found that Kentucky made “no provision for segregation in bus and train stations,” Smith still faced a charge of violating the 93rd Article of War, which pertained to punishment for crimes under military law through court

⁶¹ Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army*, 110.

martial.⁶² Police harassed Smith by calling her a “smart northern nigger” before beating her over the head. Two other WACs—Pfc Georgia Boston from Dallas, Texas, and Private Tommie Smith from Lexington, Kentucky—were also beaten by the police. Racial violence enforced by Jim Crow laws discouraged *desirable* skilled black women from applying to the WAC.⁶³

Army inaction to address and acknowledge the dangers African American men and women faced by joining the Armed Forces sent a conflicting message about America’s determination to protect the democratic rights of all human beings. The trend of the denying applicants and the failure of the WAC and War Department to protect black Wacs and encourage them to join led Walter White to express in a letter, “We [the NAACP] sincerely trust that the WAAC will smash old patterns not only that 13 million American Negroes will believe that they are actually fighting for democracy but also to demonstrate that truth to all the people of America and of the world.”⁶⁴ Alonzo D. Baxter, the executive secretary of the NAACP, in a letter to Hobby expressed the same sentiment. Baxter wrote that the fundamental tenets of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit [*sic*] of Happiness which we [black Americans] are fighting to preserve throughout the world can only become a reality when they are preceded by us at home.” America could not cull the threat of Nazism and fascism in the world until it successfully addressed and

⁶² US Army, Office of the Judge Advocate General, Revision of the Articles of War, 1912–1920, vol. 1. Charlottesville, VA: Judge Advocate General’s Office, 1920, <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/llmlp/RAW-vol1/RAW-vol1.pdf>.

⁶³ L. J. Adams to Col. Don C. Faith, July 28, 1942, folder 103246-023-0001, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0001&accountid=7090>; Putney, *When the Nation Was in Need*, 30; Constance Curtis, “N.Y. WAC Beaten by Dixie Cop: She Now Faces Court Martial, Letter Avers Girl Is Called ‘Wench,’ ‘Smart Northerner’ by Policeman in Kentucky,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 28, 1945; Putney, *When the Nation Was in Need*, 65.

⁶⁴ Walter White to Hobby, June 8, 1942, folder 103246-022-0134, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0134&accountid=7090>.

“settled” the problems faced by minority groups on the home front—especially by black women. Baxter maintained that America’s global position compared to other nations required the abolition of “all discriminatory practices in every faze [*sic*] of our American life.” He expressed to Hobby that she owed it to her office, her country, and God “to use every instrument at your command” to rid the WAC of racial discrimination.⁶⁵

From the NAACP’s challenges with the War Department, the WAC’s failure to prevent racial discrimination at recruitment centers, the alarming level of discrimination at Fort Des Moines, public appeals made by the black press and leaders such as Bethune for black women to join, and the frequently unresolved appeals made by black women to address segregation and its influence on recruitment, it is hard to imagine what motivations there were for African American women to join the WAC. Charity A. Earley, the first African American woman to become an officer in the WAC and the commanding officer of the 6888th, the only black women’s unit to serve overseas, recalls how she

was told how completely out of my mind I must be to ever consider leaving the security of a teaching position to go into something as uncertain as the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps. My friends did not know that the uncertainty of the Army was far more appealing at this point than the certainty of the dullness and rigidity that the teaching profession had offered in the last few months.⁶⁶

For Earley, the WAC offered an avenue for new opportunities and, in her words, “adventure.” Others joined with the desire to change the sociopolitical restraints faced by black women by participating in the “American ideal of ‘liberty and justice for all.’” By serving in an institution that represented the core values of American freedom, duty, and civil service, African American

⁶⁵ Alonzo D. Baxter to Hobby, February 18, 1944, folder 103246-022-0134, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0134&accountid=7090>.

⁶⁶ Earley, *One Woman’s Army*, 11.

women believed they could prove themselves worthy of the same benefits and privileges granted to white and black men.⁶⁷ Black women were historically excluded from the same spaces as white women because of their race, so the decision to open military service to *all* women opened a door to security in a nation caught in the throes of war. Service offered black women a means to support themselves and their families while the men went off to fight in the war. Expressed poignantly by Wac Mary White, “This is not a white man’s war, it is not a black man’s war, but it is a war in which all of us must participate, must put all of our efforts, our genius, into, in order to successfully combat the enemy.”⁶⁸ The Army, for all its shortcomings in providing full security due to its policy of segregation, understood the imperativeness of having the support of more than just white male Americans.

Facilitating a sense of duty to one’s country proved crucial if the country wanted to foster a unified homefront. The Intelligence Department, wartime propaganda, and the efforts of black leaders played a part in motivating black women to apply for the WAC, but a sense of patriotism, even within the confines of a society structured around racial inequality, contributed as well. When Dolores Crawford from Rochester, New York, wrote to Director Hobby about her intense desire to join the WAC, she expressed that “more than anything else in the world,” she wanted to be a WAC. Crawford expressed concern that because of her history, however, she would not qualify. Crawford had several criminal offenses associated with her name: vagrancy, disorderly conduct, and prostitution. She wrote that she “would gladly scrub floors, wash dishes or do anything else if only I had a chance. . . . I don’t believe a person ever loved their country no

⁶⁷ Earley, *One Woman’s Army*, 10; Moore, *To Serve My Country*, 23.

⁶⁸ Mary E. White to Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, July 1, 1943, folder 103246-023-0600, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, MA, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0600&accountid=7090>.

better than I.” Though Crawford lost interest in the WAC due to deteriorating health by March 1943, Helen J. Kraft, a WAC recruiting officer, assured Crawford that all women, “regardless of race, creed, or color,” could join the WAC so long as they met the requirements. Kraft was telling Dolores that her past did not determine her ability to apply to the WAC (pending a background check for the nature of her criminal offenses) and commended Dolores for her desire to serve her country in whatever way she could.⁶⁹

The desire to remain close to loved ones serving in the armed forces also compelled some black women to join the WAC. Black men often went out of their way to look for family members who might be stationed near them, and the brothers of black WACs often described their relief at being stationed near their sisters.⁷⁰ Women who joined to leave the nest and strike it on their own, like Margaret Barber of the 6888th, joined the WAC because it “was a good change” for her following her mother’s death, leaving only her and her father at home. Others, like Bernice Thomas, who also served in the 6888th, applied to the WAC to “obtain veteran’s benefits” once the war ended. Her status as a single mother who worked a dead-end job in the garment district in New York influenced Thomas’s choice, despite the sacrifices that came with it—including a close relationship with her son.⁷¹

Relationships, self-determination, patriotism, and the obvious benefits of service united black women who desired to join the WAC. When the Corps promised work for those who pushed through and persisted, the black women who broke through recruitment barriers expected

⁶⁹ Dolores Crawford to Hobby, January 7, 1942; Prisoner’s Criminal Record, Dolores Crawford; Helen J. Kraft to John H. Keyes, March 8, 1943; Helen J. Kraft to Crawford, January 26, 1943, folder 103246-023-0001, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0001&accountid=7090>.

⁷⁰ Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army*, 168.

⁷¹ Moore, *To Serve My Country*, 10–11.

the work the WAC required of them to be separate but equal. They quickly realized that this wasn't the case. Black Wacs who had tirelessly dealt with the unaddressed and ignored hurdles in their path to service confronted a new and sadly familiar obstacle: Racialized work and limited opportunities "in the dirty and most unmilitary positions as the unsung support personnel" of the WAC and Army. It became clear that the journey for equal treatment in the WAC was far from over.⁷²

⁷² Earley, *One Woman's Army*, 14.

CHAPTER TWO

Black Wacs at Work

*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the President is hereby authorized to establish and organize in such units as he may from time to time determine to be a necessary a Women's Army Auxiliary Corps for non-combatant service with the Army of the United States for the purpose of making available to the national defense when needed the knowledge, skill, and special training of the women of this Nation.*⁷³

—H.R. 6293

When George Mahon, a politician who served in Texas's 19th congressional district, received a letter from "a newspaper man" detailing the severity of the racial hostility black women faced upon arriving in Fort Des Moines, he grew seriously concerned. The information from Mahon's newspaper friend suggested that the black women accepted into the Corps faced discrimination in their training and employment as WACs—something officials in the Army and WAC insisted did not happen. Those in charge of the black WACs at Fort Des Moines expressed disdain and disgust at the women's presence. Mahon received information from his informant upon finishing her training, an unnamed white woman had to "help train the new arrivals" who "were colored folks or as we refer to them 'niggers.'" An anonymous, presumably white man at Fort Des Moines complained, "Fine [white] girl[s] are now forced to share the same living quarters . . . facilities . . . and reception rooms with niggers." The same man implied that the presence of black WACs attracted a "bunch of negro men" to the camp, "probably waiting to date their nigger gals, or visit with them. . . ." He questioned allowing black women into the

⁷³ Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, H.R. 6293, 77th Cong., 1st sess. (December 30, 1941): 1, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001535-015-0203&accountid=7090>.

WAC to do any work because, in the anonymous man's opinion, black women offered nothing but trouble of a racial *and* sexual kind. The report from Mahon's informant revealed that, at the Fort Des Moines training camp, the labor of black women in the WAC was valueless and immoral.⁷⁴

This chapter examines how many black WACs' assignments reflected racial stereotypes of black women as menial laborers and as explicitly sexual beings. Historian Leisa D. Meyer extensively examines stereotypes surrounding black women's sexuality and labor. Meyer explains that many people within the Army viewed black women as sexually immoral and tempting to whites.⁷⁵ The exploitation of African American women's bodies and labor had roots in stereotypes that identified black women as distracting temptresses. This exploitation brought the risk of not only devaluing black women but also endangering them. Black women dealt with unfair "malassignment" by the WAAC/WAC and War Department. Historian Brenda L. Moore defines malassignment as "rooted in structural inequality perpetuated by the War Department," which impacted what jobs black women were assigned.⁷⁶ Black Waacs/Wacs were often relegated to menial labor and jobs that reduced them to custodians and mail carriers, even when applying to positions for which they were overqualified. White women also experienced discrimination in their job assignments as WACs. They too grappled with assignments that stereotyped women's labor as domestic, but their whiteness protected them from the "dirty work" often assigned to African American servicewomen.

⁷⁴ George Mahon to Howard Clark II, April 22, 1943, folder 103246-023-0600, Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942-1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, MA, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0600&accountid=7090>.

⁷⁵ Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 103.

⁷⁶ Moore, *To Serve My Country*, 69.

I juxtapose the job assignment of black Wacs with requests made by African American leaders and black organizations for more support for training black women in special skill sets. Efforts to encourage support includes black leaders' labors to present accessible opportunities for black Wacs' training to support the war effort. I also argue that the support of organizations like the NAACP was conditional through an examination of the Fort Devens strike. Strict conditions came with *how* black women could respond to malassignment and discrimination. Black Wacs knew that should they act out of line by challenging the military and protesting their treatment as servicewomen, not even leaders championing civil rights would stand up for them if their interactions supposedly invalidated the movement. Finally, I address how stereotypes about black women's work explicitly *and* implicitly presented themselves in WAC assignments and interactions with other Wacs, officers, and those higher up in the chain of command. Stereotypes of black women as promiscuous, inept, and ill-mannered negatively impacted black Wacs. They were not taken seriously and exploited in their work. The attitudes of WAC leaders like Oveta Culp Hobby reveal that even though the War Department showed a vested interest in using the Corps to have women replace men's jobs so men could focus on fighting, the WAC, at its core, preserved the fundamental tenets of traditional (white) womanhood. Black women fell outside the umbrella of traditional womanhood and experienced ostracization in their education and training because of their race.

Before the onslaught of World War II, when the Army had not yet entertained the idea of letting women (other than nurses) join the service in any official capacity—let alone black women—Representative Edith Nourse Rogers proposed a bill titled HR 6293 to the House, where she suggested forming a corps that offered the same protections and services to servicewomen that the Army provided for servicemen. A former World War I nurse who served

overseas, Rogers witnessed firsthand the treatment of American women in the European Theater, and she believed the contributions of women during the First World War warranted them an official position in the Army. Her proposal initially did not include any mentions of the service of African American women and what roles they would play during the war. NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White quickly pointed the absence of African American women out in a telegram to Rogers and requested amendments in HR 6293 to include black women and prohibit discrimination in their work. He suggested that “no person should be excluded from membership in the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps . . . in enrollment, assignment or ratings, promotion and advancement . . . on account of race, creed, or color.” Even if the War Department insisted upon upholding segregation, these additions, White hoped, would protect from discrimination black women who chose to serve in the WAAC. Rogers assured White that his suggestions would be included when Congress passed the bill. She had not had time to include specifications about black women, she said, and quickly assured White that as soon as the bill gained more momentum, an amendment to include black women would likely be introduced and added.⁷⁷

Despite Rogers’ reassurance, White and other black leaders remained concerned that, without explicit amendments in the bill that would prohibit racial discrimination, H.R. 6293 would fail to protect black women from discrimination and exploitation in the WAAC. Consequently, black leaders feared that the WAAC would become another opportunity for a predominately white institution—the Army—to exploit black women’s bodies and labor. Leaders also expressed fears that, for those who made it into the Corps, discrimination would impede

⁷⁷ Walter White to Edith Nourse Rogers, telegram, January 30, 1942; Rogers to White, telegram, January 30, 1942, folder 001535-015-0203, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001535-015-0203&accountid=7090>.

their full participation. If black women were to serve, leaders believed, then Rogers' proposed bill would need to guarantee black women a place for service and the work that accompanied it.

Menial work had always been a reality for African American women in a society structured around whiteness. While white women advocated for the same benefits as white men in the workplace, black women had worked to support their families, their community, and themselves before, during, and after Reconstruction. Traditionally, black women worked in what historian Jacqueline Jones defined as three spheres: the household, their communities, and the paid labor force. In the paid labor force, which had roots in slavery, black women's "subordinate status as women and as blacks" impacted their place in American society.⁷⁸ This historic exploitation of black women's labor made it even more imperative for black leaders that a bill introducing the same service protections to women that the military offered men included African American women.⁷⁹

The concerns of black leaders that the WAAC bill would fail to explicitly state protections for black women's work were confirmed when President Franklin D. Roosevelt approved the WAAC bill without any requested amendments. Members of Congress insisted that the WAAC would follow the War Department's policy on racial equality and that no explicit protections were required.⁸⁰ The appointment of Oveta Culp Hobby as the head of the WAAC on the day after the bill's passage heightened black leaders' fears that the WAAC would

⁷⁸ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 1, ProQuest Ebook Central. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tcu/detail.action?docID=481165>.

⁷⁹ Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 23.

⁸⁰ Martha S. Putney, *When the Nation Was in Need: Blacks in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992), viii.

discriminate against black women. African American leaders expressed doubts that the Texan woman—whom they suspected of harboring racist ideologies—would follow through on the promise that the WAAC would follow the War Department’s antidiscrimination policy. Carter W. Wesley, a World War I veteran who went on to become an attorney for the NAACP, warned White that he had heard through the grapevine that “[Hobby] is the type that feels that all colored people are just ‘Niggers.’” Wesley was hard-pressed to believe that “we will get any consideration from her department [the WAC] except that that she is compelled to give by those above her or special circumstances.”⁸¹In Wesley’s eyes, the appointment of Hobby reinforced what he perceived as a lack of concern from the Army to ensure that black women received equal opportunities as Waacs.

Despite trepidations, concerns, and the history behind black women’s labor that forced them into positions of servitude, black Waacs nonetheless believed that once they overcame the challenges of recruitment, they would have the same job opportunities as any other woman (See Figure 2.1). Rumors surrounding Hobby’s attitude surely had little influence over the jobs black Waacs would perform for their nation, and they presumed that the War Department’s nondiscrimination clause would not circumvent African American women from skilled work.

⁸¹ “Carter Walker Wesley,” University of Houston, accessed June 20, 2023, https://www.uh.edu/class/ctr-public-history/tobearfruit/resources_bios_wesley.html; Carter W. Wesley to Walter White, May 20, 1942, folder 001535-015-0203, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001535-015-0203&accountid=7090>.



Figure 2.1 *Doing Their Share, Too*. Sketch by Charles Alston, 1943. Artworks and Mockups for Cartoons Promoting the War Effort and Original Sketches by Charles Alston, ca. 1942–ca. 1945, the U.S. National Archives, College Park, Maryland. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/535600>.

Before any discussion can be had over the kind of work black women were doing and their experiences, it is important to look at how black women were assigned jobs and what kind of jobs they were assigned. A memorandum for the Director of Military Training insisted that, for all Wacs, the “true objectives of training are factors of growth and development rather than bodies of subject matter to be mastered.” Women enlisted in the WAC “should achieve basic understanding, attitudes, and abilities requisite to military persons in general and members of the

WAC in particular.”⁸² In a confidential letter from Adjutant General James Alexander Ulio commanding generals and officers in the Army, Ulio reiterated the Army-wide policy for black WAAC jobs. He established that the assignment of black WAAC officers, as more became available, served the purpose of alleviating any jobs that white officers could not tackle as the WAAC expanded. “[P]osition vacancies” would be created for black officers as they became “more capable of the duties and responsibilities of higher grades” as white Wacs were transferred out of training centers. In essence, white officers got positions first, and black officers were put in afterward. The letter also revealed that black Wacs would not be assigned on an individual basis to positions where their skills were needed but rather in groups that conformed to the high standards of the WAC. Ulio communicated that as more skilled black women became available, positions would open for them to serve. This, of course, was contingent on how many white Wacs were performing a given task and was also up to the discretion of commanding officers and their subordinates—where appropriate.⁸³

It is difficult to find macro-level statistics detailing the kinds of jobs *all* black and white Wacs performed during World War II. The data that *is* available comes from individual training camps comparing the discrepancies in black and white Wacs’ labor assignments. Even then, detailed numbers on labor assignments comparing black and white Wacs in specific camps are a bit unorganized, with most records physically located in National Archives. A case study of the available records from the investigation of the Fort Devens strike in Massachusetts show the

⁸² Director of Military Training, memorandum, December 21, 1943, folder 103367-008-0445, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103367-008-0445&accountid=7090>

⁸³ A memorandum to the Commanding Generals and Officers detailing the specifics of black Wac assignment had previously been issued by Brigadier General H. B. Lewis on January 10, 1943. The information in the memorandum is identical to that issued by J. A. Ulio, so I have opted to use the latter. James A. Ulio to The Commanding Generals, et al, “Policy on the Promotion and Assignment of Negro Personnel,” January 7, 1944, folder 103246-014-0448, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-014-0448&accountid=7090>.

disproportionate assignment of black Wacs to jobs as hospital orderlies (See Table 2.1). Fort Devens was not the only location where black women experienced setbacks in hospital assignments. Many black women felt job discrimination in their assignments at Fort Lovell Hospital in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Even though they received the same exact training as the white Wacs, white Wacs appeared to be advancing in jobs as hospital technicians more than black Wacs were. It became increasingly obvious that the WAC put more emphasis on preparing and promoting white women than on black women.⁸⁴

Considering the history behind black women's labor, which designated them to positions of servitude under whites, their assignment to lowbrow work was a denigration of their worth. Those who made it past the obstacles of recruitment found that the Army employed civilians to do jobs that required specialized training. At Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, an investigation revealed that black civilians received better hospital jobs than the black Wacs who worked in those same hospitals. African American civilians worked better hours than the Black Wacs, and civilian nurses gave orders to black orderlies. Treadwell expresses that the complaints about the WAC assigning civilians to specialized work were not unique to black Wacs working in hospitals—white Wacs issued the same objections. White Wacs felt that the Army invalidated the time and effort put into their specialized training by assigning WAC jobs to civilians.⁸⁵

What Treadwell fails to take into consideration, however, is the influence malassignment had on the accessibility of jobs for black women in the WAAC/WAC. It was easier for white Wacs to progress because the Corps reflected the values held during the 1940s toward gender *and* race. Historian Leisa D. Meyer writes that the military assignments planned for Wacs

⁸⁴ Sandra M. Bolzenius, *Glory in Their Spirit: How Four Black Women Took On the Army during World War II* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 2018), 60–61, <https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctt22p7j8n>.

⁸⁵ Treadwell, *Women's Army Corps*, 598.

reflected the race, class, and sex-segregated structures in prewar civilian occupation. Male officers on WAC training posts were the ultimate determinants of Wacs' duties. Depending on the male officer, racial and gender stereotypes influenced the duties he assigned to black and white Wacs. For black Wacs, these duties encompassed roles as "domestic servants." White Wacs, on the other hand, were assigned to "reproductive labor," i.e., housewife work.⁸⁶

Not all black women serving in the WAC faced egregious malassignment as domestic servants when they worked. Historian Martha S. Putney writes that the first black unit assigned to the Fifth Service Command was redesignated as the Twenty-first WAC Hospital Company in March 1944. The women worked at Wakeman General Hospital, where they were "assigned jobs as ward attendants, medical and surgical technicians, and clerks"—the same jobs that were disproportionately assigned to white Wacs in the Army⁸⁷ With that said, work opportunities at WAC training camps and hospitals were contingent on those in charge at the hospitals. If black Wacs worked where their superiors expressed clear disdain for their presence in *any workspace* where they might be working alongside white Wacs, the "solution" was to assign them to degrading menial labor. The race and sex of black women directly determined how they were perceived and assigned work, as seen with the expectation of black Wacs like Vera A. Knapp, who received the same training as white Wacs in the Air Corps Warning System (ACWS). She and the other black Wacs whom she had trained with were told that their satisfactory performance did not necessarily guarantee them a place in the WAC and that they would need to wait their turn for an opportunity to advance. Still, Colonel W. F. Pearson alleged that no

⁸⁶ Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 75.

⁸⁷ Putney, *When the Nation Was in Need*, 88–89.

discrimination based on race took place in any capacity.⁸⁸ The Army remained insistent that it did everything to uphold the tenets of curbing racial discrimination. Yet, it still maintained its staunch stance on racial segregation, something far more enforced by the WAC than the general Army.⁸⁹

Ironically, the War Department made desperate appeals for more training opportunities for black Wacs, as their training as “Physical Therapy Aides and Medical Department technicians is desperately needed” for “units and installations hospitalizing colored troops.” Evidently, the service of black women and the need for them to have skilled qualifications to work specialized jobs in hospitals stemmed from a concern that black men should not have white medical personnel caring for them, necessitating the need for further investment into the training of black women so they could perform the same tasks in a segregated hospital. The greater issue at hand, however, was the concern that black women would be interacting with white patients, something that the Army and WAC discouraged immensely.⁹⁰ Even with the racial motivations for the training of black women, the War Department’s recognition that further resources needed to be invested into the full training of black personnel shows an awareness of the need to invest time and resources into ensuring that black women had the proper training to do the skilled labor required of them.

⁸⁸ James H. Sheldon to Bethune, July 29, 1942; Wm. F. Pearson to Leo Spanglet, July 28, 1942, folder 102613-033-0218, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=102613-033-0218&accountid=7090>.

⁸⁹ Walter White commented on the stark difference in the enforcement of racial segregation between training camps for black servicemen and WAC training camps in a letter to Henry L. Stimson and Oveta C. Hobby. In his observation, the WAC enforced segregation with more severity than the general Army. Walter White to Henry L. Stimson and Oveta Culp Hobby, October 28, 1942, folder 103246-022-0134, Correspondence of the Director of the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1946, Part 2: Personnel, National Archives, College Park, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0134&accountid=7090>.

⁹⁰ War Department to the Director of Military Training, memorandum, October 19, 1943, folder 103367-008-0445, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103367-008-0445&accountid=7090>.

Table 2.1 Comparison of White Wac and Black Wac Assignments, Fort Devens, March 9, 1945

Enlisted WAC duties	Basics	Mess personnel	Motor transport	Other technical duties	Medical Orderlies (or ward masters—white wacs only)	Hospital technicians	Clerical	Cadre
White Wacs		8%	12%	6%	12%	19%	40%	3%
Black Wacs	4%	11%	6%		75%			4%

Source: Bolzenius, *Glory in Their Spirit*, 61

Even when black women met prerequisites for the assortment of jobs available in the WAC, their race excluded them from the same training and work opportunities offered to white Wacs. The obstacles of recruitment carried over to actual service, so much so that the four black women who protested the Lovell General Hospital's discriminatory work assignments were joined by fifty-six other black Wacs, who charged Fort Devens with enforcing racial barriers to work, and they refused to continue working at the hospital even with constant assurances that the Army took grievances and complaints very seriously.⁹¹ The strike remains important in the discussion of black Wacs experiences in the army because it reveals not only the action black women were willing to take in the face of discrimination but also the lack of action by some black leaders and organizations to help black Wacs.

The Fort Devens strike is a notable moment when the treatment of black women in the labor force culminated in the resistance of black women to poor working conditions and racialized assignments. Black women were assigned to jobs that constituted low-skilled labor requirements in hospitals, even when they had the training for higher-skilled job positions. At Fort Devens especially, whistleblowers reported the racially motivated limitations imposed on black women. Robert L. Carter discussed the racialization of black women's work at Fort Devens' in a memorandum to Roy Wilkins. Carter was a civil rights lawyer for the NAACP who served from 1941 to 1944 in the Army Air Corps. Carter reported a tip from a "Mr. Pope who is connected to the USO"—the United Service Organizations, Inc.—over the WAC Strike in Massachusetts. Pope telephoned Carter with information from his informants, who he expressed were reliable and objective in their appraisal of the situation. Pope relayed that the training post where the striking WAC contingent was stationed was commanded by a Colonel Crandall, a man

⁹¹ Naomi Jolles, "4 Negro Wacs Convicted—NAACP Leader Calls it Fair," *New York Post*, March 21, 1945, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001537-019-0446&accountid=7090>.

he depicted as a “rabid Negro hater” from the reports he’d received. Crandall allegedly told the black women stationed at Fort Devens that “they are only fit for the dirtiest type of work since that is what they were used to, and that at his camp that is the only type of work that they are going to be assigned to do.” This interaction revealed that even toward the latter end of the war, hostilities toward black women and the kind of work they should be permitted to do reflected deeply engrained racist sentiments over what their participation should look like. The obvious disconnect between the antidiscrimination policy of the WAC and those who enforced the policy pervaded the experiences of black Wacs as they advocated for positions that reflected their training qualifications.⁹²

When Alice Young, Anna C. Morrison, Johnnie Murphy, and Mary E. Green received the news that they would be transferred from Fort Des Moines to Fort Devens to assist at the post’s Lovell General Hospital, they assumed they would be working the hospital jobs the WAC had trained them to do. Historian Sandra Bolzenius writes that the four black women—and others who were transferred out of Fort Des Moines—did not realize that the motivations for sending them out to do other field work had less to do with a need for their service, but more to do with their race. In actuality, they were reassigned because segregation at Fort Des Moines led to severe overcrowding, and the overcrowding of black personnel who were not being assigned to work at Fort Des Moines posed a serious threat of becoming “fodder for civil rights leaders who contested the notion that African American recruits were ‘unassignable.’” That fall of 1944, Lieutenant General Brehon Burke Somervell, the commanding general of the Army Service Forces, “took the matter in hand” and demanded the presence of black Wacs “rather than wait for

⁹² Robert L. Walker to Mr. Wilkins, memorandum, March 15, 1945, folder 001537-019-0446, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001537-019-0446&accountid=7090>; “Robert L. Carter,” National Park Service, last modified December 30, 2020, <https://www.nps.gov/people/robert-l-carter.htm>.

requisitions.” Somervell reasoned that unnecessary drama could be avoided by stepping in and taking the black Wacs. When the women arrived at Fort Devens, they faced an unfortunately familiar dilemma from their new commanding officers—racial discrimination. Testimony from Private Alice D. Young—one of the four court-martialed women—revealed the extent of the discrimination when she reported Colonel Walter Crandall, the commanding officer at Lovell General Hospital, as having told her, “I don’t want black Wacs here as medical technicians. They are here to mop walls, scrub floors, and do the dirty work.”⁹³ The official history of the WAC insists that “skilled Negro recruits . . . who met the intelligence requirements were successfully given specialist training” and “proved able to complete the regular course on the same terms as other Wacs.”⁹⁴ However, the court-martial of Privates Anna C. Morrison, Johnnie Murphy, Mary Green, and Alice D. Young shows that skilled black women were still assigned to menial labor. The discrimination manifested in the efforts of Colonel Crandall and the WAC detachment’s senior officer First Lieutenant Victoria Lawson to sequester the women instead of “incorporating them into the post’s regular functions.” Though the War Department held that “racial segregation was a military necessity,” the events that transpired at Fort Devens showed just how detrimental segregation and malassignment were for African American Wacs.⁹⁵

Understandably, the revelation that the commanding officers at Fort Devens would *not* attempt to fully incorporate black women into the WAC workforce frustrated black Wacs. The War Department outlined that military personnel of *all* races could contribute equally to the

⁹³ “Review of Court-Martial Given to Four Negro Wacs,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 21, 1945, http://library.tcu.edu/PURL/EZproxy_link.asp?login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/review-court-martial-given-four-negro-wacs/docview/514555431/se-2?accountid=7090.

⁹⁴ Treadwell, Treadwell, *Women’s Army Corps*, 595.

⁹⁵ Sandra M. Bolzenius, *Glory in Their Spirit: How Four Black Women Took On the Army during World War II* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 2018), 40–41, <https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctt22p7j8n>.

duties expected of them. Black Wacs underwent the same training as white Wacs to do the exact same kind of work the Army required of the Corps. It became obvious to the women at Fort Devens that the WAC did not uphold the War Department's antidiscrimination policy. When the black Wacs at Fort Devens began a strike on March 9, 1945, they understood the risks and consequences put on the line by doing so. Protests were not uncommon among African American servicemen and servicewomen during the Second World War; they were frequently covered by the black press in addition to the "severe consequences" personnel of color faced by protesting segregation and racial discrimination. Despite meetings with Crandall, who assured the women that their complaints of malassignment would be taken seriously while warning them of the dire consequences of striking in the military, which might be counted as sedition, nothing changed. Black Wacs grew angry with the lack of action, and "connected their grievances to the historical exploitation of black women and their labor."⁹⁶ First Lieutenant Lawson expressed that "in almost every instance the girls that complained said they would not go back to slavery, and a number stated they would take death or a kind of court-martial or dependency discharge or anything to get out of Lovell."⁹⁷

The anger of the black Wacs at Fort Devens and the refusal of Murphy, Green, Morrison, and Young to go back to work when the War Department promised that it would handle the situation made national headlines. The NAACP proved instrumental in the handling of the Fort Devens strike in how it gathered and collected information, offered legal counseling, and networked with other civil rights groups to defend the women who protested. When the NAACP publicly addressed the strike and the actions of the black Wacs at Fort Devens, however, some

⁹⁶ Bolzenius, *Glory in Their Spirit*, 66, 68.

⁹⁷ Charge Sheets, "Statement of Victoria Lawson," March 13, 1945, included in *U.S. v. Young* in Bolzenius, *Glory in Their Spirit*.

civil rights leaders condemned their actions. For the most part, the NAACP constantly advocated for black women and called out harmful discrimination. Still, the support of the NAACP and other black leaders for black women in the military was conditional. If the frustration of black women in the face of discrimination invalidated any aspect of the fight for civil rights, African American women faced quick condemnation from some of the black community because their “misbehavior” made African Americans look unprofessional. Some leaders in the NAACP viewed the issue of racial discrimination in the military as one that fundamentally stemmed from segregation and argued that the existence of Jim Crow in the army would only incite more protests from the African American community. A small faction of black leaders argued that adding gender to the dynamic would only complicate the fight against Jim Crow. Essentially, black women needed to wait their turn. A writer for the *New York Post*, Naomi Jollesl, published an article regarding the court-martial of the four Fort Devens Wacs where she discussed one black leader’s sentiments that the four black Wacs reaped what they sowed. She wrote that the head of the Boston NAACP branch, Julian Steele, expressed that the conviction of the four women was fair, considering their decision to strike and refusal to go back to work constituted mutiny in the eyes of the military.⁹⁸

Upon seeing the news article, the NAACP reached out to the editor of the *New York Post* to correct the misunderstanding that Steele’s words represented the NAACP’s view of the court martial. The acting secretary wrote that the article’s title unfairly painted the NAACP’s stance on the matter and misconstrued what Julian Steele meant when he stated the verdict reached was a fair one. The title, “4 Negro WACs Convicted—NAACP Leader Calls it Fair,” made the NAACP look like it did not support or assist the black Wacs at Fort Devens. Steele called the

⁹⁸ Bolzenius, *Glory in Their Spirit*, 114; Jolles, “4 Negro Wacs Convicted,” *New York Post*, March 21, 1945.

trial fair for the charges against the four black women. For the “severity” of their actions (i.e., striking), General Miles, who heard the case, acted with utmost fairness and consideration. The *New York Post* article painted Steele’s words in a way that made it look like the organization viewed “the verdict and punishment” as “fair.”⁹⁹

Bolzenius argues that Julian Steele’s words were not misconstrued; he was a controversial figure before he made his comments on the court-martial case, and his “public statements expressed at best halting support for the Wacs, which caused an uproar among African Americans.” Steele “dismissed local activists’ investigations that uncovered rampant discrimination at Fort Devens.” He contended that the case had nothing to do with race but rather with insubordination. An example of Steele’s dismissiveness occurred when Richard H. Walker investigated the incident at Fort Devens. “[A]s a former officer in World War I,” he wrote, “I too believed in discipline but felt that members of the Court should know of the discriminatory working conditions which those WAC’s complained they were being subjected to before sentence was passed.” Even if Colonel Wynant expressed that racial discrimination was not involved and that the matter only had to do with the “question of willfully disobeying a direct order of the Commanding General,” Walker still believed that it was unfair to the black women to completely dismiss their experiences. As members of the Army, black women were just as entitled to a fair trial with fair disciplinary measures. When Walker reached out to Steele with his observations of the treatment of black Wacs and their working conditions, Steele dismissed Walker’s concerns. Walker described Steele’s response as entirely dismissive. He had called Steele to inform him “of my visit with Colonel Wynant and also told him of the information I had secured in Ayer the night before.” Steele responde that there was no need for Walker to take

⁹⁹ Unnamed Acting Secretary of the NAACP to Paul A. Tierney, March 22, 1945, file 001537-019-0446, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001537-019-0446&accountid=7090>.

such steps. Steele said that he “‘investigated’ and knew for a fact that none of the WAC’s were trained as medical technicians.” There was no proof to claim that the strike at Fort Devens was racially motivated.¹⁰⁰

Walker also told Mary McLeod Bethune that on several occasions, Steele had talked with General Miles “concerning racial problems of Negro troops and that [Steele] had always found [Miles] to be fair and tolerant.” Walker continued, “[O]n at least two occasions, [Steele] and Mr. William H. Lewis had visited Fort Devens at the request of General Miles to make surveys on existing conditions. On no occasion had he found any evidence of discrimination or of anyone giving him factual information on which he could report to the General.” Walker continued, “I explained to Mr. Steele that I understood Army regulations and also believe in discipline, but by the same token, the Court should be made aware of the causes which made the WAC’s disobey a command.” When Walker left the camp on the eighteenth, a day before the trial against the Camp Devens strikers, “three or four Negro WAC’s had attempted suicide because of the working conditions at the Lovell Hospital.”¹⁰¹ From the information provided by Walker, it is clear that Steele’s claim that racial discrimination played no part in the experiences of the Fort Devens Wacs was factually incorrect. Colonel Crandall’s decisive words, where he expressed his belief that the only jobs black Wacs were useful for were custodial positions, demonstrate the pervasiveness of racialized attitudes at the camp. Crandall’s behavior was exposed because black Wacs organized a strike to protest discrimination. Furthermore, Walker’s personal investigation of Fort Devens revealed that the racism experienced by black Wacs had such an intense impact

¹⁰⁰ Richard H. Walker to Mary McLeod Bethune, March 24, 1945, folder 001537-019-0446, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001537-019-0446&accountid=7090>.

¹⁰¹ Walker to Bethune, March 24, 1945, folder 001537-019-0446, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001537-019-0446&accountid=7090>.

on their well-being that the treatment they received at the hospital and their routine malassignment drove some women to attempt suicide.

The conflicting information from men like Steele and Walker created divisions in the black press, where some people praised the four Wacs for standing up against discrimination while others deemed the women's actions inappropriate. Staunch advocates of black progress, like Percival Prattis of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, who launched the Double V Campaign and advocated for the "immediate demands for rights," expressed that black Wacs should be patient about acquiring equal rights. In contrast, black servicemen were praised for organizing, defying discriminatory practices, and the advocating for the immediate abolishment of segregation through grassroots movement and aggressive campaigning.¹⁰² Such attitudes demonstrate the dichotomous views held by black leaders when it came to the treatment of black servicemen versus black servicewomen. From the perspective of some of the biggest advocates of civil rights in the press and the NAACP, black women needed to wait their turn for equality and to behave while they did so. Some members of the African American community, like Julian Steele and Percival Prattis, held the opinion that black women's experience with discrimination in the WAC had less to do with race and gender and more to do with how they acted as personnel. This belief was rooted in the fear that the misbehavior of black women would detract from the long-term goal of achieving full racial equality.

In the end, African American women relied on their connections and shared experiences with other black women to navigate a Jim Crow army. The brunt of the work done to advocate for the women at Fort Devens ended up being championed by the leaders of African American women's organizations. The strike of the four women at Fort Devens was more than a

¹⁰² Bolzenius, *Glory in Their Spirit*, 123; Thomas Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America's World War II Military* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 26–27.

segregation issue—it was an African American woman’s issue. The black male leaders of the country did not fully comprehend the significance of the strike as a response to discrimination unique to black women because black men’s gender barred them from understanding the intersectionality of being black and being a *woman*. In a *Boston Herald* article titled “WAC Decision Unity Threat: Equality Means Acceptance Of Equal Responsibility,” Bill Cunningham shared his opinion that black Wacs needed to face the same kind of punishment for disorderly behavior that black soldiers did. “Of course, these are women, and WAC’s really aren’t soldiers,” he noted. Still, military discipline should be doled out the same way it would be to any other Army personnel. For Cunningham, their race and gender had little to do with the trial’s verdict, which the War Department “dropped . . . like a red hot potato.” Letting the black Wacs off scot-free without any official hearing, presidential pardon, or reduction of the verdict was a failure of the system, in his opinion. The handling of the Fort Devens case left “nothing gained” and “nothing proved.” It served no purpose other than bringing about “the separation of the word, American, into two colors—black and white,” something black leaders made active efforts to avoid.¹⁰³ Because of this, the struggles of black women were often contextualized and drowned out within the larger framework of the civil rights movement. Doing so diminished the significance of black Wac’s responses to discrimination, revealing the conditional support African American women received from their community.¹⁰⁴ The NAACP’s conditional support for black women as they grappled with work discrimination took an intense toll on their morale. Regardless of black women’s persistence to serve their country, the networks they formed to

¹⁰³ Bill Cunningham, “WAC Decision Unity Threat: Equality Means Acceptance Of Equal Responsibility,” *Boston Herald*, March 5, 1945. NAACP Papers, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001537-019-0446&accountid=7090>.

¹⁰⁴ Bolzenius, *Glory in Their Spirit*, 114–115.

support each other, they faced greater oppression through racial and gender discrimination, segregation, and unfair assignment. Only a select few seemed to be on the side of black Wacs when they desperately required *full* community support.

The actions and lack thereof by the WAC, War Department, and even some black leaders, barred black women from obtaining full support, denied their work opportunities, and reinforced not only their isolation but pervasive, harmful stereotypes. The most harmful stereotype revolved around the sexuality of black women, something that directly impacted their work assignments. When the WAC first formed, the Army and the American public attempted to grasp what women's work for their country entailed. Many Americans worried that the WAC would encourage promiscuous behavior in women and challenge traditional gender roles. It should be noted, however, that these concerns were primarily geared toward white Wacs. A greater concern for preserving the traditional values of womanhood—specifically white womanhood—dominated cultural concerns and the actions of the WAC to present the Corps as one that did not challenge traditional masculinity but sought to ease the nation's burden so the men could focus on fighting for their country. By “[d]efining all jobs that women performed within the military as noncombat,” the army could preserve its definition of soldiers as men regardless of whether they served as combatants. Understanding differentiation between combatant and noncombatant status for Wacs is important in the examination of black Wacs' sexuality. The Army established the gendered distinctions between combatant and noncombatant status through whiteness, and by doing so, reinforced stereotypes around gender roles for black Americans. The “War Department and Army officials denied African-American men access to the status of ‘protector’ and further reinforced black women's position as ‘unprotected.’” It was the unprotected status of black Wacs compared to the protected status of their white Wacs that

emboldened the Army to suggest the use of black women on the European front to provide company to black men.¹⁰⁵

This history explains why Dwight D. Eisenhower's initial acceptance of black women to the European front—though taken out of context—was met with such vitriolic pushback. Black leaders understood that sending black Wacs over to assuage fears of racial mixing and keep black GIs in check reinforced sexual stereotypes of black women, even if the intent was only to provide innocent company to boost morale. Eisenhower insisted that “Negroes were performing essential duties” but “without the companionship of other Negroes,” leaving black soldiers to “wander disconsolately.”¹⁰⁶ Even if it was not Eisenhower's intent, proposing to send black Wacs over to “entertain” black soldiers, in essence, reduced them to sexual objects.¹⁰⁷ The WAC responded to the request by outright declaring that no WAC would not go to the European front unless their service entailed the work women were trained for in the corps, as it would give “women's work” in the WAC a reputation as secretarial service, or worse.

An article from the *New York Times* discussed the Army's suggestion, citing its desire to address the problem of black troops' interactions with white civilians in England by dealing “with it on a sensible and practical basis.”¹⁰⁸ The so-called sensible solution suggested by General Dwight D. Eisenhower and the army was to send black women over to curb any further interactions between black soldiers and America's white European allies. Concerns over racial

¹⁰⁵ Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 85.

¹⁰⁶ “Duty in England for Negro Waacs: General Says They Will Help to Entertain Soldiers of Their Race Stationed There,” *New York Times*, Aug 16, 1942.

¹⁰⁷ Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 36.

¹⁰⁸ “Duty in England for Negro Waacs: General Says They Will Help to Entertain Soldiers of Their Race Stationed There,” *New York Times*, Aug 16, 1942, http://library.tcu.edu/PURL/EZproxy_link.asp?login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/duty-england-negro-waacs/docview/106369643/se-2.

integration also stemmed from the fear of interracial relationships forming between black soldiers and white women. Jim Crow laws forbade interracial relationships of any kind out of a priority of protecting white women and their reputations. Furthermore, the Army thought that black women would be best equipped to handle the needs of black soldiers by providing them with company and entertainment.¹⁰⁹

Historical stereotypes around women's sexuality greatly influenced the military's expectations for black and white women in the WAC. From the onset, the WAC had to address claims that it employed prostitutes and "predatory lesbians." Rumors that the WAC harbored sexually immoral women threatened the respectability and legitimacy of women's service and reflected poorly on WAC leaders like Hobby. Respectability, then, became of such serious concern that it influenced whether women were accepted into the WAC in the first place, while also influencing the kind of work women would be assigned.¹¹⁰ All women in the WAC were subjected to scrutiny when it came to their sexuality, but it impacted black women to a greater degree in their work assignments and experiences as WACs than their white peers. Sexualization historically limited the opportunities of black women and their treatment by society at large. It endangered them, dehumanized them, and fueled dangerous myths that black women would tempt and distract men. Colonel Crandall was reported saying he would not "permit the Negro soldiers hospitalized at the Lowell Hospital in Boston to have any outside entertainment. His sentiments on that point are that he will not have any Negroes coming into that hospital to entertain the colored soldiers."¹¹¹ Crandall's policy on using black women to "entertain" black

¹⁰⁹ "Duty in England for Negro Waacs," *New York Times*, Aug 16, 1942.

¹¹⁰ Beth Bailey, "'A Higher Moral Character': Respectability and the Women's Army Corps," 72, 76.

¹¹¹ Walker to Wilkins, memorandum, March 15, 1945, folder 001537-019-0446.

soldiers did not come from a place of concern for black women—his sentiments clearly show that he viewed black women as detrimental to the performance of black soldiers. Their “detrimental” presence revolved around their supposedly “tempting” nature.

There existed a dichotomy between and keeping them from interacting with black men out of fear that they might distract soldiers from the war effort using black women as behavioral regulators. When General Eisenhower suggested that black Wacs be sent to the European front to provide company to black GIs, he unintentionally opened a door that equated the usefulness of black Wacs’ labor with their ability to regulate men. The WAC put a stop to any suggestions that the black Wacs be sent to the European front to provide companionship to black soldiers, but this came from a place of preserving the reputation of the WAC and asserting its role as a necessary corps to aid the country.¹¹² The WAC did not exist to ease the emotional burdens and needs of servicemen. Putting women in companion positions—even if they weren’t sexual—would set a dangerous precedent for WAC service. This precedent had greater consequences for black women in an army that stereotyped their sexuality and placed less emphasis on preventing the exploitation of black women versus white women. The concept of sexual morality was analyzed through the morality of white women, which only ostracized black Wacs further when it came to their sexuality and treatment. As a result, black women were more likely to experience sexual exploitation without consequence for offenders, *especially* when the offenders were white.¹¹³

When Elsie Oliver was stationed at Fort Des Moines, she experienced barbaric treatment at the hands of a dentist who deliberately used “soiled instruments” to work on her mouth and sexually assaulted her. Oliver recalled how she was alerted to go to a dentist who reportedly held

¹¹² Bailey, “Higher Moral Character,” 81.

¹¹³ Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 103.

an extreme disdain toward African Americans. When she was called back, Oliver quickly told the dentist that the tools he was going to use on her were soiled. Undaunted, the dentist said, “I’m the dentist, you’ll do as I tell you.” She describes how he “pushed me in the chair and started rubbing his hands up on my legs.” Oliver protested and told him she was only there for dental work. The dentist ignored her and “pushed my head back and started pawing in my mouth.” By the next morning, her mouth had become infected, resulting in a three or four-week hospitalization. Williams believed the dentist faced the consequences for his actions, but Moore found no records indicating that he was punished for assaulting her.¹¹⁴

Historian Leisa D. Meyer explains that the lack of action by the WAC and Army when protecting black women from sexual abuse stemmed from the perception of black women as “bad” women. “Bad” women could be used to regulate the sexuality of male personnel without endangering “good” women. Consequently, African American Wacs found themselves in a position where their bodies were objects for military use.¹¹⁵ The WAAC/WAC was in the business of protecting the respectability of white women. Black women only came to the attention of its leaders when their treatment might have broader consequences for the safety of white Wacs. The lack of protection, the denial of their experiences, and the slow responses of the WAC and Army to the conditions black women faced/confronted when they chose to serve affected the willingness of many African American women to entertain the idea of working in the WAAC/WAC. Despite this, however, studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor show that black Wacs did instrumental work. The Department of Labor cited that black women

¹¹⁴ Brenda L. Moore, *To Serve My Country, To Serve My Race: The Story of the Only African American WACs Stationed Overseas during World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 74.

¹¹⁵ Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women’s Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 103.

did crucial work to support their nation and were “competently” doing work that helped the war effort. The labor of black women was crucial to the War effort and the success of America on and off the homefront.¹¹⁶

African American women in the WAC navigated the restrictions and stereotypes that infiltrated their efforts to receive the same kind of work opportunities as any other WAC by reaching out to the NAACP and its leaders. Despite the limitations, exploitation, and discrimination, black women persisted and continued to advocate for their worth in the Army. Black women worked with the resources and opportunities they had available to them and made irrefutably important contributions to America during World War II. The movement for equal access to the rights and benefits of citizenship through service stood tall in the face of discouragement from outside and within the African American community, as the final chapter will show.

¹¹⁶ US Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau, *Negro Women War Workers*, by Kathryn Blood, No. 205, 1945, 14, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112104139040>.

CHAPTER THREE

Why Do We Serve?

The women were prepared to be friends to their brothers if they wanted friends. Most of us were very patriotic. The welfare of the country came first, even as we rejected our status as second-class citizens and sought legal redress. We held a firm belief that, by replacing a man behind the lines, we could help all men, fathers, brothers, husbands, and sweethearts, come home sooner. There were some who had responded to the call to adventure, and some, I suspect, hoped to find *the* man.¹¹⁷

—Charity A. Earley

When Colonel Frank U. McCoskrie, known as Colonel Mac, asked Charity Adams Earley how soon she could leave Company 8 as its Commanding Officer (CO), she didn't know what to expect. Earley recalls how she "could think of absolutely nothing else that I could do and could see no logic in leaving a job that I did well for something about which I knew nothing." For so long, Earley enjoyed the authority that came with her position as the CO of Company 8. The sudden request that she leave her position startled and even depressed her.¹¹⁸ Earley had no idea that Colonel Mac's request to have her moved would result in an opportunity she never expected—a chance for overseas service. "You know, Adams," Colonel Mac had told her, "I have always refused to release you from the Training Center [in Des Moines] because I could see no advantage for you in letting you go unless you have an opportunity for a promotion. Here you have received as much as we can give, but there was no more opportunity in other assignments until this came along. I wanted you to know. How do you feel about it?"¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Charity A. Earley, *One Woman's Army: A Black Officer Remembers the WAC*, Texas A&M University Military History Series, vol 12. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), 153.

¹¹⁸ Earley, *One Woman's Army*, 89–90.

¹¹⁹ Earley, *One Woman's Army*, 121–122.

Charity A. Earley would go on to lead the 6888th Central Postal Battalion—the first and only black WAC division sent to the European front during World War II. Its job was to sort through the massive backlog of mail to U.S. personnel on the European Front. At a surface level, the job of the 6888th might seem inconsequential, but the job was no small feat. Approximately seven million American personnel served in the European Theater of Operations (ETO). This number included “every person involved in and with military and para-military activity in the ETO.” It was up to the black Wacs of the 6888th to comb through every single name to determine where mail went on the European Front and to make sure it got to U.S. personnel in a timely manner (Fig. 3.1).¹²⁰

Why does the 6888th matter in the discussion of black women’s contributions during World War II? Moreover, what does the 6888th have to do with the legacy of black Wacs’ service and their importance during the war? Black women fought to prove their worth to a nation set on changing the world without changing its own ways, and the women of the 6888th are a primary example of that fight. The 6888th Wacs understood that their work gave hope to servicemen and servicewomen desperate for communication with home. They kindled morale and, by doing so, influenced the tides of war and the U.S. military’s success. Their mission was not simply sending out mail and reorganizing mailroom efficiency. They uplifted the spirits of American personnel by reminding them that the fight for freedom abroad was a fight for freedom at home. The 6888th also brought hope to America’s European allies by showing them that American personnel were there to provide as much support and aid they could afford by assisting with overwhelming tasks for people who were already overwhelmed by the horrors of war. In exchange, most white Europeans treated black women with dignity and respect for their service.

¹²⁰ Earley, *One Woman’s Army*, 148.

Service on the ETO allowed the Wacs of the 6888th to experience the privileges of citizenship they would not have experienced otherwise, and this experience fueled their patriotism. The determination of black women to serve their country fundamentally reflects American ideals of freedom: (1) the right to citizenship, (2) the desire to support one's nation, and (3) perseverance in the face of oppression. The 6888th is important in the examination of these factors because they reflect the uniqueness of black Wacs' experiences during the war and their relationship with service.



Figure 3.1 *WACs sort packages, taken from the mail sacks by French civilian employees, at the 17th Base Post Office. Paris, France.* Local Identifier: 111-Sc-337995-1; National Archives Identifier: 175539203. <https://unwritten-record.blogs.archives.gov/2022/02/08/no-mail-low-morale-the-6888th-central-postal-battalion/>.

This chapter focuses on how black women perceived military service and what they thought their service to the country meant. I do this by first defining what service meant to the African American community. I look at how black men saw their service as an opportunity for advancement—a sentiment shared by black women who joined the WAAC/WAC. From there, I examine black Americans' understanding of fascism on the European Theater of Operations and the homefront. I also delve into black women's relationship with black servicemen who, at times, perceived their presence and desire to join the army as a threat to masculinity. I look at the women of the 6888th and the Fort Devens strikers to show that black women were not so easily deterred. I frame the 6888th in a wider context by showing how they were received and, ultimately, remembered. Black Wacs service stood against white supremacy as a step toward acceptance. By persevering in the face of oppression through military service, black women changed perceptions of race and gender in and outside the United States.

Understanding what service meant to servicemen and servicewomen in African American communities requires examining the sociocultural significance of military service and its correlation with citizenship. In the United States, people viewed military service as the ultimate demonstration of citizenship. Those who voluntarily joined the armed forces, fought for their country, and even died for it were perceived as paragons of American loyalty and dedication. Servicemen and servicewomen sacrificed their time and leisure to aid their country in its defense in a true show of American patriotism. To an extent, the military acknowledged the sacrifices and dedication of those who voluntarily served, but mainly for America's nonminority demographic. The military mainly acknowledged the service of white Americans, because America is a nation fundamentally structured around whiteness. Most of the nation's leaders were white, laws benefited and protected white people, and white men fought America's wars.

Historian Thomas Guglielmo writes that “only in the military did the US government deny a subset of its people the rights and privileges of citizenship at precisely the time that those same people performed the most solemn and dangerous obligation of citizenship.” This “dangerous obligation,” as Guglielmo puts it, was service during wartime.¹²¹

Most major works on military service and citizenship have been explored through a white male perspective. Even as scholarship over citizenship has expanded, most works revolve around men’s citizenship and service. *Half American* by Matthew Delmont, *Divisions* by Thomas Guglielmo, and *War! What Is It Good For?* by Kimberly Phillips share common arguments over what qualities define citizenship for Black Americans: full integration, unobstructed democratic participation, and security through military benefits. The irony of serving a country that did not extend the same rights and privileges to minority groups was not lost on black men and women, yet they continued to serve. Why?

To understand black women’s motivations and feelings toward service it is important to look at the motivations of black servicemen. The issue of race in the army predates black women’s mobilization in the WAC. A black serviceman by the name of Jim Williams expressed that “even though the army was segregated,” he believed that “if we [black personnel] went in and proved ourselves in some small way, they would have to recognize us. . . . recognize our deportment in the army and say, ‘Well, hey, look. These people are A-number-1, so we’ll have to treat them as citizens.’” The black press repeated the same sentiments over black citizenship

¹²¹ Thomas Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America’s World War II Military* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 13.

through service.¹²² “The issue is plain. The issue is freedom,” J. Saunders Redding, a journalist, stated in an article titled “A Negro Looks at the War.” Redding wrote,

It used to seem shamefully silly to me to hear Negroes talk about freedom. But now I know that we Negroes here in America know a lot about freedom and love it more than a great many people who have long had it. We see that in the logic of a system based on freedom and the dignity of every man we have a chance. This is a war to keep me free. The very fact that I, a Negro in America, can fight against the evils in America is worth fighting for.¹²³

Historically, the citizenship obtainable through service in the United States was only open to white men. Black men had contributed to previous wars—the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War I, to name a few—but it was the Second World War, when the War Department and the Roosevelt administration explicitly determined the labor of African American men “as essential for victory,” that black wartime participation took on a new meaning for citizenship. African Americans argued that the nation’s call for their participation necessitated equal chances to “contribute to the welfare and defense of the country.” If black Americans were to fight at the behest of their nation to fulfill their roles as citizens, it would need to be under the same terms as white men.¹²⁴

Black Americans had a different relationship with freedom and citizenship than any other demographic in the country. They understood that the citizenship enjoyed by white Americans—white men in particular—did not socially or systemically extend to them. Furthermore, suggesting that “citizenship” should include black men created conflict, especially in terms of granting black men a physical place with, and not alongside, white men. Leaders of the Army

¹²² Maggi M. Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: Black Men and Women Remember World War II* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 8.

¹²³ Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army*, 8.

¹²⁴ Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For?*, 6–7.

insisted that undertaking any program that might abruptly end discrimination or segregation for American civilians was too big of a burden. They reasoned that it would be better if all efforts were invested into the war instead of substantial social changes.¹²⁵

The establishment of the WAAC contrasted Army leaders' sentiments on social change. Establishing the Corps implied that the War Department was willing to introduce a taste of citizenship to women, whose minority status excluded them from the full freedoms that came with American citizenship. Including white women suggested to minority groups in the United States that their chance to experience and express greater freedom was on the horizon. It became apparent to black women, however, that this freedom came with the same limitations placed on black servicemen through the War Department's reinforcement of Jim Crow policies. Some black women expected the Army and the military to "lead the way" in improving race relations but later decided that their expectations "were too high." Historian Martha S. Putney insists, though, that black Wacs did not expect "too much." She argues that racism was intentional "because the army, its policymakers, and some of its field commanders . . . was overwhelmingly Southern in its orientation and . . . too intent on running an apartheid-style operation." This structure essentially ensured that no efforts were made to make sure black servicemen and servicewomen "were accorded basic human rights."¹²⁶

Black leaders called out the hypocrisy of the War Department for introducing programs that suggested a willingness to further social change on the homefront, and the message the War Department sent to America's adversaries. The director of the Institute of Racial Relations in

¹²⁵ Bettie J. Morden, *The Women's Army Corps, 1945–1978*, Army Historical Series (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1990), 16.

¹²⁶ Martha S. Putney, *When the Nation Was in Need: Blacks in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 119.

Detroit, Philip H. Nichamin, commented that the Army's stance on segregation and discrimination "brought joy to the hearts of our enemies." Fascists in Europe, especially the Nazis, "saw the American system of race law as a model" for Nazi ideology.¹²⁷ For the Axis Powers, interracial strife and the conflicts that arose from it were "more valuable to them than a major military victory" because Jim Crow delegitimized democracy. It also reinforced the idea that minorities were undeserving of citizenship because they were inferior. The delegitimization of democracy threatened the efforts made by black men and women to cement their place as citizens through military service. Even so, Historian Sandra M. Bolzenius writes that as "[v]ictims of discrimination at home," both racially and gender-based, black women understood better than anyone else the significance of joining the war effort. Black Wacs were a "breathing defiance to Hitler, Hirohito, Mussolini, and all they represent."¹²⁸

Despite the Army's enforcement of segregation and lack of accountability when it came to cases of discrimination, duty and patriotism compelled black women to join the WAC. Major Charity Adams expressed that one motivator for black women to join the WAC was to support the men in their lives who had been called for service. This call was monumental and demanded of American citizens major sacrifices—time with their families, their careers on the homefront, and even their lives. Through the WAC, black women had the opportunity to take on the

¹²⁷ Matthew F. Delmont, *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad* (New York: Viking, 2022), 4.

¹²⁸ Philip H. Nichamin to Oveta C. Hobby, February 18, 1944, folder 103246-023-0001, Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942–1946. Part 2: Personnel. National Archives, College Park, MA, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0001&accountid=7090>; Sandra M. Bolzenius, *Glory in Their Spirit: How Four Black Women Took On the Army during World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 22, <https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctt22p7j8n>; "WAACS Make First Public Bow In Style At Fort Des Moines, Iowa," *Chicago Defender*, August 15, 1942, http://library.tcu.edu/PURL/EZproxy_link.asp?login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/waacs-make-first-public-bow-style-at-fort-des/docview/492578584/se-2.

responsibilities their fathers, brothers, and husbands left behind. WAC service offered the prospect of bringing their men home sooner as well.¹²⁹

For some black men, however, black women in the Army and in the ETO threatened American standards of masculinity, even if black women “were less likely to meet with disapproval from the black male soldiers” than white soldiers. Women in the armed forces fundamentally challenged the traditional roles men played, even if the WAC operated with the intent to spare some male personnel from the noncombatant work that came with war. Black women realized quickly that it did not necessarily matter that they joined the WAC to support black men. Not even their historical role as providers within their community came into consideration. Differences in American social standards—rooted in whiteness—left black Wacs at odds with black soldiers. By not adhering to traditional gender roles, black women threatened black masculinity because of their work and social interactions, especially in the ETO. They interacted with British and French men instead of “men of their own race,” to whom they “belonged.” Earley noted that some black men mistook the support of black women “for competition and patronage.” The systemic degradation and mistreatment of black men in the “civilian world” fueled resentment toward successful black women in the Army.¹³⁰

Members of the 6888th interviewed by historian Brenda L. Moore also express the same sentiments when recalling the attitudes of black GIs. Mary Rozier relayed that, while some black men were happy to see black women on the ETO—usually family—other black men were not as pleased to see women because they perceived the presence of black women as a threat. Black Wacs also had to navigate their way past assumptions made by some black GIs that they were in

¹²⁹ Earley, *One Woman's Army*, 153.

¹³⁰ Moore, *To Serve My Country, To Serve My Race*, 136; Earley, *One Woman's Army*, 187.

the ETO to offer companionship. Ardella Pitts expressed that the men would call her and her fellow servicewomen “stuck-up” and “all kinds of names” even as they conducted themselves in a professional manner and rejected advances.¹³¹

Obstacles appeared with black women’s every step to exercise their freedom, but they persisted. Wac Lucia Mae Pitts expressed in a poem why she and so many other black women were determined to serve:

You did not really want us here.
“Women have no place in the army,” you said.
Women should stay at home and keep the home-fires burning.
...
We have swallowed up your disapproval
And joined up at the same time
Because there was a job to be done
And we had to do it.¹³²

Pitts and other black Wacs knew that their presence in the army challenged social conventions and ideas of blackness and womanhood. Wherever they went, people viewed their presence as a detriment to performance, morale, and atmosphere.

Still, black women continued to express a desire to serve in the WAC. A sense of patriotism toward America, as flawed and imperfect as it was, motivated them to join beyond their duty to themselves, their families, and their community. In the past, American women typically supported their country within the gendered confines imposed upon them. Black women had historically participated in the American labor force more than white women ever

¹³¹ Moore, *To Serve My Country, To Serve My Race*, 136; Earley, *One Woman’s Army*, 134–135.

¹³² Lucia Mae Pitts, “A WAC Speaks to a Soldier” in Maureen Honey, *Bitter Fruit: African American Women in World War II* (Columbia: Missouri University Press, 1999), 40–41 <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,uid&db=nlebk&AN=46433&site=ehost-live>.

did, yet black women frequently found themselves in situations where the WAC and Army undermined their service.¹³³

As a result, African American women's opinions on how to address the Army's less-than-enthusiastic efforts to include and utilize black Wacs differed. Some women believed that operating "outside military channels" by reporting the challenges they faced to the black press and black leaders would push the Army to take an active stance in acknowledging the struggles faced by black Wacs. Others considered working within the system to expand black women's opportunities and change their standing in the WAC. The two approaches intertwined as black women routinely advocated for their worth as Waacs/Wacs by working with black leaders and the black press who, in turn, reached out to the Army leaders on behalf of black women.¹³⁴ Helen Jones, a Waac from Brooklyn, New York, wrote to Anna Arnold Hedgeman,¹³⁵ the head of Brooklyn's black YWCA branch, because she believed the Army was undermining her and her fellow black Waacs' work and training because they were not being utilized or taken seriously as servicewomen. The letter concerned the Aircraft Warning System (AWS)—a branch of the WAAC. Jones explained that the new branch would not accept black Waacs because "there are not enough trained Negro women in the U.S.A. to form a separate Negro corps." Even though she and several other black women "had given months of service with no trouble whatsoever" with their white coworkers, black Waacs did not qualify. Jones and the other black Waacs

¹³³ The enslaved labor of black women contributed to the growth and success of American Empire. See Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 1, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹³⁴ Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 21, 30, 91.

¹³⁵ "Anna Arnold Hedgeman (1899–1990)," National Park Service, accessed June 8, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/people/annaarnoldhegeman-1889-1990.htm>.

expressed great disappointment that their training as servicewomen did not qualify them for the AWS. It did not what their numbers were—black women were there to help their country just like the white Waacs. The letter reached Mary McLeod Bethune’s desk, and from there, it eventually reached Hobby, who reiterated that the WAAC was still in its infancy. Jones would have to wait until a black AWS company was formed to serve her country to the same degree that white Wacs did, regardless of her desire to offer her country the same needed service. Still, black Wacs publicly and privately challenged systems and attitudes that discouraged and discredited their efforts to propel their positions to support their country. They were determined to serve in the same positions as their white counterparts—they had as much to offer to their country as any other American.¹³⁶

African American women did not want to wait their turn to offer their service to their country. L. Virgil Williams, the executive secretary of the Dallas Negro Chamber of Commerce, expressed in a letter to Hobby that black people across the country were “anxious” to offer their aid to their country. Black women were no exception. Williams continued that, as “civilians or members of the armed forces,” Americans of all races sought to help America win the war effort through whatever means. Williams urged Hobby to reconsider the reestablishment of recruiting centers and resources because black Wacs’ determination to serve and help during the war should qualify them for the same resources and treatment as any other citizen. They sacrificed their time. They dedicated their energy to helping the country. It did not matter whether they

¹³⁶ Helen Jones to Anna A. Hedgeman, August 6, 1942; Hobby to Bethune, memorandum, September 5, 1942, folder 103246-023-0001, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-023-0001&accountid=7090>.

belonged to a minority group; black women were just as entitled as any other American to offer their service.¹³⁷

The separation of “Americanness” on a racial basis permeated black women’s attempts to support their nation, as did the racial stereotypes that followed them. In an anonymous letter sent to Eleanor Roosevelt, an observer of the segregation of Wacs at Fort Des Moines expressed that black women were “still primitive in their emotions as is all the Negro race.” The anonymous sender, who identified herself as the mother of a white Wac at Fort Des Moines, believed that black women’s experiences with discrimination would impair their ability to perform tasks, especially when they had, in her opinion, behavioral issues that made them ill-suited to perform WAC duties. With assistance, they *might* be able to be of service, but in the long run, the anonymous woman did not see any fully successful way of employing black women’s service without intense support. The woman even questioned if African Americans were ready for the kind of freedom the First Lady advocated for routinely.¹³⁸ In the eyes of many, black Americans’—particularly black women’s—stand against oppression in any form represented a direct challenge to the authority of the Army. Standing against oppression fueled Army and public sentiments that black women were not ready to handle service in any capacity.

Biases toward black women did not stop or even deter all them from joining the WAAC/WAC and aspiring to support their country and their communities. Those who chose to serve in the WAC understood they were fighting for something greater than victory. Amid mixed opinions and support, black WACs represented the spirit of freedom to the African American

¹³⁷ L. Virgil Williams to Hobby, July 2, 1943, folder 103246-022-0734, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0734&accountid=7090>.

¹³⁸ Anonymous to Eleanor Roosevelt, August 3, 1943, folder 103246-022-0734, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=103246-022-0734&accountid=7090>.

community because they fought for the greater good. During a sermon on Easter Sunday of April 1, 1945, Reverend Kenneth Hughes referred to the four black Wacs from the Fort Devens strike—Alice Young, Anna C. Morrison, Johnnie Murphy, and Mary E. Green. Hughes cited their courage to stand up against the oppressor as a reminder to black Americans everywhere that “[w]e will take death if it will advance the cause of our people.” Reverend Hughes had attended the court martial of the Fort Devens Wacs. He talked with the four black Wacs, heard the testimonies, and concluded that the women’s decision to strike, knowing what repercussions awaited them by disobeying a direct order from the Army, was an ultimate act of bravery. Hughes relayed to his congregation that the black Wacs knew that the consequences of an illegal strike in the army could result in their deaths, yet they faced the challenge head-on. Hughes believed “calculated courage” fueled women’s actions. He argued that their selfless desire “to advance the cause of their people” by voluntarily offering themselves “on the altar of Negro freedom” should serve as an example to all black Americans. Freedom could not be obtained without blood, sacrifice, and tears.¹³⁹

The black women in the 6888th challenged stereotypes perpetuated by American personnel in Europe. Upon first arriving in Europe, Earley remembers, the “minority status” of black women disappeared as soon as she and the battalion went to search for the Visitor’s Bureau in London. “London was filled with representatives of all the Allies and neutrals,” she writes in her autobiography. “[E]very conceivable kind of uniform could be seen on the streets, worn by all races, colors, shapes, sizes, sexes, and religious persuasions.” Recalling her experience in Rouen, France, Earley also reveals that the 6888th “represented the U.S. government, which was white in [European’s] minds, but we were black. There was much curiosity about us, and they

¹³⁹ Reverend Kenneth Hughes, “Our Debt to the Four Striking WACs,” sermon, April 1, 1945, folder 001537-019-0446, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001537-019-0446&accountid=7090>.

were very friendly, sometimes in a meddling and nosy way.” The only antagonism she and the women of the 6888th experienced stemmed from resentment that the WAC battalion had comforts that war stripped away from Europeans. Earley remembers that the only people on the European front who held genuine concerns about the mixing of race, black participation, and the freedoms service allowed them to enjoy were white Americans. For Europeans interacting with Americans, she believed, the war made their race irrelevant. Earley’s memories show that race simultaneously mattered and did not matter on the ETO. Being black mattered when it came to what African American women could do for their country. It did *not* matter when it came to what they could do for Europe. Earley recalls that when France had been liberated,

everyone in U.S. military uniform was subjected to the victory hysteria of the French. We were kissed on the cheek, sometimes on the lips, offered drinks, asked for souvenirs, and if you had none, something was taken: your cap, insignia, epaulettes, even the braid on the sleeves.¹⁴⁰

The Allies in the ETO not only expressed a greater appreciation for black Wacs’ service than did the Army or WAC—they also provided black women with a glimpse of what their contributions to the war could offer themselves and others. In Britain, the women of the 6888th claimed that they did not experience racial discrimination but witnessed a society that “approved of interracial marriages,” “gravitated toward African Americans,” and condemned racial discrimination and segregation in any form. Black women, in the eyes of those on the ETO, but especially the English, were citizens worthy of respect.¹⁴¹ Eleanor Roosevelt’s support of black Wacs also shows that their fight against oppression had backing from those who represented American democracy and freedom. Regarding black women’s trepidations with Hobby as the head of the WAAC, Roosevelt expressed her hope that the presence of Bethune “might be a good

¹⁴⁰ Earley, *One Woman’s Army*, 135, 177, 172.

¹⁴¹ Moore, *To Serve My Country, To serve My Race*, 123.

step forward” in ensuring that black women received the same treatment as any other Wacs, and hopefully, the end of segregation in the armed forces. Roosevelt expressed her hope that, by having a black woman help make decisions in the WAAC, Hobby would change from “a Texan” to someone with a “saner point of view.”¹⁴² Black leadership, especially black women’s leadership, was key to securing not only full freedoms for African Americans but also as a way to fundamentally change the image and rights of black Americans in the United States. Black Wacs were integral in transforming not only the warfront but the homefront.

As the Second World War neared its end, the need for the 6888th’s services diminished. Many of the black Wacs, including Charity A. Earley, spent their remaining time in the ETO traveling in Allied territory to partake in military-endorsed recreational activities before the time came to return to the homefront. Earley also traveled at the behest of the Commanding Officers to offer advice and aid where warranted. On a trip to Brussels, she met with a general who had threatened her with a court martial for telling him that he could send a white first lieutenant to show her how to run a battalion properly “Over my dead body, sir.” Earley was shocked to hear that the general was interested in her input on ways the military might aid black servicemen to train them for civilian work—but believed that this was the last interaction she would ever have with the general, whose attitude seemed to have changed since their last interaction.

To Earley’s shock, the same general showed up at the 6888th in Rouen several weeks later. She wondered what he could possibly have to say to her; she had been under the impression that they had settled their differences once and for all. “Adams, I’ve received my orders to return to the States,” said the general. “Otherwise, I would not be here. It’s not easy for me to say what I’ve come to say. Working with you has been quite an education for me,

¹⁴² Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White, June 24, 1942, folder 001535-015-0203, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001535-015-0203&accountid=7090>.

especially about Negroes.” He continued, “The only Negroes I have ever known personally were those who were in the servant capacity or my subordinates in the Army.” It was the general’s next words, Earley recalls, that left a lasting impact on her. “It’s been a long time since anyone challenged me, black or white, but you took me on,” he said. “You outsmarted me and I am proud that I know you. I would not have told you this if I thought I would ever see you again.”¹⁴³

This interaction reveals an important aspect of black Wacs’ contributions to the war effort—they fundamentally changed perceptions of black women’s capabilities and roles for some whites. The discrimination experienced by black women who served in the WAAC/WAC, their perseverance through trials and tribulations, and their adamantness that they deserved a place in the military just as much as they deserved a place in society reveal that they were not passive bystanders during the war. Black women tackled recruitment and labor biases; they challenged racial stereotypes and sought full equality through their service to their country. Black women persisted and fought for a place in the Army. They confronted hurdles that no other minority group faced in service during World War II with determination and grace. Their blackness historically separated them from other minority groups in a nation that exploited black women’s labor and bodies. Black women encountered blockades to recruitment. They grappled with the existence of segregation in the Army and racial violence wherever they went. They faced job inequality while serving in the WAAC/WAC, influenced by stereotypes about black women and their “usefulness.”

¹⁴³ Earley, *One Woman’s Army*, 191–192.

CONCLUSION

World War II cannot be remembered without the acknowledgment of black Wacs' service. There are, of course, places where discussions of black Wacs can be extended, which I seek to explore further as I continue my research of black Wac's service. More can be done in analyzing and collecting statistics surrounding the assignment of black women to certain WAC jobs. Uncovering explicit numbers on the women who were and were not accepted into the WAC can expand further on how serious an influence discrimination had on the acceptance of black women into the WAC. There is much in the way of military correspondence, in addition to the letters of the NAACP, WAC, and black advocates, but further examination of the personal, though usually private, accounts and letters of black women who served can greatly contribute to further in-depth analyses of what it meant for black women to serve in the WAC. Black women found support with each other and continuously advocated for themselves in a society that diminished their voices. Black women worked as leaders to advance the cause for black women not only in the WAC, but in society. Black Wacs protested their treatment, and, by doing so, changed attitudes and ideas over race and gender through determination to serve in the same capacity as any other Army personnel.

Though long overdue, recent attention has been given to the contributions of black women during World War II. In 2018, a statue honoring the 6888th was erected at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. This past year, the House of Representatives introduced a bill that would acknowledge the service of the women of the 6888th by awarding them a Congressional Gold Medal, which President Joe Biden signed and approved on March 14, 2022. The recognition of the 6888th, though eighty years overdue, is a major step in acknowledging the service of black

Wacs and their contributions to the country. Still, it is time for this nation to understand that all black women contributed to the war effort in more ways than one. This thesis ultimately demonstrates that black Wacs fundamentally shaped World War II through their resistance and determination. They stood up against oppression and argued for their worth as American citizens who were just as capable of contributing to the country in its greatest time of need as any other American.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Katie Lange, “All-Black Female WWII Unit to Receive Congressional Gold Medal,” U.S. Department of Defense, last modified March 18, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/story/Article/2971608/all-black-female-wwii-unit-to-receive-congressional-gold-medal/>.

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