

# What Did You Do in the War, Granny?

## Women in the Army in World War II

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### Introduction

Over 150,000 women served in the Army in World War II. Women's military service in this time period helped change expectations and perceptions about women's role outside the home. This presentation deals with their pioneering wartime service and how to find records for the women in your family who served.

Military research can be confusing for genealogists who don't have background or expertise in the history, the jargon, and the customs of the military services. But even researchers who are familiar with these matters can find themselves scratching their heads over what they find when looking into women's military service in World War II.

The day after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt called upon Congress to declare war on Japan. On December 11, war was declared on Germany and Italy. The United States, with a total military strength of only 1.8 million (that number would be 12.2 million by war's end), was now faced with a multiple-theater, overseas war.

It soon became apparent to war planners that manning both the military services and the civilian industries required for mobilization to a war footing was going to be a problem. Decision makers began considering how women could contribute to the war effort. While nurses had served in the Army since 1901 and Navy since 1908, and women had served in clerical positions in the Navy and Marine Corps during World War I, the recruiting of large numbers of women to "free a man for combat" was a new concept.

### Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC)

Representative Edith Nourse Rogers, of Massachusetts, introduced a bill in Congress to establish the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) to work *with* the Army (but not be *in* the Army) "for the purpose of making available to the national defense the knowledge, skill, and special training of the women of the nation." After much opposition and much debate, the bill passed the House (249-86) and Senate (38-27). President Roosevelt signed the bill on 15 May 1942.

Rogers's original intention had been that women would serve in the Army, not with it, but military leaders resisted such a radical change. Rogers had to accept a number of compromises in order to get the bill passed. Though WAACs were not prohibited from being assigned overseas, the bill made no provisions for "overseas pay, government life insurance, veterans medical coverage, and death benefits granted Regular Army

soldiers. If WAACs were captured, they had no protection under existing international agreements covering prisoners of war.”

WAACs received lower pay than male soldiers and officers, and they were not allowed to hold military rank. Instead, WAAC officers were designated as third officer (equivalent to second lieutenant), second officer (first lieutenant), and first officer (captain). Enlisted women were ranked as chief leader (equivalent to master sergeant), junior leader (corporal), and auxiliary (private).

Over 35,000 applicants for fewer than 1,000 officer positions showed the level of interest American women had in serving their country in uniform. Four hundred forty women, 40 of whom were African-American, reported for the first officer candidate training class at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, on 20 July 1942. Women whose applications had not been accepted for officer training were considered for the first auxiliary class, which began at Fort Des Moines on 17 August 1942. Three new WAAC training centers were opened in Daytona Beach, Florida; Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia; and Fort Devens, Massachusetts. Training units for African-American WAACs were at Fort Des Moines and Fort Devens.

### Women’s Army Corps (WAC)

After much debate, Congress signed the WAC bill on 3 July 1943, integrating women into the Army with equal pay and privileges and real Army rank. Though some WAACs had served overseas, the first battalion of WACs to serve in Europe arrived in London in July 1943, with a second battalion arriving later that fall. A year later, on 14 July 1944, the first group of WACs arrived in France, just over a month after D-Day. Women served in vital jobs both in the U.S. and overseas throughout the war.

Demobilization began right after V-E Day, and by the end of 1946, WAC strength was under 10,000. In 1948, the WAC was made a permanent part of the Regular Army. It remained so until 1978, when the corps was abolished, and women soldiers and officers were assimilated into the Army without the distinction of a separate corps.

### Some World War II Record Collections

The National Archives

“World War II Army Enlistment Records.” *Access to Archival Databases (AAD)*.  
<https://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-description.jsp?s=3360&cat=WR26&bc=sl>.  
Database includes approximately 141,000 WAAC and WAC enlistees; searchable.

Finding Aid. “Richards, Nellie Eileen: Papers, 1931-1980.”

[https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/finding\\_aids/pdf/Richards\\_Nellie\\_Eileen\\_Papers.pdf](https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/finding_aids/pdf/Richards_Nellie_Eileen_Papers.pdf).

“Interview with Inez G. Scott in January of 1979 for Dwight D. Eisenhower Library.”

[https://eisenhower.archives.gov/research/oral\\_histories/oral\\_history\\_transcripts/Scott\\_Inez\\_409.pdf](https://eisenhower.archives.gov/research/oral_histories/oral_history_transcripts/Scott_Inez_409.pdf).

“Interview with Sue Sarafian Jehl on February 13, 1991 by Mack Teasley for Dwight D. Eisenhower Library.”

[https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/oral\\_histories/oral\\_history\\_transcripts/Jehl\\_Sue\\_Sarafian.pdf](https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/oral_histories/oral_history_transcripts/Jehl_Sue_Sarafian.pdf).

“Pictures of African Americans During World War II: Women in the Military.”

<https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/ww2-pictures#women>.

“World War II Remembered: Leaders, Battles & Heroes.”

[https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/education/articles/Jeanne\\_Emilie\\_Perret\\_Betcher.pdf](https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/education/articles/Jeanne_Emilie_Perret_Betcher.pdf). Article on Jeanne E. Betcher, Women’s Army Corps.

Fold3

“World War II Servicemen Photos, Mullally Collection.”

<https://www.fold3.com/browse/292/hF3sSILcO>. Photos of WWII service men and women with their unit and service information.

“Headstone Applications, 1925-1963.”

[https://www.fold3.com/browse/251/hY6R\\_H7pm](https://www.fold3.com/browse/251/hY6R_H7pm).

“WWII Army and Air Force Casualty List.”

<https://www.fold3.com/browse/251/hxzd6ogMT>.

“WWII Cadet Nursing Corps Card Files.”

<https://www.fold3.com/browse/251/heMkODsBu>.

“WWII European Theater Army Records.”

<https://www.fold3.com/browse/251/hkRaaEDpy>.

## Resources

“Army Nurse Corps History,” *U.S. Army Medical Department, Office of Medical History*.

<http://history.amedd.army.mil/ANCWebsite/anchome.html>.

Bellafaire, Judith A. *The Army Nurse Corps: A Commemoration of World War II Service*.

<https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/72-14/72-14.HTM>.

Bellafaire, Judith A. *The Women’s Army Corps: A Commemoration of World War II Service*.

<http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/WAC/WAC.HTM>.

“By the Numbers: The U.S. Military.” *The National WW II Museum*.

<http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/ww2-history/ww2-by-the-numbers/us-military.html>.

“Celebrating the Women of World War II.” *Women of World War II*.  
<http://womenofwwii.com/>. Site contains photos of women from all the services.

“11 Women Warriors of World War II.” *Mental Floss*.  
<http://mentalfloss.com/article/29219/11-women-warriors-world-war-ii>.

National Women’s History Museum. *Partners in Winning the War: American Women in World War II*. <https://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/partners/exhibitentrance.html>.

*Sharing the Burden: Women in Cryptology during World War II*.  
[https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/about/cryptologic-heritage/historical-figures-publications/publications/wwii/sharing\\_the\\_burden.pdf](https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/about/cryptologic-heritage/historical-figures-publications/publications/wwii/sharing_the_burden.pdf).

Treadwell, Mattie B. *The Women’s Army Corps*. Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1954.

“World War II Army Nurse Died While Saving Patients.” *CBS News*, 30 October 2013.  
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/world-war-ii-army-nurse-died-while-saving-patients/>.

“World War II: Women’s Army Corps,” *Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc*.  
[http://www.womensmemorial.org/H&C/History/wwii\(wac\).html](http://www.womensmemorial.org/H&C/History/wwii(wac).html).

“Women Veterans Historical Project.” *UNC Greensboro*.  
<http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/WVHP>.

#### Other services in World War II

“The Women’s Reserve (WAVES).” *Naval History and Heritage Command*.  
<https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/diversity/women-in-the-navy/waves.html>

“How to Serve Your Country in the WAVES.” *Naval History and Heritage Command*.  
<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/h/how-to-serve-your-country-in-the-WAVES.html>

“United States Coast Guard Women’s Reserve (SPARS).” *National Park Service*.  
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/united-states-coast-guard-women-s-reserve-spars.htm>

“SPARS: The Coast Guard & the Women’s Reserve in World War II.” *United States Coast Guard*. <https://www.history.uscg.mil/Browse-by-Topic/Notable-People/Women/SPARS/>

“U.S., World War II Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard Casualties, 1941–1945.” *Ancestry*. <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1122/>

“U.S., World War II Navy Muster Rolls, 1938–1949.” *Ancestry*.  
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1143/>

“Celebrating Women’s Role in Marine Corps History.” *Women Marines Association*.  
<https://www.womenmarines.org/wma-history/>

Stremlow, Mary V. *Free A Marine to Fight: Women Marines in World War II*.  
<https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/Free%20a%20Marine%20to%20Fight%20Women%20Marines%20in%20World%20War%20II%20PCN%2019000312900.pdf>

“Women in the Marine Corps.” *United States Marine Corps History Division*.  
<https://www.usmcu.edu/Research/Marine-Corps-History-Division/People/Women-in-the-Marine-Corps/>

A catalog search on Ancestry or FamilySearch for the keywords “World War II” will lead you to many more collections of records.

