



JUMPING INTO THE UNKNOWN

THE ORIGINS OF WOMEN'S MILITARY SERVICE IN WORLD WAR II

Image: US Army Women's Museum.

More than 350,000 American women served in uniform during World War II. Each one of those women—whether officer or enlisted, WAC (Army), WAVES (Navy), SPARs (Coast Guard), Marine, or in the Army or Navy Nurse Corps—volunteered to serve their nation. Not a single woman was drafted. But even as they came forward in a time of national need, they faced enormous opposition from their fellow citizens: from members of Congress; from men in the uniforms of the US military; even from friends, neighbors, and family members. These women, in their support for those on the front lines, fought the nation's enemies. But they also fought for the very right to serve.

In the late 1930s, the US military was much too small and ill-equipped for what would soon be asked of it. Manpower issues were pressing, and the nation, for the first time in its history, instituted a peacetime draft. Eight months later, in May 1941, a member of the US House of Representatives introduced a bill that would allow the nation to rely on its women as well as its men. Accurately anticipating opposition to her proposal, Representative Edith Nourse Rogers offered a modest plan: an “auxiliary” women's corps, strictly noncombatant, that would serve “with” the US Army rather than within it. But she and her supporters also rejected the idea that the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) would provide large numbers of

unskilled workers to take on menial tasks, instead proposing a relatively small corps of well-educated women with the “highest reputation for . . . character.”

Throughout 1941, the bill got little traction, even with the support of General George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff. But after the attacks of December 7, 1941, and the series of defeats and setbacks in the first months after the United States entered the war, in March 1942 the US Congress began debating HR 6293. Opposition to women's uniformed service was fierce, and debate revealed a level of division and discord rarely seen in the initial flush of wartime unity.

Much opposition was rooted in cultural beliefs about appropriate gender roles. Speaking against the bill, Michigan Representative Clare E. Hoffman felt it necessary to remind his colleagues that war was not “a social event: in it teas, dances, card parties, amusements generally play little, if any, part.” Were women to serve, he asked, “who then will maintain the home fires; who will do the cooking, the washing, the mending, the humble, homey tasks to which every woman has devoted herself; who will rear and nurture the children[?]” A representative from New York attacked this “silliest piece of legislation” as “so revolting to me, to my sense of Americanism, to my sense of decency” that it was not appropriate to discuss



on the floor of the House. A representative from South Carolina condemned the plan as “a reflection on the courageous manhood of the country.”

In congressional debate, other members raised practical issues. Many had financial concerns: What would the nation gain by paying for work women already did as volunteers? Would women be entitled to the same expansive benefits that male servicemembers received after war’s end? Would they be covered by military insurance? But another practical question suggested a different sort of concern: If WAACs were sent abroad, asked a male representative, would they be quartered close to male combat troops? Representative Rogers (one of seven women among the 435 House members) understood what her male colleague was asking. “I trust the women thoroughly,” she answered. “It is not where you are, but what you are.” In a time and place where women who had sex outside marriage were strongly condemned, Rogers insisted on the “respectability” not only of the WAAC, but of each individual WAAC.

In the end, it took a year, but on May 14, 1942, HR 6293 passed the House. The vote was 249 to 83; 96 members abstained. In the early months of the war, such division was notable. In the meantime, proposals to create women’s branches in the other services were moving forward. In fact, women (aside from the Army and Navy Nurse Corps) had first served in uniform in the Navy; during World War I, a loophole in the Naval Act of 1916 allowed about 12,000 women to serve as Yeoman (F)—“F” standing for “female.” Unlike women civilian employees or volunteers, these women served under military authority, giving the Navy greater control over its “manpower.” In World War II, war planners once again sought to “free a man to fight” by recruiting women to perform on-shore duties.

But there, too, war planners and proponents of women’s service encountered opposition. The chair of the Senate Naval Affairs Committee argued that women’s service “would tend to break-up American homes and would be a step backwards in the progress of civilization.” As Navy leaders stalled, one woman suggested that some admirals would rather “enroll monkeys, dogs, or ducks” than women. However, as it became clear that Congress would likely create a

women’s naval branch, Navy leaders worked to ensure that the branch would not be “auxiliary”; that it would not serve “with” rather than “in” the US Navy. Naval leaders successfully sought full control over women in uniform, in part for reasons of security.

In late June 1942, about six weeks after the controversial vote on the WAAC, Congress established the Women’s Reserve of the US Naval Reserve, known as the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service). A women’s branch of the US Marine Corps was authorized by Congress soon after, and the US Coast Guard’s women’s branch was established in November 1942. Meanwhile, the Army branch was reconstituted, removing its “auxiliary” designation.

But opposition to women’s service continued. Once women’s service was authorized, Marine Corps leaders delayed actually forming the women’s reserve for almost seven months. And in June 1944, Congress defeated a bill to make the WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots) a women’s service within the US Army Air Forces. These skilled female pilots flew US military aircraft more than 60 million miles over the course of the war, and were only recognized as veterans in 1977.

It was members of Congress and military leaders who determined whether and how women would serve, and their opposition to women’s service had concrete impact. But as increasing numbers of women put on the uniforms of military service, they were powerfully affected by opposition from the American public.

Even as early as 1942, rumors had begun to circulate. GIs in Camp Lee, Virginia, were convinced that any soldier seen dating a WAAC would be seized by military authorities and treated for exposure to venereal disease. “Facts” made the rounds within the military: 90 percent of WAACs had been confirmed to be prostitutes; 40 percent of WAACs were pregnant and unwed. A story circulated that Army medical officers had been instructed to reject all virgins who sought to enlist. In civilian society, gossip was that shiploads of WAACs were being returned from their overseas postings, pregnant and unmarried. And a more specific charge: WACs were being furnished with

contraceptives (the Army chief of staff condemned this claim as “vicious slander”).

These charges hit individual women hard. Wrote one: “It was a disgrace to join the military. If you were a woman, it wasn’t the thing that was done. [My father] was afraid of what the neighbors would say.” And shortly after the end of the war, an enlisted woman explained how she had been affected by the rumors and gossip: “I went home on leave to tell my family it wasn’t true. When I went through the streets, I held up my head because I imagined everybody was talking about me, but when I was at last safe inside our front door, I couldn’t say a word to them, I was so humiliated. I just burst out crying, and my people ran and put their arms around me and cried with me. I couldn’t understand how my eagerness to serve our country could have brought such shame on us all.”

Such attacks distressed individual women and their families, undermining the volunteer service the women offered their nation. But it also impeded the nation’s war effort, as recruiting suffered along with the WAC’s reputation.

The women who served in the US military during World War II helped secure victory over the Axis. They received high praise from military leaders. But they fought for the right to serve, confronting initial opposition, gender discrimination, and widespread rumors that threatened their reputations and their futures.



ABOUT THE ESSAY AUTHOR

BETH BAILEY, PhD, is the Foundation Distinguished Professor in the Department of History and the Director of the Center for Military, War, and Society Studies at the University of Kansas. She has authored and edited numerous books including *The First Strange Place: Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii*.

