



# OUR LEGACY, TOO

## THE LEGACY OF WOMEN'S MILITARY SERVICE IN WORLD WAR II

Image: US Coast Guard.

When World War II ended in August 1945, Captain Jeanne M. Holm was commanding the 106th Women's Army Corps (WAC) Hospital Company at Newton D. Baker General Hospital in Martinsburg, West Virginia. She had joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps as soon as she could, graduated from Officer Candidate School, and then spent most of the war commanding WAC basic training units at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. Holm loved her time in the US Army and understood that she and her fellow servicewomen were making history. "We felt like pioneers, we really did," she later remembered. "We knew we were breaking new ground."

Even as these women paved new paths, the war's conclusion brought the end of most women's time in uniform. The legislation that had authorized the new women's military organizations only extended six months after the war's end. And, so, with victory came demobilization and discharge for most servicewomen, including Holm, who used her GI Bill benefits to enroll in college.

Historians have debated for years how World War II shaped women's lives in the postwar era. The war offered many women new opportunities, but were those changes only for the duration, or did they have longer-lasting repercussions for women? These are

complex questions, with nuanced answers. For women in the military, it is clear that the war established a precedent that could not be rolled back entirely at war's end. In the decades that followed, women served in increasing numbers and in ever-expanding roles. Their activism for a greater presence in the military intersected with women's other struggles to expand their place in the nation. At times, the military led the way for women, offering them more opportunities than were available elsewhere. Other times, the military lagged behind American society in its understanding of women's capabilities. Questions about the terms and conditions of women's military service were integral to broader struggles and debates about women's place in the post-WWII United States.

Within a year after the war's end, military leaders realized that "womanpower" would be essential to meeting the needs of the emerging Cold War and proposed legislation to create permanent women's corps. While the Army and Navy's Nurse Corps were both permanent organizations, in 1947 the Army-Navy Nurses Act granted nurses permanent commissions with equal pay, created the Women's Medical Specialist Corps, and capped nurses' rank at lieutenant colonel (the corps' chiefs would wear a colonel's rank only during their tenure). Despite the recommendations of the military's leadership, Congress took two years to

approve the Women's Armed Services Integration Act, which allowed women to serve in the regular military, on a permanent basis. A significant victory in the history of women's service, the act nonetheless continued to limit women's service. Restricted to two percent of the total force, their ranks were capped at colonel or Navy captain for the leaders of women's branches, and women could serve only in support roles and could never command men.

Soon after the Integration Act passed, Holm received a postcard from the Army, asking her to consider returning to active duty. She served for a year before transferring to the still-new US Air Force, where she began an exciting career with posts in Germany, at the Pentagon, and at NATO headquarters, and assignments as a congressional staff officer and finally as director of Women in the Air Force. In this role, she continued the pioneering work she began in World War II, only now on a much broader scale. In fact, Holm often led the way, pressing more fervently and assertively than other leaders of the women's branches to expand the ways women could serve, to remove the limitations on their careers, and to open ROTC and the service academies to women. Holm's career spanned the years most commonly associated with second-wave feminism, and it illustrates the often uneasy relationship between the movement and the military.

While early Cold War domestic culture often idealized conservative images of women as homemakers, women in the military served in Korea, Vietnam, Europe, and other stations across the globe. Cold War personnel demands demonstrated the need for more women in uniform, and by the 1960s civilian women's organizations were recognizing servicewomen's work as a women's issue. In October 1963, the President's Commission on the Status of Women issued its report documenting discrimination against women in education, the workplace, as citizens, and in the military. Broadly, the commission's findings led to federal endorsement of equal pay for equal work and the creation of the National Organization for Women. Less known is the report's significance within the military. The commission argued that limiting women's ranks discriminated against women and urged the Department of Defense to rectify its policies. It took several years and the concerted efforts of military and

civilian women, and in 1967 Congress approved a bill removing all restrictions on women's ranks. Three years later, women wore general's stars for the first time; in 1971, Holm became the first female general in the Air Force.

Policy changes like this one signaled opportunities for women in the military, even as many restrictions remained on their service. The personnel needs of the Vietnam War, especially for nurses, led military leaders to take seriously the demands of the young women they needed and to gradually permit mothers to serve. Often, military leaders only acquiesced to women's demands when faced with legal challenges. In 1973, for example, in the US Supreme Court case *Frontiero v. Richardson*, the court ruled in favor of Air Force physical therapist Sharon Frontiero, who argued that the military's practice of distributing spousal benefits based on sex constituted discrimination against women. Her case transformed how the legal system treated women and formed a key part of future justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's (who represented Frontiero) approach to challenging gender discrimination in the US Constitution.

The advent of the all-volunteer force in 1973 sparked perhaps the widest transformations in women's service. Faced with the daunting task of recruiting every soldier, sailor, airman, and Marine that they needed, military leaders looked anew at women as a potential source for meeting demands. This new perspective coincided with Congress's passing of the Equal Rights Amendment. Although the ERA was never ratified, military officials had expected it would be and began amending all policies that treated women and men differently because of their sex. Throughout the late 1970s, the women's branches, which had separated women in everything from basic training to promotion lists, were formally integrated into the military branches at large.

In the last decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st, women's presence in the Armed Forces continued to grow. As women made up a greater portion of troops serving in places like Grenada and in the First Gulf War, the last remaining restrictions on the jobs they could perform proved increasingly difficult to maintain. While technically

forbidden from serving in “combat,” combat itself evolved. Was combat a place on the battlefield, a presumed distance away from danger, direct engagement with the enemy, a function of one’s job, or a perceived risk? It depended on whom you asked, and when you asked.

Reflecting a combination of personnel needs, external pressure, recognition of women’s abilities, and changing cultural norms, by the early 2000s, the Navy and Air Force began permitting women to serve on certain ships and in aviation. The Army and Marine Corps slowly and incrementally opened jobs to women, while holding fast on their attempts to prevent women from ground combat assignments. However much they resisted, by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, military leaders recognized the futility of such distinctions, as well as their need to use women in essential roles with local women. In 2015, the Department of Defense finally opened all military jobs to women.

Today’s women in uniform are in many ways the legacy of servicewomen in World War II. The path from 1945 to today is a circuitous one, winding between women’s demands for change, the military’s need for women to perform critical functions, and evolving social, cultural, and legal frameworks. Women in uniform today have opportunities that would have been unthinkable to women like Holm who joined in World War II. And yet, women continue to face hardships and challenges because of their sex, most notably sexual harassment and assault at the hands of their fellow soldiers. As women continue to serve and endeavor to make the military a more welcoming institution for women, they create new legacies for future generations.



## ABOUT THE ESSAY AUTHOR

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