



RACE AND WOMEN'S MILITARY SERVICE DURING WORLD WAR II

Image: National Archives and Records Administration.

In May 1941, Edith Nourse Rogers, a Congresswoman from Massachusetts, introduced a bill to organize a women's corps within the US Army to free men for combat service. While the bill initially found little support, shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the bill was amended and signed into law. The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (later the Women's Army Corps, or WAC) was established in 1942 and was shortly followed by the Naval Women's Reserve (Women Accepted for Volunteer Service, or WAVES), the Coast Guard Women's Reserve (SPARs), Marine Corps Women's Reserve, and the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). These groups joined the long-established Army and Navy Nurses Corps (created in 1901 and 1908, respectively). The nation needed women to serve in and with the military, but their service was debated and contested from the beginning. A vast majority of Americans believed that women should not serve in uniform. They feared the effects of military service on traditional gender roles and social and cultural customs; they complained about women's fitness for military service and were concerned about the morals of those women who wanted to serve. For women of color, military service was further complicated by Jim Crow laws and customs that used race and racial understanding of the time to determine where, how, and in what capacity some women could serve in defense of the nation.

By the end of World War II, more than 350,000 women volunteered to serve their nation. But these were a fraction of the thousands more who wished to serve among white women and women of color. Debates about the recruitment of women of color and the experiences of the women who served reveal the role of race in women's service during World War II. Even before the United States officially entered the war, race organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, and the National Association for Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN) urged the military and the Roosevelt administration to ensure that there would be no discrimination based on race in the recruitment or job opportunities for American citizens. While the passage of Executive Order 8802 in June 1941 prohibited discrimination in the defense industry and with war-related work, it did not place these same demands on the Armed Forces; instead, the US military determined both in the drafting of men and, later, with the recruitment of women that with regards to race, the accepted practice of racial segregation would remain in place.

Beyond eligibility restrictions placed on women's service that included age, height, weight, citizenship, and, for some branches, marital status and whether a woman had dependent children of a certain age,



recruitment of women of color, particularly Black women, would be segregated and limited. For example, the War Department followed the US Army's policy of white and Black troop segregation and limited Black recruitment to a quota of 10 percent to reflect the United States' population percentage of African Americans in 1940. Thus, recruiting campaigns and propaganda toward women spoke to the American public's general conceptions of race and who should serve. Posters featuring beautiful, youthful, fair-skinned white women reminded women that "this was their war, too." Indeed, white women constituted the majority of women who served in uniform during World War II. Black women, however, were as eager to serve their nation but rarely, if ever, saw any official recruitment materials featuring any women of color. Instead, they relied on publicity from race organizations, Black newspapers, activists, and white allies to support their efforts to serve their nation.

The racial quota system was particularly problematic for women of color when recruitment campaigns called for the service of women nationwide. The Army Nurse Corps (ANC), for example, initially had a quota to accept 48 Black nurses in April 1941. Yet, even as that number was raised to 50 by December 1941, the ANC had trouble fulfilling that number—not because of a lack of available nurses but because of the requirement to segregate Black and white nurses and to have Black nurses care, at least initially, only for Black servicemembers. While there were some estimates that roughly 8,000 Black nurses were available and qualified for service in the Army or Navy Nurse Corps, it was not unusual for Black nurses or their allies to hear that the quota for Black nurses was filled. The Navy Nurse Corps refused to accept Black female nurses until 1945. Racial segregation of nurses also meant that there were only a few places—Fort Bragg in North Carolina and Camp Livingston in Louisiana, for example—where Black women nurses could be assigned to the Army. In the few places they served, several nurses discussed the feeling of being overlooked and isolated by local civilian populations off-base and being disrespected by white personnel, from enlisted men to their fellow officers on base. By late 1944, the US Army had dropped the quota for Black nurses and expanded where they could work, but the long-term effects of this practice meant that by the

end of the war, only about 500 Black women nurses served while the ANC continued to face desperate nursing shortages. For other women of color, the racial quota system was also complicated by other factors. Suspicion and incarceration of Americans of Japanese descent meant that until 1943, no Nisei, or second-generation Japanese American, women were accepted into the military. In late 1943, the Women's Army Corps began accepting Nisei women with an initial quota of 500; by the end of the war, about 200 Nisei women served in the Army Nurse Corps, the Women's Army Corps, the Army Medical Department, and the Military Intelligence Service combined.

Once in service, women of color faced additional racial challenges. Neither the uniform nor segregation shielded them from the discrimination or violence they often faced within the military and from civilian society. A failure of equal job-training opportunities or access to promotion, coupled with other experiences with racial discrimination, even resulted in disciplinary actions against some Black women, including the court-martial of a group of Black WACs who protested what they viewed as unequal treatment with a work strike at Fort Devens in Massachusetts in 1945. While not officially subject to racial segregation, race additionally shaped the military service of some Hispanic women. Latina women had an ambiguous place in the racial hierarchy of the nation during World War II. This meant that while Latina women could and often did serve in many different positions and with all-white units, they were also the subject of special recruiting efforts in certain branches, such as with the Benito Juarez Air-WAC Squadron (known as the Bee-Jays) with the US Army Air Forces, a group of Spanish-speaking "Latin American" women, many of whom, it was announced, would serve along the southern border region of Texas.

While race presented many challenges to women's service during World War II, women of color served with pride and distinction in each military branch that accepted them. Their service may not have been consistently recognized or acknowledged, and it was undoubtedly contested, but it was invaluable, nonetheless. From the 855 members of the famed all-Black 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion who processed over 17 million pieces of backlogged "morale" mail in their first three months overseas, to



the Nisei women who worked in military intelligence, to the thousands more who did everything from routine daily work to highly specialized activities at home and abroad, these women answered the call. While racial quotas, discrimination, and other challenges limited the ability of some women to serve, those who did were also a source of pride in local communities and among their families. Their service laid the foundation for the permanent establishment of the Nurse Corps with the Army-Navy Nurse Act of 1947 and the acceptance of women as permanent Armed Forces members with the passage of the 1948 Women's Armed Services Integration Act. The WWII service of thousands of Black women (alongside millions of Black men) also supported the eventual postwar desegregation of the Armed Forces with the passage of President Harry S. Truman's 1948 Executive Order 9981.



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