

## WOMEN SERVED WITH WWII SOLDIERS, SAILORS AND MARINES

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

“My best soldiers,” Gen. Douglas MacArthur is often quoted as saying, were the women under his command. As the quote goes, “they worked harder, complained less, and were better disciplined than male soldiers.”

In May 1942, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was created as an auxiliary to the U.S. Army and converted to full status as a branch of the Army (without “Auxiliary” in its name) on 1 July 1943. Other women's corps followed, the WAVES (Navy), SPARS (Coast Guard), and the Marine Corps Women's Reserve (MCWR).

Over 100 names on the Veterans Memorial belong to women. Most were nurses, WACs or WAVES, but several were in the SPARS and Marines, plus one lone but high-flying member of the WAAFS.<sup>2</sup> Three served with the Canadian WAC and one (born in England) with the British Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service, the model for the WAAC.

The first from Winchester to enlist in the WAAC was Margaret Randall, who joined in July 1942. A member of the Randall family which ran a popular ice cream and confectionary shop on Mount Vernon Street, she was a graduate of Winchester High School who had sung in the Congregational Choir and performed with the Parish Players.



At age 43, Randall was one of the older enlistees. A graduate of Simmons College with experience as an executive secretary, Randall's skills suited her to assignment in the induction office in Hartford and later to recruitment in Vermont. Ultimately she reached the rank of Captain, held by her brother Earle during World War I.

Virginia Farrar, one of Winchester's first WAVES, joined up in November 1942. “When her brother was called to the colors,” *The Winchester Star* reported, she “began to feel that she too should be doing something to help win the war.”<sup>3</sup> She was 28 and had been doing personnel work for a Boston insurance company. After aptitude tests at boot school revealed she had mechanical ability, she was sent to a “mech” school and became rated as an aviation machinist's mate.



Another Winchester girl, Suzanne Gleason (age 22) whose ambition was to be an artist, was also found to have mechanical ability. As she reported to the *Star* in July 1943 from Oklahoma, “I am in training to be an aviation machinist's mate. A smaller percentage are training to be metalsmiths. Virginia Farrar was in the first class of WAVES ever to graduate from this aviation machinist mate. It was a proud day for us undergraduates when we saw them graduate side by side with the Sailors and Marines.

“The training we are getting at N.A.T.T.C. is the best and will be invaluable to most of us after this war is won.... There are so many things to see and do on liberty... We don’t feel particularly salty out here in Oklahoma; nevertheless, Navy life is great!”<sup>4</sup>

After completing training, Farrar was stationed at a naval air station in Kansas. Gleason was attached to the Aerology Department of the Naval Air Station in Miami.

Like the men, every enlistee went for training. After Myrtle Severance began hers in July 1943 at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, the *Star* described the experience. “She was immediately assigned to a Receiving Center company for a week of elementary training. Here she was issued clothing and equipment, instructed in rudiments of drill, and given Army classification tests. For the following four weeks, she will be assigned to a basic company for more detailed training preparing her to replace a man in a non-combat Army job.”<sup>5</sup>

After basic training, a woman might be assigned duty at an Army post, sent to a specialist school, or chosen to attend Officer Candidate School. *Star* readers learned that Severance, after completing eight weeks of officer training at Fort Oglethorpe, Ga., was commissioned a second lieutenant. Previously a secretary for the Greater Boston United War Fund, she was reassigned to the Fund and stationed back in Boston.

## RECRUITING

“Now that the WAC is a part of the regular Army,” the *Star* quoted a recruiting officer saying in 1943, “there will be many more jobs open to women in the Corps.”<sup>6</sup>

Local recruiting efforts stepped up in 1943 when the Army needed more personnel and the revamped WAC had to prove itself. “There are 155 important jobs that the WACs are doing,” the *Star* reported and announced that women could pick up applications at its own office.<sup>7</sup>

In Winchester, it appears that as many women signed up for the WAAC as joined up after it became the WAC. Slightly more opted for the WAVES in 1944. In all the branches of service, the women had different backgrounds and were given a variety of jobs. Ens. Elizabeth (Dickson) Finegan, a Radcliffe graduate, was assigned to the office of the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington. Cpl. Shirley Green, holder of a B.S. in Education, was a Jeep driver for the Marines. Marine Staff Sgt. Elizabeth Jeane Howard, a former shopper for Filene’s, became an aviation control tower operator.



*Elizabeth Howard*

Connie Titilah, a waitress at the Horace Ford Restaurant, was selected for specialist training in the WAC Bakers and Cook’s School. Pvt. Norma Mandeville was sent to the Army’s Dental Technician School, afterward assisting Army dentists in Mississippi care for sick and wounded soldiers.

Ann Marsters, who had been a model, attended a specialist school for storekeepers in Indiana and was assigned to the SPARS recruiting office in Boston. The Boat Club took pride in announcing that its member, Lt. Betty Burr of the U.S. Marines, was a Commissary Officer at Quantico, “the first woman in America to hold that type of position. She’s in charge of a PX and doing a grand job.”<sup>8</sup>

The work they did was important. When Lt. Betty Ann Budd was assigned to the Miami Air Technical Service Command as assistant chief of the equipment supply branch, the *Star* pointed up that this was a position of responsibility and vital importance, helping “direct the flow of spare parts and supplies from huge warehouses in the country to the Army Air Forces all over the world.”<sup>9</sup>

## ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

Most women were stationed statewide, but not all. Nancy Robinson, Winchester’s second WAAC, ended up in Paris. “I would recommend joining the WACs to any young American woman,” she declared.<sup>10</sup> A former bank clerk, she worked her way up from private to lieutenant, at which point she was assigned to be a supply officer in Texas. In March 1945, she was executive officer of a detachment of the 3341<sup>st</sup> Signal Service Battalion attached to headquarters, communications zone in Paris.

In 1944, Pvt. Frances Trott made a high speed convoy trip with a WAC unit from the U.S. to North Africa. That September she was among the 600 WACs who participated in the first anniversary parade of the Women’s Army Corps in Italy. “Press reports indicate the girls made a fine appearance and were warmly greeted by the residents of Rome,” the *Star* reported.<sup>11</sup>

The women were not always warmly greeted. As reported through the *Star*’s Sons of Italy column, Winchester’s Gabriel Vespucci wrote from England, before leaving for France, that “his biggest headache is handling a bunch of WACs he has working for him.” But he changed his tune a few months later.

“They deserve a lot of credit. They were the first group to set foot on French soil (38 of them). Says Gay: ‘While fighting was only 15 miles away we G.I.’s worried about what we’d do with them in case of a retreat, for, during those early days of the invasion of Normandy, we held only a speck of France and were being stymied at Saint Lo. The gals tightened their belts and slushed in the mud, slept in tents and plugged along with the rest of us G.I.’s. It was there in Normandy that we G.I.s learned to respect these girls.’”<sup>12</sup>

## INTO THE PACIFIC THEATER

Similar respect was due the women who went to the Pacific. In 1944, the first WACs arrived in the Philippines. They went first to Australia and from there to New Guinea, where they were ill equipped and primitively housed. On Nov. 26, 1944, WACs arrived in the Philippines, about a month after the first wave of combat troops.

The first enlisted women to land at Leyte were met with strafing and had to run for foxholes. Despite this, the troubles of the rainy season, problems with food and supply, lack of boots and clothing, and rough housing, the women stuck it out to do their jobs.

Among them was Grace Marchesi. Five feet tall, one of 12 children born to Italian immigrant parents, Marchesi's ambition was to operate her own beauty salon. She was actually managing one when the war came along.

After enlisting on Feb. 22, 1943, she went to Ft. Oglethorpe, Ga., for basic training. By the fall she was acting supply sergeant of the WAC Hospital Detachment at Camp Carson, Colorado. Next year, at age 23, she was stationed in the Pacific Theater.



The *Star* reported that Sgt. Marchesi "landed with the first contingent of WACs assigned to this [Pacific] theater and has since then been stationed in Brisbane, Hollandia, and Tacloban."<sup>13</sup> No details were recorded, except for two chance meetings with local boys and the opportunity arranged by the American Red Cross to speak via phone with her brother Fiume (a survivor of the Pearl Harbor attack) stationed about 125 miles away. "She described it as being the greatest thrill of her life."<sup>14</sup>

Back home in 1946, as a guest speaker for the high school's Better Home Living class, she spoke about her experiences in Australia, the Philippines, Guam, and Hawaii and exhibited some souvenirs from there and from Japan.

Marchesi also returned with three bronze battle stars, as did Norma McKeown who joined the WAC on the same day and also went to the Pacific. As the *Star* reported, Sgt. McKeown, "assigned to Transportation Corps in this Headquarters, has been with the advance echelon on each northward move."<sup>15</sup>

Also in the Philippines was Barbara Currie who spent 10 months overseas as a secretary to the Air Evaluation Board. She was awarded two battle stars on the Asiatic-Pacific theatre ribbon and the Philippine Liberation ribbon with one star.<sup>16</sup>

A few women enjoyed being in the service enough to stick with it after the war. Severance remained in the WAC for decades, promoted to the rank of Major. Machinist Mate Farrar, after serving in the WAVES from 1942 to 1946, signed up for a second hitch in 1949. She saw duty throughout the United States and Hawaiian Islands.

However assigned and for however long, it was undoubtedly an adventure for the women who responded to the call, learned new trades, and served side by side with the soldiers, sailors and marines, proving their worth while helping to win the war.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2023 by the author Ellen Knight is a revision of an earlier article by the author published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on March 22, 2017. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.winchester.us/DocumentCenter/View/10204/Meserve?bidId=>

<sup>3</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 21, 1944.

<sup>4</sup> *The Winchester Star*, July 23, 1943.

<sup>5</sup> *The Winchester Star*, July 30, 1943.

<sup>6</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 6 1943.

<sup>7</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 5, 1943.

<sup>8</sup> *The Winchester Star*, May 4, 1945.

<sup>9</sup> *The Winchester Star*, April 20, 1945.

<sup>10</sup> *The Winchester Star*, March 31, 1944

<sup>11</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 22, 1944.

<sup>12</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Dec. 22, 1944.

<sup>13</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 14, 1945.

<sup>14</sup> *The Winchester Star*, June 15, 1945.

<sup>15</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 14 1945.

<sup>16</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 16, 1945.