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Don't Take 'No' for an Answer

Beth Liechti

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For several decades, a petite, blonde-haired female mannequin in a small-town museum has worn an OD (olive drab)-green, World War II uniform.

The uniform is tiny, size six or smaller. Hardly showing its age, the European Theater of Operations (ETO) winter outfit includes an Eisenhower-style jacket and A-line skirt, tan men's button-down shirt and tie. On her head, the mannequin wears an OD garrison cap. Very sharp!

The owner of the uniform was unknown.

During the years after leaving the army, moments of emptiness ricocheted through my days. The battle rhythm, op tempo, and camaraderie in civilian life are … different. Avoid sifted from my dawn to the dark. It was years before I considered myself a veteran. Though I guess I was.

At the invitation of a colleague, I attended a Veteran's Day ceremony where I heard about the Women's Army Corps (WAC) veterans' association. I was not a WAC and had never worn the Pallas Athena (Greek goddess of wisdom) insignia. The WAC, signed into law in 1943, was disbanded in 1978, the year before I raised my right hand. The population of WACs decreases daily. At some point the WAC vets expanded eligibility to all women who served in the army. Women in the local chapter welcomed me.

During chapter meetings, I was moved by the concern members demonstrated for each other. Most heartwarming were the chaplain's updates. Some members, who served during World War II and the Korean War, were now homebound. I speculated about what army life was like for these WACs who served in the 1940s. Surely it was different from my experiences in the Cold War, in South Korea, and in the Mideast desert of the global war on terror.

During the WAC era, women were segregated from men in separate WAC-only units. When I joined the 'Be All You Can Be' Army, men and women served side by side. In the

formations I stood, females were greatly outnumbered. One or two women stood to my left or right and a handful stood behind me. It was two decades before I reported to a woman. Little mention was made of the history of women in the military. Likewise, I had little interest in learning the history. Ingratitude? No. Ignorance? Partly. The churn and swirl of climbing the career ladder? Definitely.

Middle age changed me. Curiosity propelled me to seek out the women who served before me. Figuring we had army service in common, I volunteered to visit with the homebound WACs. The chaplain coordinated a visit with Carolyn. She had been a member of the WAC's association for more than twenty years.

Carolyn and I met at her home, where she lived with her niece in a suburb of the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Sitting in a well-worn easy chair in her living room, Carolyn's diminutive figure was surrounded by cases and shelves jammed with books and papers, curious memorabilia from exotic lands, odd antiques, and a half dozen models of miniature tall sailing ships. Intrigued by the symphony of possessions, our dialogue came easy.

During our visits, I asked questions and Carolyn reflected. Almost forty years and four wars separated our service in the army. Surprisingly, or maybe not, we shared several traits, especially independence. When we met, Carolyn was ninety-four years old but younger in spirit.

Despite her slight frame and wispy white hair, Carolyn projected intensity and self-confidence, qualities I'd long been accused of showing. Even before I asked, she ticked off the jobs she was qualified to do in civilian life after she left the service, yet in many instances was not hired because she was a woman.

"Why did you enlist in the army?" I asked.

Carolyn's snappy response made me laugh. "I didn't want to cook and clean for no man. I didn't want to get stuck as a secretary."

She wanted to study biology and medicine, but her parents didn't have the money to send her to college. Coming of age during the Great Depression (1929–1939), Carolyn said, "I knew I needed to take care of myself." She softly chuckled. "I was not too domestically inclined and still am not. From the word go, I was interested in a career and a pension."

Like Carolyn, I preferred to make it on my own. During freshman year of college, cadre in the ROTC unit offered me the opportunity to attend "jump school" if I accepted a scholarship with a six-year obligation. At age nineteen, committing to six years seemed like forever. On the other hand, not many were offered "jump school." I thought about it.

The privilege of getting to know Carolyn increased with each visit. Intelligent, decisive, and driven to succeed, she was a woman ahead of her time. As she talked, her fierce "can do" attitude and exceptional work ethic surfaced.

Carolyn grew up in Utica, New York. After high school, she studied Italian, German, newspaper printing, and wood working. She attended courses offered by the National Youth Administration (a New Deal program started by FDR to educate unemployed youth). Excelling in machine shop, she landed a job at the Savage Arms Company—one of the first four women employed at Savage Arms in 1941. An original Rosie the Riveter!

She recalls, "I worked ten hours a day, seven days a week, two days off. And no overtime pay. After about a year, I started getting sick, so I left." While at Savage Arms, Carolyn attended night school and studied X-ray technology. "I tried to find a job as an X-ray tech but couldn't get hired. To get experience, I decided to join the military. My older brother was already serving. He liked it. I was always interested in metal ships and I really wanted to be in the navy."

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In 1943, on her first trip away from home alone, she traveled by train to Rochester, NY to be examined for navy service. "The navy turned me down because of a small goiter," she said, pointing to her neck. "I was really crushed," she said. Despite the Navy's rejection, Carolyn persisted and the Army accepted her for duty.

Since she was a few weeks shy of twenty-one, Carolyn's parents, William and Evelina, had to give their written permission. Even though WWII was under way, they agreed. I was amazed. "Why would your parents give permission for you, their only daughter, to enlist during a war?" Carolyn adamantly responded, "They had to sign. Either way, I turned twenty-one in a few weeks and they knew I'd be gone just the same."

"I enlisted in the WACs on November 5, 1943," Carolyn announced to me more than once and always in a loud and clear voice. She attended basic training at Fort Oglethorpe, GA, and army X-ray technician school at Camp Atterbury, IN. "The service changed my whole life," she said. "I would not have attended college were it not for the service."

I nodded in agreement. "Joining the army changed my whole life too." Accepting the scholarship, I signed the six-year commitment, then told my parents. Murmurs of dismay greeted my decision.

"Why would you want to join the army?" Unlike the citizens responding to the call to duty during the 1940s, America languished under the shadow of Vietnam in the late 1970s when I signed up. Yet my parents, like Carolyn's folks, knew I was headed down my own road one way or the other.

I looked forward to my visits with Carolyn. I think she enjoyed the company. At our third visit, Carolyn told me about her first assignment at Camp Stoneman. She added, "Can you find my Ike uniform? I'd sure like pictures of my Ike uniform." She was insistent. Carolyn never

mentioned why finding the uniform was important to her. Her request seemed small. I was honored she asked.

The search was on. First order of business, where was Camp Stoneman?

Camp Stoneman no longer exists. The camp was the last stop for troops deploying overseas to the Pacific theater during WWII. More than one million soldiers entered the camp beneath a sixteen-foot sign that read, "Through this portal pass the best damn soldiers in the world." Located north of San Francisco in Pittsburg, CA, Camp Stoneman existed as a major Pacific coast staging area and prisoner of war (POW) facility for twelve years from 1942 to 1954.

At the end of X-ray school, Carolyn recalls boarding a troop train to cross the country. She remarked, "The train wandered throughout the southwest. They didn't tell us where we were going." The train trip ended at Camp Stoneman, her first duty assignment. She served on active duty for six years and three years in the reserve, "so I could get a pension," she reminded me.

After Carolyn's request to find her "Ike" uniform, I started Internet sleuthing and located the Pittsburg Historical Society, founded in 1961. I contacted the curator, Rosemarie DiMaggio. During our initial phone call, she said, "Yes, the museum has a woman's WWII WAC uniform, but it has never been identified with an owner." She graciously emailed pictures.

I could not wait to show Carolyn the pictures. Could the uniform be hers?

Carolyn was a woman of abundant curiosity … a Renaissance woman … scientist and writer, talented amateur singer, musician, and photographer, model maker and wood worker. Ever since she was young, Carolyn had been drawn to historical, tall sailing ships. Over the years, she built many model ships (from hand), such as the USS *Constitution*. She even

constructed one ship in a bottle. These miniature model ships perched on shelves and cabinets throughout her home.

In the 1950s, few women pursued careers, let alone careers in the sciences. After leaving active duty in 1948, Carolyn used her GI bill benefits to earn a bachelor's degree in biology at Utica College, and then a master's degree in geology from Syracuse University. In 1953, she was hired as a geologist for the US Geological Survey (USGS) in Denver.

Offhandedly, she mentioned applying for the Fulbright. Of course, she was selected for the prestigious Fulbright scholarship. She studied at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia, traveled around the world (mostly by ship), and visited eighteen countries in 1954 and '55. "I studied corals in northern Queensland and at the Great Barrier Reef, Aborigines, and a glow worm cave during a visit to New Zealand." She proudly showed me a thick, two-foot strand of braided Aborigine hair held together by two small wooden handles.

Several times Carolyn had her niece dig out newspaper clippings. A 1960 "Career Girl" article gushes about Miss Carolyn who presented extensive travel lectures about places she had traveled, and her acceptance to the Rochester Nature Salon and the National Photographic Society for her prize-winning color photography. Looking at the news clips, I was impressed with how Carolyn had documented her career. For all my public affairs training, I had never even filled out a Hometown News Release.

Carolyn talked of playing the organ, the piano, and singing. While in the army and stationed at Camp Stoneman, she sang with the WAC Chorus. Later, she sang in the San Francisco Chorus Society, the Utica Ladies Chorus, and the Cathedral Chorus Society at the Washington National Cathedral in DC. She also collected antique musical instruments, including a zither, phono fiddle, and even two pipe organs, one that she repaired so she could play it.

Over the years, Carolyn encountered obstacles that may have stopped some. For her, the roadblocks served as springboards, allowing her to dive into a variety of pursuits. At the Geological Survey, other women colleagues married and left within a couple years. With sharpness in her voice Carolyn remembered, "My boss didn't offer me any promotions. He made it clear he didn't want me, or any women, in his department. After ten years, I quit and returned to the east coast." Rather than stew about it, she changed course and transitioned to the science publications field where she gained success as a science magazine/book editor and an editor-indexer with the American Geological Institute.

In her last job, Carolyn was a public health inspector, the first woman inspector in the county. Time and again, she proved one can find many paths to pursue. An individual of formidable endurance, Carolyn worked into her late seventies. She modeled an inspirational example.

By the time I brought her the pictures of the WWII uniform on the mannequin, my anticipation had mounted considerably.

Carolyn's face lit up when she looked at the pictures. She recognized her Ike jacket. Staff sergeant rank, two diagonal yellow service stripes, and a Port of Embarkation patch were hand-sewn on the left sleeve. The Army Service Forces patch and the WWII Meritorious Unit Citation patch were sewn on the right sleeve. The row of ribbons included the Army Good Conduct Medal, American Campaign medal, and World War II Victory medal. Transportation Corps and US Army brass were pinned on the lapels. All the insignia and awards matched those she had earned.

She was thrilled I found the uniform.

"Why did you want me to find the uniform?" I asked. She smiled, but did not answer.

Now Carolyn's days are filled with crossword puzzles, medical appointments at the VA, dinners at American Legion, and occasional visitors like me. Visiting with Carolyn, I connected with a woman, a soldier, a veteran more than thirty-five years my senior. I heard first-hand about the history of women in the Army. We laughed and commiserated as memories of our service brought us together. In November 2017, Carolyn celebrated her ninety-fifth birthday with the Northern Virginia chapter of the WAC veteran's association.

"Carolyn, do you have any guidance for other, maybe younger, women?" I asked.

"Do all you want to do," Carolyn advised. "Marriage is not the only thing you can do. And don't take 'No' for an answer."

Carolyn rarely took "No" for an answer, and for that, I thank her.