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“Island of Integration”: Desegregation of the Women’s Army Corps  
at Fort Lee, Virginia, 1948–1954

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at  
Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Bachelor of Arts, History and Political Science, Hollins University, 2017

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May 2020



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To Joyce, Doris, Florence, Ethel S., Clara, Ramona, Ethel N., Kay, & Mary Ann

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*Abstract*

“ISLAND OF INTEGRATION”: DESEGREGATION OF THE WOMEN’S ARMY CORPS AT  
FORT LEE, VIRGINIA, 1948–1954

By Meika Downey, Bachelor of Arts, Hollins University, 2017

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at  
Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020

Major Director: Dr. Emilie Raymond, Ph.D., Professor of History and Director of Graduate  
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Countless studies exist examining President Harry S. Truman’s Executive Order 9981 mandating racial desegregation of the U.S. armed forces, though all singularly focus on the experiences of male soldiers in the twentieth century. This thesis examines how the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) training center at Fort Lee, Virginia implemented desegregation in 1950 in the midst of the Korean War with relative speed and tolerance. Determined through archival records including official WAC reports, photographs, newspapers, and nine newly conducted racially diverse oral history interviews with WAC veterans, I demonstrate how the Fort Lee training center became a physical and cultural “island of integration in an otherwise sea of segregation” in the Jim Crow South.<sup>1</sup> The WAC had distinct advantages to make for a rapid transition to desegregated training, namely too few enlisted black women to merit the continuance of segregated units at Fort Lee. Nonetheless, the bonding experiences of basic training helped ease lingering racial prejudices among the women, thus fostering a peaceful and unified community in which to train and live. A social history of this kind offers a much-needed expansion of the

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<sup>1</sup> “WAC Center Real Model: Stands out as Good Example of Integration,” *Afro-American*, August 4, 1951, “WACs at Camp Lee,” Box A151, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

historiography by placing women at the forefront of military desegregation. Using oral history to examine the racial attitudes among female recruits and officers between 1948 and 1954, the following chapters analyze how the Fort Lee WAC training center underwent the critical transformation of segregated to integrated training at mid-century.

## *Introduction*

“Whereas it is essential that there be maintained in the armed forces of the United States the highest standards of democracy...It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.”<sup>2</sup>

In July 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981 demanding the armed forces to desegregate “as rapidly as possible.”<sup>3</sup> The Army fiercely opposed the President’s new policy and delayed full integration until after the Korean War in 1954. Most historical interpretations cast desegregation of the armed forces as an arduous and gradual process.<sup>4</sup> However, the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) proved more amenable to Executive Order 9981 and desegregated its national training center at Fort Lee, Virginia in April 1950—four years before their male counterparts. This relatively swift adoption of desegregation indicates a deviation from the long-accepted understanding of desegregation as an incremental process. The Women’s Army Corps’ implementation of President Truman’s new order in 1950 demonstrates that perhaps desegregation was not as difficult a process on every military base as historians have generalized.

The Women’s Army Corps continued to demonstrate its compliance with desegregation in August 1951, when the black press including Baltimore’s *Afro-American* and Norfolk’s *Journal and Guide*, described the WAC training center at Fort Lee as an “island of integration in an otherwise sea of segregation.”<sup>5</sup> A peculiar phrase, “island of integration” connotes both an internal

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<sup>2</sup> Harry S. Truman, Executive Order 9981, July 26, 1948.

<sup>3</sup> “Freedom to Serve: Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Forces,” A Report by the President’s Committee, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1950), 1, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, Online Collection, N.D., Web, Accessed November 22, 2019, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/freedom-to-serve#1>.

<sup>4</sup> Sherie Mershon and Steven Schlossman, *Foxholes and Color Lines: Desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), xi.

<sup>5</sup> “WAC Center Real Model: Stands out as Good Example of Integration,” *Afro-American*, August 4, 1951, “WACs at Camp Lee,” Box A151, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA.



culture and a physical space. However, a term like “island” also conjures sentiments of peace and isolation. To this end, while civil rights and the desegregation of the military was indeed strenuous, frustrating, and sometimes unpleasant, the Fort Lee Women’s Army Corps desegregated its ranks, basic training, barracks, bathrooms, mess halls, and recreational facilities in the early 1950s with relative ease. In this, the WAC training center deviated from the U.S. Army’s firm stance against Executive Order 9981 and achieved desegregation quickly. Furthermore, the WAC did not necessarily desire to promote racial equality in their efficient desegregation of Fort Lee in 1950. Nonetheless, recruits and officers proved amenable to desegregation and fostered the peaceful community described as an “island of integration” in 1951.

The Women’s Army Corps might be considered progressive for desegregating in 1950—years before the other branches—but during the WAC’s first eight years, it remained in league with the rest of the armed forces in support of segregation, and discriminated against its black servicewomen. Created in 1942 as the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, the WAAC was initially conceived as a temporary service through which to employ women in support of World War II. Originally a corps of women independent of the War Department, the WAAC was governed by its own protocol, organization, and policy, but this autonomous structure proved more chaotic than productive. Therefore, in July 1943, the Army absorbed the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps and abolished its Auxiliary status. Now known as the Women’s Army Corps, over 150,000 women enlisted during World War II.<sup>6</sup> Eager to serve, American women filled WAC recruitment offices around the country.

Black women, like many African Americans, likewise wanted to contribute to the Allied war effort. Though kept completely segregated from white servicewomen and denied equal

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<sup>6</sup> Bettie J. Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps, 1945–1978*, (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1990), 409.

promotional opportunities and overseas assignments, black Wacs endured discrimination in the hope that helping defeat fascism abroad would help crush racism at home.<sup>7</sup> By 1945, about 6,500 African Americans served in the Women's Army Corps during the war, but unfortunately their service did not have the desired impact on advancing civil rights in society or in the Army as they hoped.<sup>8</sup>

Since 1948, scholars and historians have examined both black contributions to and discriminatory treatment in the U.S. military, as well as the racial desegregation of the armed forces in the mid-twentieth century. The literature remained relatively consistent throughout the decades following World War II and historians have revised previous studies as new sources and information have come available. The earliest historiographical study of African Americans in and the desegregation of the military appeared in 1948 with Paul C. Davis' article, "The Negro in the Armed Services." Written for the *Virginia Quarterly Review* shortly after President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, but well before all the branches complied with the new policy. Davis argues that the United States was causing itself and its military undue "infection" by maintaining segregation within its ranks. Davis continues that during World War II, the United States military "looked upon the Negro soldier as a tolerable but dispensable luxury." Emphasizing "the essential role the Negro was destined to play in national defense," Davis believed that the United States had unlimited potential if it could only train, equip, and utilize black soldiers in the same equal fashion as whites.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout this paper, "WAC" will be used to describe the Women's Army Corps as an organization, and "Wac" will be used to describe someone serving in the Corps. The same protocol can be seen in several works which address the WAC, such as Sandra M. Bolzenius' *Glory in Their Spirit: How Four Black Women Took on the Army during World War II* (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Sandra M. Bolzenius, *Glory in their Spirit: Four Black Women Took on the Army during World War II*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Paul C. Davis, "The Negro in the Armed Services," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 24, No. 4, (Autumn, 1948), 500, 519.

Academic examinations of desegregation in the military reappeared in 1954, when Lee Nichols published *Breakthrough on the Color Front*. A groundbreaking work, Nichols' book has since become a foundational text regarding the historiography of desegregation and African Americans in the military, and can be found in nearly all secondary bibliographies. Formerly a journalist for the United Press in Washington, D.C., Nichols crafted a study on current race relations in the United States and argues that "the color barrier was breached" by vast but intricately related events coupled with "changing times and attitudes."<sup>10</sup> Through interviews with former President Truman and Generals George Marshall and Omar Bradley, Lee Nichols examines the circumstances and "diverse factors" which brought about desegregation of the military.<sup>11</sup> Sherie Mershon and Steven Schlossman later built upon this gradualist argument with their 1998 work, *Foxholes and Color Lines: Desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces*.

Additional scholars returned to the subject of race and desegregation in the military in the years following Nichols's study. Most notably, Richard Dalfume published two articles about desegregation in the late 1960s which have since become literary staples within the wider historiography. A prominent political and military historian, Dalfume in 1968 wrote the articles "The Fahy Committee and Desegregation of the Armed Forces" and "The 'Forgotten Years of the Negro Revolution.'" In the first article, Dalfume considers the creation of the Fahy Committee (at President Truman's commission) to investigate each service branch's treatment of black servicemen and implementation of desegregation. The author details the incredible amount of monotonous debate which took place between the Committee and the Secretaries of each branch in the postwar years. Dalfume is one of the first historians to criticize the Army's vehement

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<sup>10</sup> Lee Nichols, *Breakthrough on the Color Front*, (New York: Random House, 1954), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Nichols, *Breakthrough on the Color Front*, viii.

opposition to Executive Order 9981 and provides a summation of its contentious response to the Fahy Committee's efforts to effect change in the military.<sup>12</sup>

In "The 'Forgotten Years of the Negro Revolution,'" Dalfume argued that the foundations for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s were built during World War II, the years he deems "forgotten" in the history of black civil rights in the United States. Moreover, Dalfume was the first to examine black conditions in the military since Lee Nichols broached the subject in 1954. Dalfume maintains that "Black Americans were assigned a minimal role and rigidly segregated" in the military and he claims that if one could not fully serve his country, then he likewise could not enjoy the full benefits of citizenship, a sentiment later shared and built upon by historian Christine Knauer.<sup>13</sup> By discussing how blacks reacted to racial prejudice in the military and society, Dalfume concludes that racial tension in the United States during World War II "stimulated the race consciousness and the desire for change among Negroes," thus giving birth to the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>14</sup>

The following two decades exhibited some significant historiographical advancements on desegregation and race in the military including works by Jack D. Foner (1974), Morris MacGregor (1981), and Philip McGuire (1983). Foner's book, *Blacks and the Military in American History*, is significant because it was the first comprehensive examination of black contributions in the United States military. He charts the role, exclusion of, development, and contribution of blacks in the armed forces from the American Revolution to 1974. In the early 1980s, Morris MacGregor offered a thorough study of blacks in the military and the effects of desegregation in

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Dalfume, "The Fahy Committee and Desegregation of the Armed Forces," *The Historian*, Vol. 31, No.1 (November 1968), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Dalfume, "The 'Forgotten Years,' of the Negro Revolution," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (June 1968), 91-92.

<sup>14</sup> Dalfume, "The 'Forgotten Years,'" 104.

his work, *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940–1965*. In addition to drawing upon the connection between desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement, first presented by Dalfiume in 1968, MacGregor created an institutional history of blacks in the military, sourced from political, military, and journalistic records. Moreover, he emphasizes the need to view records and opinions in the context of their time which is important because of the attitudes they reveal about society “rather than what they reveal about any individual.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in 1983 Philip McGuire penned “Desegregation of the Armed Forces: Black Leadership, Protest, and World War II” for the *Journal of Negro History*. McGuire shows the development, failures, and successes of black leaders during World War II as they sought to pressure President Franklin Roosevelt and his administration to revise and abolish racist policies in the United States military and government. McGuire examines the contribution of black community activist and judge William H. Hastie, who was appointed as a black aide and advisor to the Secretary of War Henry Stimson from 1940–1942. Save for these three scholars, few additional works of note about desegregation in the military appeared in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1998, Sherie Mershon and Steven Schlossman published *Foxholes and Color Lines: Desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces* in which they argue that desegregation of the military was the result of a series of calculated and decisive actions including “intense political conflict... resistance from the armed forces...and policies during periods of alternating active war and Cold War.”<sup>16</sup> Mershon and Schlossman claim that desegregation was a three-phase process that took place between 1940 and 1965, thus building off of MacGregor. Additionally, Mershon and Schlossman make the case that desegregation was not an inevitable accomplishment but rather the

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<sup>15</sup> Morris MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940–1965*, (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1981), ix–x.

<sup>16</sup> Mershon and Schlossman, *Foxholes and Color Lines*, xi.

result of a precise series of events over time. *Foxholes and Color Lines* fostered renewed momentum in the years following for historical scholarship about desegregation and the armed forces.

The 2000s and 2010s saw new and inclusive studies on black military contributions to American history, including enlightened perspectives about President Truman's role in the development of African Americans' military status in the mid-twentieth century, and new connections between desegregation in the armed forces and the growth of the Civil Rights Movement in the years following.<sup>17</sup> In 2009, Christopher S. Parker published *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South* in which he argues that black World War II veterans built off of the momentum their wartime service afforded them and used their new confidence to challenge Jim Crow and segregation upon returning home. Parker poignantly describes the treatment of black soldiers and veterans in the Jim Crow South. In 2014, Christine Knauer published *Let Us Fight as Free Men: Black Soldiers and Civil Rights*, further building on previous arguments made by Dalfiume, MacGregor, and Parker on black military service, citizenship, and the Civil Rights Movement.

However, none of these works adequately discusses or discusses at all the roles and experiences of women—black or white—in the armed forces. Since World War II, American women have made significant contributions to the military in their respective branches: Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES); Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASPS)/Women's Air Force (WAF); Women Marines; and Women's Army Corps (WAC).

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<sup>17</sup> Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risk*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2002) and Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

These branches were all subjected to military law and policy just like their male counterparts, the Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Army, respectively. As of 1948, this included desegregation. Additionally, throughout the mid-twentieth century, black women made incredible strides in the armed services. Yet, the historiography of desegregation does not explore how black or white women experienced that important process. In examining how the Women's Army Corps processed and complied with desegregation at Fort Lee in 1950, this thesis seeks to both highlight women's roles in the military and to disrupt the dominant male narrative regarding race relations in the armed forces.

While the secondary literature about servicewomen's experiences in the military during desegregation in the early 1950s is nearly nonexistent, there are two key works supporting this research. *The Women's Army Corps, 1945–1978* by Bettie Morden (1990) is an administrative history of the WAC that provides excellent contextual knowledge of the Corps and details how it developed in the decades following World War II. "*A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value*": *Servicewomen of the Korean War Era* by Linda Witt, et. al. (2005) is the closest source to address my topic, and while the authors have produced an incredibly thorough history of women in uniform in the 1950s, Witt, et. al. affords little focus to the Women's Army Corps or desegregation. Still, while *The Women's Army Corps* and "*A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value*" do not specifically address the desegregation of the WAC, they are the most closely linked secondary literature on the topic and they both provided excellent contextual history for this research.

What is lacking in secondary literature is more than made up for by an arsenal of available primary sources, the most significant of which is located at the Army Women's Museum at Fort Lee, Virginia. The general record collections I consulted include basic training scrap books, newspapers, official WAC correspondence and policy briefs, inter-organizational memos,

speeches, and personal papers. While secondary literature and official Women's Army Corps records informed a top-down perspective on race relations and desegregation in the early 1950s, this source material gives little insight into the racial attitudes and culture in the Women's Army Corps at Fort Lee. Personal experiences are missing from the archives. Thus, there was only one source left to pursue in order to address essential questions about WAC experiences on the ground at Fort Lee: the women themselves who trained there between 1948 and 1954.

Oral history became the most important component of this research and revealed intimacies not mentioned in the primary or secondary sources. This paper uses these invaluable narratives to conceptualize and recreate 1950s WAC basic training for modern audiences. Essential to this thesis's success, however, was the inclusion of racially diverse voices. "Selection of informants" matters in oral history and this study in particular, for without the voices of white and minority WAC veterans, this thesis would be wholly inadequate in parsing together an understanding of racial attitudes surrounding desegregation at Fort Lee.<sup>18</sup> Each of the nine WAC veterans interviewed for this project, now aged between 84 and 92, hails from across the country and represents three different races and ethnicities, a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, educations, and occupations. These women arrived at Fort Lee with their own motives, expectations, and insecurities, and their time in the Women's Army Corps affected them all differently. These oral histories define the methodological approach of this thesis and their memories and reflections provide the human experience vital to this research.

Though oral history offers many benefits to historical research, such sources do not come without challenges. Oral history interviews are prone to encounter pitfalls, most notably with the

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<sup>18</sup> R. Kenneth Kirby, "Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History," *Oral History Review*, Vol. 35, No. 1, (Winter/Spring 2008), 24.



subjectivity of memory “and flux of human knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> So often are oral histories conducted years after the event in question—more than sixty years in this case—and interviewers and audiences need to remain aware that one’s narrator (the interviewee) could easily misremember moments in the past. The older the narrator and wider the stretch of time between an event and the time of recounting, the greater the threat of inaccurate memory.<sup>20</sup> However, less important is the possibility for skewed facts or dates than the meaning behind the memory. In fact, the most common inconsistency across the oral history interviews conducted for this research was the number of weeks that the Women’s Army Corps veterans trained at Fort Lee in the early 1950s. However, in the grand scheme of the historical significance of desegregated WAC basic training, the length of the period is less important than the meaning behind their experiences.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, while oral history offers historical meaning not always discernable in other types of sources, interviewers need also to be cognizant of the presence and role of bias in oral history on the part of both narrator and interviewer. There exists the possibility of narrators selectively remembering an event or circumstance, and while interviewers cannot always stave off narrator bias, there are precautionary measures interviewers can take to deafen its affect. An important aspect of conducting oral histories regards the questions one asks, or in fact, does not ask. The desire to conduct authentic oral histories demanded that I balance my need to ask similar questions of all the women with providing “an atmosphere that [did] not improperly influence the informant’s responses.”<sup>22</sup> In order to avoid drawing out biased answers—either my desire to hear a certain answer or the narrator shaping her reply based on what she thought I might like her to say—

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<sup>19</sup> Kirby, “Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History,” 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Kirby adds that minute details matter less than what the “telling of the events just might reveal about the important ‘expectations and norms’ that are the most valuable part of the story” (25).

<sup>22</sup> Kirby, “Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History,” 23–24.

I sought to ask objective, open-ended questions, which ultimately led to the WAC veterans directing the conversation. Thus, the dialogues ebbed and flowed differently across the nine oral histories. I responded to each of their needs by in some cases stepping back and letting the narrator do much of the talking, and in other instances, the narrator looked to me to guide the discussion. I wanted to promote an organic and “nonthreatening atmosphere” in which to collect an unbiased accounting of race relations and desegregated basic training at Fort Lee between 1948 and 1954.<sup>23</sup>

However, oral history alone cannot provide “absolute truth of the past.”<sup>24</sup> Oral historians possess the responsibility to corroborate personal experience with other kinds of evidence and sources. While I validated some points expressed in the oral histories by corroborating with outside sources, in large part, I lacked adequate archival and secondary materials with which to authenticate personal experiences in basic training. To this end, whenever the narrators discussed related topics, I cross-referenced their answers. In these instances, such as protocols upon arriving at Fort Lee for basic training or what the women experienced traveling through the local town of Petersburg, the narrators’ memories and interpretations remained largely consistent.

Ultimately, the oral history interviews used throughout this research are the first of their kind and the first to be used to examine desegregation at the Fort Lee Women’s Army Corps training center. In that, these histories are innately valuable and meaningful, and while I aimed to promote as objective an interview with each narrator as possible and reflect these sentiments on the page, there is room to expand this research. I encourage readers to accept these women’s memories as they are, and all they contribute to understanding life at Fort Lee in the 1950s, but recognize that there is no doubt more to this WAC story than what these sources allowed me to write. Additionally, in the vein of maintaining authenticity, except in specialized cases where

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<sup>23</sup> Kirby, “Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History,” 24.

altered punctuation and spelling was needed for clarity, the oral history included herein remains consistent with the narrator's delivery.

Through oral history, the following pages seek to provide readers a glimpse into the realities of diverse young women who entered the Women's Army Corps at a time when it was frowned upon to do so. However, perhaps more importantly, these sources also shed light on the important role America's servicewomen had on the process of military desegregation. Though perhaps difficult for these women to look back on their years in the WAC as being important to achieving civil rights for African Americans and on normalizing women in uniform in the twentieth century, the ways in which these WAC veterans responded to desegregation at Fort Lee in the early 1950s set precedents for positive military integration across the armed forces. To many of these women, their time in the WAC represented a two or three-year period in which they earned money for college, developed a sense of independence and patriotism, and escaped a small town. As such, these former Fort Lee recruits and officers did not join the WAC to make a significant impact on a generations-old national institution, though their service indelibly affected the Army and vice versa.

This thesis is composed of three chapters, each of which will explore how the Fort Lee Women's Army Corps training center, between 1948 with the passage of Executive Order 9981 and 1954 after the conclusion of the Korean War, operated as an island of integration. Chapter one discusses the WAC's background and recruitment and explores the lead causes for efficient desegregation at Fort Lee; chapter two the implementation of Truman's executive order; and chapter three the impact of the Women's Army Corps' racial practices on the nearby community of Petersburg.

Women who served in the Army in the late 1940s and early 1950s are not far behind in age to America's World War II veterans, and as such, it is vitally important to gather the stories of this generation while time remains. Moreover, the majority of the nine women interviewed for this study, all in their late '80s and early '90s, had never before been interviewed about their military experience and were eager, though at times slightly apprehensive, to share their memories. These women's oral histories not only contribute historiographical and academic value to this thesis, but also their recollections, photos, and impressions constitute the most important aspect of this project.

Chapter 1 | “No Daughter of Mine!”: WAC Recruitment in Postwar America<sup>25</sup>

“As I recall, the recruitment office was located in downtown Detroit, and it was a clear, sunny, April day when my mother Rose and I walked the distance from our home on 4<sup>th</sup> Street (we all did a lot of walking in those days) to the office...I do not remember the exact day that I left for Fort Lee, but I think my Dad was able to drive me to the train station, where the other young recruit and I, left by train.”<sup>26</sup>

Clara Chapala, a first generation Mexican-American from Detroit, Michigan, joined the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) at eighteen years old in April 1954. Now aged eighty-three, Clara recalled that when she arrived at the WAC enlistment office many years before, the recruitment officers filled her pockets with rolls of coins to increase her weight on the scale. At a slight ninety-seven pounds, she fell three pounds shy of the minimum enlistment weight. The fact that the WAC recruitment officers felt the need to dishonestly help Clara qualify for enlistment demonstrates the concern about low recruitment rates in postwar America. During these years, “there simply were not enough servicewomen to meet the need.”<sup>27</sup> Between 1946 and the end of the 1950s, the WACs’ recruitment of young, single women remained an uphill battle and “some recruiters w[ould] do anything to meet their quotas.”<sup>28</sup> Though initially taken aback by the recruiters’ actions, Clara was “happy to keep [their] ‘adjustment’ secret so that [she] could join.”<sup>29</sup>

In the decade following World War II, the Women’s Army Corps struggled to recruit qualified young women to join its ranks, and ultimately, fewer potential recruits at WAC enlistment offices resulted in fewer women training at Fort Lee, Virginia. In June 1945, the Women’s Army Corps, like the other branches of the armed forces, conducted a mass

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<sup>25</sup> Ethel Barnes Naddaff Interview with Meika Downey, September 13, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Clara Chapala Email Correspondence with Meika Downey, November 12, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Linda Witt, et. al., *“A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value”: Servicewomen in the Korean War Era*, (Hanover: University of New England Press, 2005), 76.

<sup>28</sup> Chapala, “WAC Story,” Email Correspondence with Meika Downey, September 28, 2019, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Chapala, “WAC Story,” 1.

demobilization of its wartime strength, leaving the WAC only 95,957 enlistees and officers, many of whom would leave the service in the weeks to come. However, of the remaining Wacs at war's end, only 3,489 were black women, a mere fraction of the whole. Three years later as the Women's Army Corps converted to peacetime, only 5,352 women remained in the service and a mere one hundred-twenty-five were black. Not only do these anemic enlistment rates demonstrate the WAC's struggle to recruit servicewomen post-World War II, but the wide ratio between white and black recruits also reflected the racial demographic of basic recruits and officer candidates training at Fort Lee between 1948 and 1954.<sup>30</sup>

During the postwar and Korean War years, African Americans were underrepresented in the Women's Army Corps, even after Fort Lee desegregated. However, the Fort Lee WAC training center is not only known to have desegregated its ranks in a relatively quick and tolerant manner in April 1950, but by August 1951, members of the black press considered the base an "island of integration in an otherwise sea of segregation." The Fort Lee training center only achieved desegregation easily at this time because there were too few black women enlisted in the WAC to merit segregated units any longer. Ultimately, the WAC's inability to recruit and retain enough servicewomen between 1948 and 1954 resulted in not only fewer white enlistees, but even fewer women of color at Fort Lee, making for an easier transition to an integrated WAC.

Furthermore, the Women's Army Corps struggled not only to recruit enlisted women in the postwar years, but also to find candidates for officer training. An official, though unpublished 1949 Army report entitled "History of the WAC Training Center, Camp Lee, Virginia, From 15 June 1948 to 24 January 1949" claimed that "due to a shortage of personnel, the companies have

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<sup>30</sup> Morden, *The Women's Army Corps*, 409, 415.

been operating with considerably less than” the needed number of officers.<sup>31</sup> The demand for college-educated women to complete Officer Candidate School in the Women’s Army Corps remained high throughout the postwar years. The WAC’s need for eligible women to train and serve as officers was still so great in 1951 that when African American Florence Saunders Farley entered the Women’s Army Corps, her officer class of one hundred women skipped Officer Candidate School altogether. One of five black women in her officer class, Florence recalled:

Yeah, no one was volunteering. That’s what was going on...The WAAC had to go through OCS to become officers, but we didn’t. We didn’t have to go through OCS.<sup>32</sup> That’s how desperate they were to get volunteers. So we didn’t go through OCS. We got our bars right from civilian [life]. I raised my hand up and they gave me the oath and I was a Second Lieutenant. All of a sudden. Didn’t know anything about the military, so the first six months was training...We put in...more hours than we spent going to college for four years...We went in in September, and in January, we took off the gold bars and put on the silver bars. So I became a First Lieutenant in January, in six months. But those things were all the incentives that we had.<sup>33</sup>

Especially after the United States entered the Korean War, the Women’s Army Corps was in such need of officers that, as Florence experienced, the WAC accepted most college-educated women directly into the officer corps without a day of training or proceeding through traditional methods. Instead of enlisting as a basic recruit and then progressing towards Officer Candidate School to earn officers’ bars, Florence and many other new Wacs entered into the service directly as officers and then completed their training. Recognizing it “ha[d] a recruiting problem,” the Women’s Army Corps’ desperation to attract enlisted recruits and officer candidates remained

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<sup>31</sup> “History of the WAC Training Center, Camp Lee, Virginia, From 15 June 1948 to 24 January 1948,” Unpublished Army Internal Report, 1949, “WACs at Camp Lee Scrapbook” Collection, 1949, Box 251, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 6.

<sup>32</sup> During World War II, if a young woman desired to enter the WAAC/WAC already holding a college degree, she was fast-tracked to Officer Candidate School (OCS). She would undergo thirteen weeks of basic training, mostly at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, and then instead of getting her Military Occupational Status (MOS) and proceeding to her assignment, officer candidates began OCS training. After several more weeks, if successful, they emerged as officers. Other basic recruits who showed promise or interest in becoming officers were recommended for OCS at their graduations from basic training.

<sup>33</sup> Florence Farley Interview with Meika Downey, October 1, 2019.

throughout the Korean War era as seen through Florence's accelerated promotion to Second Lieutenant in 1951, and Clara Chapala's fudged enlistment in 1954.<sup>34</sup>

However, by the time Clara joined the Women's Army Corps in 1954, enlistment rates had slightly increased. By this year, the conflict in Korea had come to an end and desegregation of the WAC was fully complete at Fort Lee. In June 1954, while the Women's Army Corps enjoyed a forty-five percent increase in its overall enlistments since 1948, personnel statistics demonstrate that black women increased their enlistment by nearly six hundred percent compared to six years earlier. In reality, this percentage equates to only 744 black servicewomen, which is still a small minority in the greater WAC strength of 7,803 in 1954.<sup>35</sup> Though black and white WAC enlistment rates in the postwar years and early 1950s were racially disproportionate, black and white women generally lacked interest in joining the military for similar reasons.

In 1945, the United States government had heartily thanked the 350,000 women for their service during the country's time of need, but the War Department told them to return home and pursue more suitable occupations within the realm of domestic life.<sup>36</sup> Linda Eisenmann, historian of education at Wheaton College, contends that at war's end, women were "asked to step aside to ease men's [reentry to the] labor force."<sup>37</sup> "Demobilized in droves," America's servicewomen complied with their new instructions to return home, merely fulfilling their World War II terms of temporary enlistment.<sup>38</sup> The War Department never intended for servicewomen to remain in the armed forces long term or to pursue careers in uniform. Their service was acceptable in the 1940s

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<sup>34</sup> "First WAC Regulars Finish Basic Training at Camp Lee," *Army Times*, December 18, 1948, "WACs at Camp Lee Scrapbook" Collection, 1948, Box 146, Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

<sup>35</sup> Morden, *The Women's Army Corps*, 409, 415.

<sup>36</sup> Sum composed of servicewomen in the Navy, Air Corps, Marines, and Army; Witt, et. al., "*A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value*," 7.

<sup>37</sup> Linda Eisenmann, *Higher Education for Women in Postwar America, 1945-1965*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Witt, et. al., "*A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value*," 1.



only because the country was in dire need.<sup>39</sup> However, now that America was once again on the doorstep of peace in 1945, the military believed a need no longer existed for these women to remain in the service. However, little time passed before the military realized it had made a mistake to discharge so many servicewomen. The War Department determined that women were a benefit to the service after all, so much so, that “commanders wondered how [they] had ever gotten along without them.”<sup>40</sup> Recognizing servicewomen’s usefulness alone was an insufficient means of retaining women in the postwar years; if the Army desired to grow and maintain a peacetime strength of women, improved service conditions were essential.

The Women’s Army Corps’ “limit[ations]...on military...career advancement and the limited opportunities to achieve higher rank” also greatly deterred women from wanting to join the WAC after 1945.<sup>41</sup> Originating with the creation of the Women’s Army Corps during World War II, the War Department placed occupational parameters on women’s service, the most notable of which was a requirement that women only served under supporting and temporary versus Regular and permanent status.<sup>42</sup> As black World War II Wac Dovey Johnson Roundtree recalled in her 2009 memoir *Justice Older Than the Law: The Life of Dovey Johnson Roundtree*, “the country’s leaders hated the idea of women in the military.”<sup>43</sup> Reflecting this attitude, the Army denied WAC servicewomen the equal pay or veterans benefits that came with Regular status. Bettie Morden argues that “while white congressmen could accept the idea of a women’s auxiliary [service] to ease a manpower shortage, they objected to giving women military status as well as

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<sup>39</sup> Witt, et. al., “*A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value*,” 14.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>42</sup> The armed forces used terms like “Regular,” “Reserve,” and “permanent” to describe one’s status in the military. These status terms long applied to servicemen and when women entered the military in World War II, they, too were subject to “Regular,” “Reserve,” and eventually “permanent” status.

<sup>43</sup> Katie McCabe and Dovey Johnson Roundtree, *Justice Older Than the Law: The Life of Dovey Johnson Roundtree*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), 49.

the rights and benefits of veterans.”<sup>44</sup> Much of this reluctance derived from lawmakers’ unwillingness to promote nonconformist roles for women.

Despite efforts from Congresswoman and WAAC founder Edith Nourse Rogers, and others including Oveta Culp Hobby, director of the Corps (1942–1945), and Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune of the National Council of Negro Women, the Army deferred decision-making about veteran’s benefits, pay, promotion, and assignments for Wacs throughout the entirety of World War II. However, the Army was forced to confront these pressing issues after it regretted demobilizing its nearly 100,000 Wacs in 1945. Soon after V–J Day, debates began about the role women should play in the postwar Army.<sup>45</sup>

Between 1946 and 1948, the War Department and Congress considered legislation to award the Women’s Army Corps and the other female service branches Regular and reserve status. With this recognition, female military service would earn competitive pay, benefits, promotions, and non-traditional assignments enjoyed by the men’s service branches and important to their career growth. However, Army Chief of Staff General Dwight D. Eisenhower made clear that establishing such legislation “was not to provide equal opportunity for women or to set a precedent for society,” but to maintain objectives as established in World War II: “to relieve as many men as possible...for combat.”<sup>46</sup> In support of Eisenhower’s motive, Linda Witt, et. al. argue that the Women’s Army Corps was granted Regular and reserve status out of pragmatic, not socially progressive reasons.<sup>47</sup>

The War Department believed enlisted women would free more men for combat roles, and in concession, Congress passed the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act, which officially

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<sup>44</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Witt, et. al., “*A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value*,” 30–32.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 25, 5.

granted the women's branches Regular and reserve status in June 1948.<sup>48</sup> In effect, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported on January 1, 1949: "The Army hopes that the existence of an alert, well-equipped regular Army will postpone permanently the need for a wartime mobilization."<sup>49</sup> The Women's Armed Services Integration Act was adopted as a tactic to increase recruitment to the Women's Army Corps, but the new legislation did not attract the number of women that the Army hoped or expected between 1948 and 1954.

The total strength of the WAC in June 1948, as Bettie Morden reported, was 5,352; one hundred-twenty-five of whom were black. One year later in June 1949, total numbers in the Women's Army Corps, composed of both commissioned and enlisted personnel, actually saw a decrease: only 4,909 servicewomen. In the same month, however, the WAC witnessed a rise in African American enlistment with three hundred fifty-two recruits. Though black enlistment saw an increase between 1948 and 1949 (of two hundred-twenty-seven women to the Women's Army Corps), these numbers nonetheless made up a small fraction of the whole strength, and black officers therein composed an even smaller percentage compared to their white counterparts.<sup>50</sup>

Two years after the passage of the Women's Armed Services Integration Act, the overall WAC enlistments failed to reach the desired number, and the Korean War's eruption in June 1950 only exacerbated this recruitment dearth. To the American veterans of World War II, little time had passed before the United States mobilized for war in Korea, a spoke in the larger wheel of the Cold War which persisted for much of the latter half of the twentieth century. Devoted to

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<sup>48</sup> It is important to note that the Women's Armed Services Integration Act did not racially integrate the women's service branches, but instead *integrated* gender in the military by establishing precedent of women's permanent status as members of the military. However, women still trained and lived in separate spheres to servicemen, and the Integration Act did not address race.

<sup>49</sup> "The Distaff Side of the Peacetime Army: WACs Are Career Girls," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 23, 1949.

<sup>50</sup> Morden, *The Women's Army Corps*, 409, 415.

preventing the spread of communism, President Harry S. Truman quickly called on American servicemen and soon women, as well, to suit up for war in Korea.<sup>51</sup>

Linda Witt, et. al. assert in *“A Defense Weapon Known to Be of Value”*: *Servicewomen of the Korean War Era* (2005) that the “outbreak of war meant that every WAC was needed,” but the branch was ill-prepared for war.<sup>52</sup> There was a great need for Wacs during the Korean War, but unfortunately, organic and voluntary interest from American women was wildly insufficient and to the Army’s dismay, the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act failed to recruit the needed numbers of servicewomen. As a result, for the first time, the Army defaulted to calling up WAC reservists from World War II to supplement personnel needs for Korea.<sup>53</sup>

Still, for as “hard [a] sell” military service was for the general white female population, convincing African American women to enlist in the Army was made even more difficult by the Integration Act’s shortcomings.<sup>54</sup> When Congress first considered creating the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act in 1946, activists inside and out of Congress advocated that the “WAC bill be amended to include” a policy of desegregation.<sup>55</sup> However, the Senate Armed Services Committee chose to remain in line with the Army’s firm segregationist stance.<sup>56</sup> Subsequently, the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act did not include a provision about racial desegregation. While Truman issued Executive Order 9981 ordering the military to racially desegregate in July 1948—a month after the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act was passed—perhaps had the

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<sup>51</sup> Melinda L. Pash, *In The Shadow of the Greatest Generation: The Americans Who Fought in the Korean War*, (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 8, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Witt, et. al., *“A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value,”* 94.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 65–67.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>55</sup> “Powell Charges Truman with Double Talk and Armed Services Committee as ‘Rubber Stamp for White Army,’” *Arkansas State Press*, April 9, 1948.

<sup>56</sup> Pash, *In The Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 168.

WAC considered changing its segregation policy earlier, then more black women would have enlisted in June 1948.

Ultimately, the Women's Army Corps experienced low recruitment numbers between 1946 and 1948 in part because American women did not want to commit themselves to Army service when their positions did not guarantee them adequate pay, interesting assignments, veteran's benefits, or a desegregated structure. Serving under such conditions may have been acceptable during World War II because the country was involved in global war, but after the United States entered peacetime in 1945, women no longer wanted to compromise the value of their service. Furthermore, the Women's Army Services Integration Act, despite giving servicewomen Regular and reserve status, did not award servicewomen equal status to men.<sup>57</sup> While women could not serve in combat or warzones, and could not be drafted as WAC Director Colonel Mary Hallaren advocated in 1951, it is debatable whether permitting such a policy would have increased WAC recruitment. Additionally, women were largely denied weapons training and could not constitute more than two percent of the entire Army, among other discrepancies.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, enlistment rates remained dangerously low in the postwar years even after the passage of the Integration Act. However, if the guarantee of permanent status and veteran's benefits did not drum up the enlistments so "urgent[ly] needed," in postwar America, it is clear that there were other factors deterring women from joining the Women's Army Corps.<sup>59</sup>

Another significant contribution to low recruitment in the postwar years was a shift in public opinion about women in the military. Female service during World War II was viewed as a patriotic sacrifice, but in the years following the war, eligible bachelors and polite society frowned

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<sup>57</sup> Pash, *In The Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 168

<sup>58</sup> Witt, et. al., "*A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value*," 70.

<sup>59</sup> "Armed Forces to Seek 72,000 More Women," *New York Herald*, September 27, 1951, Box 149, Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

upon such behavior. Donning a uniform instead of an apron in the 1950s smacked of nonconformity, one of the greatest political and social threats of the era. In her 1998 work, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Elaine Tyler May argues that “those who did not conform...were likely to be marginalized, stigmatized, and disadvantaged as a result.”<sup>60</sup> To be a nonconformist or social deviant in the 1940s and 1950s might prove incredibly damaging to individuals and their families.<sup>61</sup>

Opponents of female military service presumed that those who entered the Women’s Army Corps harbored nonconformist tendencies and that joining the WAC only confirmed such assumptions. For example, in a Korean War-era article entitled, “A Happy-Go-Lucky ‘Tomboy,’ She’s Pvt. Doris, WAC, Now,” the author wrote a noticeably-biased piece about an Alabama girl’s decision to join the Women’s Army Corps in the early 1950s. The author cast Doris in a disapproving light by establishing her youthful indifference to gendered activities as a suspicious prerequisite to military service. A “tomboy...Doris Schatz, who used to shrug off such tasks as dishwashing and making...beds, is now doing her share of ‘kaypee,’ ‘policing up,’ and ‘GI parties.’” Instinctively taking to military life, this young “soldier-gal” excelled in “lessons [of] military courtesy, handling of field problems...drill[ing]...and spending a week...in camouflaged tents.” Also apparently important in this woman’s characterization, the author included that Doris’ parents did not approve of her joining. Additionally, she “didn’t date much before she entered the WACs” and exhibited a disinterest in marriage and domestic life.<sup>62</sup> The author’s characterization of Doris demonstrates the skepticism with which the general public viewed female military service

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<sup>60</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 15.

<sup>61</sup> Pash, *In The Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 13.

<sup>62</sup> “A Happy-Go-Lucky ‘Tomboy,’ She’s Pvt. Doris, WAC, Now,” Unknown Publication, Box 260, 228-01 Permanent, WHC-385, Fort Lee General Orders (1948–1953), Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA. “Kaypee” refers to “kitchen police.”

after World War II. “Evil gossip” and insinuations about women in uniform “proved to be a barrier to servicewomen” and largely hindered Women’s Army Corps enlistment at the time.<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, women within the military endured negative stereotypes. As Fort Lee Wac First Sergeant Ramona V. Chipman from Novato, California recalled, “in those days, women who joined the service were...looked down at as being...bums.”<sup>64</sup> Ramona declined to elaborate further, but in the postwar years, servicewomen were seen as being morally questionable and sexually perverse. “Rumors...[of lesbianism] and the disparagement of women in uniform...prevented many women from enlisting” in the military.<sup>65</sup> During this heightened paranoia of the early Cold War period, the public feared threats of homosexuality nearly on the same scale of communism. Known as the Lavender Scare—versus the era’s Red Scare—even whispers of homosexuality could quickly turn into a government investigation.<sup>66</sup> Since female military service was so closely tied to lesbianism, many American women steered clear of WAC recruitment offices. Kay Turner Greczkowski, who enlisted in the WAC in January 1950, noted that joining the service

was a little controversial at the time. Women were looked down on for their contribution for their being in the military which I thought was really too bad because they were just ordinary next door women and were not there in any capacity of ill repute. But it was difficult to us at that time I guess to see women in that capacity...Women were not supposed to be in that role. Women are supposed to be home tending kids and making dinner...I remember going home on leave and coming back on the train in uniform and it was stressful. It was stressful. I was pointed at and nobody wanted to sit beside me in the waiting room...<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Witt, et. al., “A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value,” 3.

<sup>64</sup> Ramona V. Chipman Interview with Meika Downey, August 26, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Witt, et. al., “A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value,” 7.

<sup>66</sup> Pash, *In The Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Greczkowski Interview, September 22, 2019.

Here, Kay touched on another vital—if not the most important—deterrent to WAC enlistment between 1948 and 1954, and present in both white and black middle-class communities: the American cult of domesticity.

The revival of domestic life and gendered roles in the aftermath of World War II and the gravitational pull towards marriage, homemaking, and child-rearing became a priority for many American women. May argues in that “the home seemed to offer a secure, private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world.”<sup>68</sup> Marrying and having children at an accelerated rate, women contributed to a post-war baby boom and won praise for their role in securing America’s postwar peace and prosperity.

Instead of creating nuclear families, however, the Women’s Army Corps entreated America’s young women to “to form a nucleus of WACs.”<sup>69</sup> While the WAC “hasten[ed] to assure]” that it had “no wish to be a substitute for marriage,” the truth of the matter was that the cult of domesticity and the military vied for the same candidates.<sup>70</sup> Both camps placed high demand on single women between eighteen and twenty-five years old. However, this demographic was overwhelmingly uninterested in serving in the WAC between 1948 and 1954. As exhibited in the WAC personnel statistics of the time and in May’s study, marriage and family proved the primary reasons women opted against military service. Despite dedicated recruitment efforts in the postwar years—especially as the conflict in Korea expanded—the Women’s Army Corps had difficulty competing with the appeal of domestic life after four harsh years of war. By 1948, Americans were “...eager to put the disruptions and hardships [of World War II] behind them.”<sup>71</sup> As African

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<sup>68</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 1–3.

<sup>69</sup> “WAC Center, Ignoring Race and Color, An Island of Integration,” Unknown Publication, 1951, “WACs at Fort Lee Scrapbook” Collection, 1951, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, Virginia, Box 150.

<sup>70</sup> “The Distaff Side of the Peacetime Army: WACs Are Career Girls,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 23, 1949.

<sup>71</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 4.



American First Lieutenant Florence Saunders Farley of Roanoke, Virginia, who served in the WAC at Fort Lee between 1951 and 1953, recalled:

Everything was winding down. You'd been through World War II and you were disinvested, you were pulling back; the guys were coming home. I can remember. I had a brother in the Navy and two brothers in the Army. So they had come home, or were coming home, and that's what people were interested in more than anything else.<sup>72</sup>

As World War II came to a close, Americans were in large part disinterested in cultivating any relationship with the armed forces, least of all in enlistment.

Ultimately, the approximately 58,000 women who served in the WAC between 1948 and 1954 were radical, social outliers, as were the nine women interviewed for this study, for in entering the service as young women, they rejected society's expectations in the 1950s. During this period, young women had only a handful of socially acceptable occupations available to them after completing high school. While some wealthier women attended college, "in those days, girls had about three [career] choices," said Ramona Chipman. "You could be a teacher or you could be a secretary [or a nurse]...And I found that kinda insulting."<sup>73</sup> However, the most commendable choice remained marriage and child-rearing.

WAC recruitment dramatically decreased between 1945 and 1954 because a service career was not conducive to finding a husband, marrying, and having a family. After disrupting gender spheres during the war, many Americans preferred to revert to "distinct roles for women and men."<sup>74</sup> Subsequently, Levittowns, white picket fences, "Honey, I'm home's," and two-and-a-half kids came to characterize postwar American society. While this is not an accurate representation of all Americans following World War II (dependent in particular on socio-economic factors), it

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<sup>72</sup> Farley Interview, October 1, 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Chipman Interview, August 26, 2019.

<sup>74</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 6.

pervaded the culture of the era.<sup>75</sup> Americans desired a return to normalcy, and women serving in uniform were considered far from normal in the postwar period. Additionally, “as prosperity returned to the United States, people wanted to do all the things they couldn't during the war years: marry, have kids, buy a car, and move into a single-family home.”<sup>76</sup> Female military service was not socially or culturally prescribed in the 1950s and had no place in the dynamic of American nuclear families. For women to serve in the military was to reject their social responsibility of “marriage and parenthood.”<sup>77</sup> This rejuvenated culture of domestic life in the early 1950s was a leading contributor to low recruitment in the Women’s Army Corps in the mid-twentieth century.

Moreover, with marriage a long-term goal for many American women, the WAC struggled to recruit even female veterans of World War II. Many women considered military service, civilian occupations, and higher education as “temporary stops along the road to marriage and motherhood.”<sup>78</sup> Throughout World War II, Americans were dedicated to the war effort “for the duration,” but simultaneously mused about a different life after the war. By 1946, after the Allies defeated fascism and totalitarianism abroad, the time finally arrived for America’s young men and women to pursue their wartime daydreams. As the Army initially desired, within a year’s time between June 1945 to June 1946, the Women’s Army Corps decreased in size from 95,957 to 17,896. The WAC continued this downward trajectory until 1951, when enlistment rates plateaued around 11,500.<sup>79</sup> While World War II Wacs looked forward to returning home, the Army’s rapid demobilization contributed greatly to the fast-deflating enlistment numbers at war’s end. Having

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<sup>75</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>76</sup> Ashley Hamer, “Traditional’ Family Values Were Invented in the 1950s,” *Curiosity*, September 18, 2017, Web, Accessed November 22, 2019, <https://curiosity.com/topics/traditional-family-values-were-invented-in-the-1950s-curiosity/>.

<sup>77</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 4.

<sup>78</sup> Witt, et. al., “*A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value*,” 7.

<sup>79</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 409.

already served their war, it is no surprise that in the immediate postwar years that renewed service disinterested WAC veterans from World War II in particular. In 1949, re-enlisted Wacs composed sixty-five percent of the branch.<sup>80</sup>

Getting married young was so common at mid-century that Joyce Jackson Button who served in the WAC from 1951–1953, recalled that her father “was old-fashioned; he said, ‘I’m not going to give you money to go to college because you’re just going to get married and waste the money anyway.’”<sup>81</sup> Joyce’s father did not want to invest in any post-secondary educational pursuits for his daughter because he was sure that Joyce would succumb to social pressures and hastily marry like most of the other young women in their hometown of Kenosha, Wisconsin. Deciding she was “not going to go along with that,” eighteen-year-old Joyce Jackson Button joined the Women’s Army Corps instead.<sup>82</sup>

In June 1951, 11,932 recruits joined the Women’s Army Corps, versus the 113,991 women who got married that month instead.<sup>83</sup> In 1954, The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (for which former WAAC/WAC Director, Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby served as Secretary, 1953–1955) published, “Vital Statistics of the United States, 1951.” This national report detailed marriage, divorce, birth, and death rates across various states. Statistics collected from twenty-one states demonstrate that women far favored marriage over military service in 1951. Because the Women’s Army Corps prohibited marriage, the women detailed in this report could not have possibly wed and been a member of the WAC as well. Ramona noted that, “In those days, [the Army] really didn’t want women to be married because you were a pain in the neck to them

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<sup>80</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 414.

<sup>81</sup> Button Interview, August 20, 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 409; “Vital Statistics of the United States, 1951,” Vol. 1, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, (Washington, D.C., United States Government Printing Office, 1954), Center for Disease Prevention, N.D., Web, Accessed November 23, 2019, [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsus/Vsus\\_1951\\_1.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsus/Vsus_1951_1.pdf), 77.

administratively.”<sup>84</sup> In 1951, 266,382 women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five—the ideal demographic for the Women’s Army Corps—got married in place of pursuing a career in the military.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, black women proved just as drawn to the culture of domestic life as white women. The Vital Statistics Report for 1951 recorded that 105,400 non-white women between ages eighteen and twenty-five from across thirteen states married or remarried instead of joining the WAC.<sup>86</sup> These rates demonstrate that black women were also focused on marriage and families in postwar America and not interested in military service.

Furthermore, while the zeitgeist of domesticity attracted “Americans of all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic classes,” black women confronted the additional obstacles of racial segregation and discrimination when considering enlistment in the Women’s Army Corps.<sup>87</sup> Following World War II, black women worried that serving in a segregated peacetime WAC would perpetuate the military’s long history of prejudice and racism. While military service during the recent war provided some black women with a means toward upward mobility, by and large, African American Wacs were overlooked, overworked, and undervalued. Though the WAC training center at Fort Lee adopted desegregation efficiently in April 1950 and treated its black Wacs well, women of color in the postwar era could not ignore the poor treatment their predecessors experienced during World War II, and this likely deterred some from enlisting between 1948 and 1954.

In 1942, the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was “as leery of altering gender roles as it was racial boundaries.”<sup>88</sup> As such, the WAAC was inherently built upon racial segregation and prejudice in line with Army doctrine at the time. Dovey Johnson Roundtree

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<sup>84</sup> Chipman Interview, August 26, 2019.

<sup>85</sup> “Vital Statistics of the United States, 1951,” 78.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>87</sup> Eisenmann, *Higher Education for Women in Postwar America, 1945–1965*, 2.

<sup>88</sup> Bolzenius, *Glory in Their Spirit*, 4.

recalled, “[segregation was] enforced with an iron hand.”<sup>89</sup> The WAAC welcomed its first class of officers for training at Fort Des Moines, Iowa in 1942, but because of a ten percent quota placed on African American enlistment in the organization during the war, of the four-hundred-forty officer candidates selected to attend training, only forty were black. Dovey Johnson Roundtree was one.<sup>90</sup> While the WAAC officer candidates “marched, trained, and saluted together,” the forty black officers slept, ate, and took leisure in segregated spheres.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, even after the WAAC transitioned to the Women’s Army Corps in 1943, black women continued to serve and train in segregated conditions, were largely assigned to perform menial labor, and were denied overseas assignments during World War II.<sup>92</sup> Uninterested in continuing under this system of discrimination in any postwar service, black World War II veterans—male and female—and black activist groups like the National Council for Negro Women under its president, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, advocated for desegregation and equal opportunities in the military.

Dr. Bethune vocally supported racial justice in the military, and as America entered World War II, she was a pillar of strength and advocacy for the 6,500 black women who served. In a 1942 letter, Bethune’s protégé, Dovey Johnson Roundtree, wrote from Fort Des Moines to her “First Lady”: “a part of you is here to inspire and lead us on to the greater service. We shall not fail the pledge of faith we made to you and to each other.”<sup>93</sup> Dr. Bethune not only worked with WAAC/WAC director Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby to promote equality in the service, but Bethune

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<sup>89</sup> McCabe and Roundtree, *Justice Older Than the Law*, 49.

<sup>90</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 17. During World War II, the War Department stated that black women could not compose more than ten percent of the WAC, within the broader limitation that servicewomen in general could likewise not compose more than two percent of the entire Army.

<sup>91</sup> McCabe and Roundtree, *Justice Older Than the Law*, 52.

<sup>92</sup> While white and black officers trained together throughout the duration of World War II, because again, black women composed such a small portion of the officer corps, all basic recruits in the WAC lived and trained in segregated units.

<sup>93</sup> 1942 letter from Dovey Johnson Roundtree at Fort Des Moines, Iowa to Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, National Archive for Black Women’s History, Landover, MD.

also had First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's ear, who proved a great ally to Bethune's mission. Once the WAAC was created in 1942, Dr. Bethune hand-picked a "vanguard" of African Americans to "pave a way for black women in the military."<sup>94</sup> Roundtree recalled that "Dr. Bethune...insisted ...[that] black women must be granted not merely the right to enlist [in the WAAC] but also a place in the corps' first Officer Candidate School."<sup>95</sup> With the first black officer candidates in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in mind, Dr. Bethune "launched [her own] war" against "the principle of 'separate but equal'" during World War II.<sup>96</sup>

However, one of Dr. Bethune's greatest challenges during the war included convincing young black women in the United States to enlist in the Jim Crow Army. Despite experiencing hurtful and "heinous" discriminatory practices in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps at Fort Des Moines in 1942, Roundtree "discovered...a force greater than the Army's attempt to divide us. That was our common belief in the war."<sup>97</sup> How might one express these sentiments to service-eligible black women, both during World War II and after, and convince them to join the Women's Army Corps? Dr. Bethune assigned Roundtree the mission of embarking on a black recruitment crusade across the United States in November 1942.<sup>98</sup>

Even with America mobilized for war, conditions proved so discriminatory that Roundtree worried her class of black officers—the "First Forty"—would soon become the "Last Forty" because segregation in the WAAC deterred enlistment. Though she faced an uphill climb to recruit new black Waacs, Roundtree confidently "pitch[ed] a Jim Crow WAAC in the Deep South"<sup>99</sup>:

...Despite all I'd endured at Fort Des Moines...I would have chosen it again, because...I still believed in everything the WAAC stood for. I believed in the war

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<sup>94</sup> McCabe and Roundtree, *Justice Older Than the Law*, 48.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

effort, in the critical role of women in that effort, and in the right of blacks to fight alongside whites...That was what I told the crowds of girls and women...all over the South.<sup>100</sup>

Though Dovey Johnson Roundtree and the WAAC/WAC appealed to significant numbers of black women to join the Army during World War II, the black WAC contingent never came close to filling the ten percent quota. Still, black enlistments reached 4,040 in December 1944, equating to 4.5 percent of the entire Women's Army Corps.<sup>101</sup> By 1946, when much of the WAC was demobilized, black enlistment bottomed out and steadily decreased until 1949. In 1945, there were 3,849 black women in the Army; this rate fell to six-hundred-seventy-three in 1946; three-hundred-nineteen in 1947; and a lowly one-hundred-twenty-five in 1948.<sup>102</sup> Effectually, due to low enlistment, African Americans composed only a small portion of the WAC population at Fort Lee between 1948 and 1954, thus fostering an easier transition to integration in 1950.

However, service in the Women's Army Corps became more appealing to black women after July 26, 1948, when the most significant civil rights advancement at the time occurred: President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981. The new law demanded each of the armed services to desegregate their ranks "as rapidly as possible" and cease racially discriminatory policies and protocols.<sup>103</sup> The Women's Army Corps was subject to the new policy, but it took two years to implement at Fort Lee. However, the signing of Executive Order 9981 brought more black women to the WAC in 1949. After Truman's new order was signed, black enlistment rose to 7.17

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<sup>100</sup> McCabe and Roundtree, *Justice Older Than the Law*, 63.

<sup>101</sup> "Summary of Information on Negro Women Who Have Served or are Serving in the Women's Army Corps, 1942 – 1963, with Particular Reference to WAC Officers," Prepared by Division of Doctrine and Literature, United States Women's Army Corps School, October 1963, Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

<sup>102</sup> Morden, *The Women's Army Corps*, 415.

<sup>103</sup> "Freedom to Serve: Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Forces," A Report by the President's Committee, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1950), 1, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, Online Collection, N.D., Web, Accessed November 22, 2019, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/freedom-to-serve#1>.

percent of the WAC, or three-hundred-fifty-two African Americans out the WAC's overall strength of 4,909. In 1950, black women grew to 8.93 percent of the WAC, with six-hundred-forty-eight black servicewomen out of 7,259.<sup>104</sup> Despite the uptick in black enlistment, it took another year before the WAC training center at Fort Lee adopted desegregation.

Black enlistment continued to rise in 1950 and 1951 as Fort Lee created its "island of integration." Even though the numbers steadily increased beginning in 1950, one must bear in mind that relative to the entire strength of the Women's Army Corps, black women still maintained only a small fraction of the greater whole. As such, it was easier for them to integrate into the wider WAC population at Fort Lee. Between 1948 and 1954, as can be calculated in the graph below, the median black strength in the WAC was seven-hundred-ninety-one women within the greater median WAC total of 8,376 women. Therefore, during these critical postwar years, black women composed on average 9.4 percent of the overall Women's Army Corps strength.

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<sup>104</sup> Morden, *The Women's Army Corps*, 409, 415.



**Figure 1.** Women’s Army Corps Enlistment Strength, 1948–1954.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Overall WAC Strength (including commissioned and enlisted)</b>	<b>Black Strength (including commissioned and enlisted)</b>	<b>Black Percentage of Whole</b>
1948	5,352	125	2.34%
1949	4,909	352	7.17%
1950	7,259	648	8.93%
1951	11,932	1,046	8.77%
1952	11,456	1,332	11.63%
1953	9,924	1,169	11.78%
1954	7,803	869	11.14%

**Source.** *The Women’s Army Corps, 1945–1978* by Bettie Morden (1990), pp. 409, 415.

In addition to segregation, guaranteed overseas assignments remained a particular source of concern for black women about postwar enlistment. During World War II, black Wacs were almost entirely excluded from serving anywhere but in stateside locations. For the majority of the war and the majority of black women, the Army did not send black Wacs to assignments overseas unlike their white counterparts. Training at Fort Des Moines in 1944, black WAC Private First Class Thelma Lee O’Kelley, wrote to Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune expressing her frustration that black servicewomen were denied overseas service. O’Kelley appealed to Bethune: “This is what I’m getting at: as far as I know we don’t have the chance to go overseas; we are not requisitioned for to relieve our men over there. We all have the desire and the courage to be sent there.”<sup>105</sup>

Largely due to Bethune’s efforts, in 1945 the first and only unit of black Wacs to serve abroad during World War II reported to Birmingham, England. Under the command of Major Charity Adams Earley, the 6888<sup>th</sup> Central Postal Directory Battalion sorted millions of pieces of backed-up mail for soldiers and military personnel. This all-black unit demonstrated that African

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<sup>105</sup> Private Thelma Lee O’Kelley to Mary McLeod Bethune, Undated Letter 1944, Box 18, Folder 1, National Archive for Black Women’s History, Landover, MD.

American servicewomen could be of great use in a theatre of war. Despite their success, however, the War Department continued to discriminate against black servicewomen on the issue of overseas assignments after World War II ended.

When the Army began its first postwar recruitment and re-enlistment campaign in 1946, the War Department maintained its position from World War II that black women were not to serve abroad. On July 15, 1946, the Secretary of War's office declared in a statement that while "the re-entry program in the Women's Army Corps is open to Negro women who have been honorably discharged from the service...there is no current or foreseeable requirement for Negro Wacs in any overseas theater."<sup>106</sup> This directive endured as policy until March 1949. Betty Morden reports that as Fort Lee continued to welcome basic recruits and officer candidates, the Women's Army Corps was directed to "provide overseas training for all Wacs."<sup>107</sup> This change in policy is significant because with all training centralized in Fort Lee, overseas training was extended to all servicewomen regardless of race. The ability to travel abroad was a premier concern for prospective black recruits between 1946 and 1949, and while other factors played a role, exclusion from overseas deployment contributed to low black enlistment rates in the postwar years. Thus, the change in policy in 1949 proved a significant way of appealing to eligible African American WAC recruits. After 1950, black Wacs served on bases in Germany and Japan.

Though WAC overseas training extended to black women at Fort Lee beginning in 1949, the institution's overall segregationist policies persisted. Until April 1950, the Fort Lee WAC training center continued to send new black recruits directly to the segregated Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.<sup>108</sup> Fort Lee was home to four other companies (with a one-hundred-fifty-two-person

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<sup>106</sup> Untitled July 15, 1946 Statement from the Office of Secretary of War, Box 251, Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

<sup>107</sup> Morden, *The Women's Army Corps*, 81–82.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

capacity): A, C, D, and E. Yet, black women were streamlined into Company B and kept there until completing their training.<sup>109</sup> While President Truman's Executive Order 9981 was the first of its kind and for which the President received both praise and opposition, it took a long time for the new law to be implemented and enforced. Between July 1948 when the President signed Executive Order 9981 and April 1950 when the last black recruit was sent to Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, new black enlistees trained, served, lived, and took leisure at Fort Lee in completely segregated conditions.<sup>110</sup>



**Figure 2.** *Company B Mess Hall, 1949. Army Women's Museum.*

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<sup>109</sup> "History of the WAC Training Center, Box 251, Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 4.

<sup>110</sup> Witt, et. al, "*A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value*," 49.

When the first class of “complete Negro unit of Wacs” graduated from Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on February 2, 1949, sixty-two women matriculated.<sup>111</sup> “Representing 23 states and the District of Columbia,” these sixty-two black recruits had no interaction with the the one-hundred-eleven white and non-black basic recruits who graduated a month-and-a-half prior despite President Truman’s executive order. The first class of “Negro trainees” in Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion began basic at Fort Lee on November 29, 1948, and for the next ten weeks, the black women spent their entire time at Fort Lee in segregated training units, barracks, leisure areas and activities, and meals—four months after President Truman desegregated the armed forces with Executive Order 9981.<sup>112</sup>



**Figure 3.** *African American Wacs at Camp Lee, 1949.*  
*Army Women’s Museum.*

Racial discrimination and segregation continued in the Women’s Army Corps at Fort Lee with President Truman’s inaugural parade on January 20, 1949. It was the “largest and most spectacular of all Inaugural Parades ever held,” declared an official Army report.<sup>113</sup> The massive

<sup>111</sup> “First Negro WACs to Graduate at Camp Lee,” Press Release, National Military Establishment Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., February 2, 1949, “WACs at Camp Lee Scrapbook” Collection, 1949, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

<sup>112</sup> “First Negro WACs to Graduate at Camp Lee.”

<sup>113</sup> “History of the WAC Training Center, Camp Lee, Virginia, From 15 June 1948 to 24 January 1949,” Unpublished Army Internal Report, 1949, “WACs at Camp Lee Scrapbook” Collection, 1949, Box 251, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 19.

body of parade participants was also spectacularly white. The Army report noted that this marked the first occasion in which “members of the Women’s Army Corps...ha[d] the honor of marching” in an inaugural parade.<sup>114</sup> The Fort Lee training center selected sixteen women, both recruits and officers, from each of the five companies at the training center.<sup>115</sup> A total of eighty WAC representatives from Fort Lee marched in the Fifth Division of the parade line-up “follow[ing] the Army Ground Forces Band” through Washington, D.C. on that blistery January day.<sup>116</sup>

Despite their “splendid show,” the Women’s Army Corps parade contingent consisted entirely of white women, even though President Truman had mandated the racial desegregation of the armed forces six months previously. According to the Army report, the parade included Company B among the five WAC companies represented. Until early 1950, Company B of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was the segregated black company into which all new black recruits were placed upon arrival at Fort Lee. Based on the language of the report that the Fort Lee inaugural parade contingent was “composed of sixteen women from each company,” one might assume that black servicewomen would be included amongst the eighty marching Wacs.<sup>117</sup> However, photographs of the Wacs on parade show no black women amongst them. How could Company B be considered “represented” in the parade when there were no black Wacs present within five companies visible in the photographs?

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<sup>114</sup> “Inaugural Parade to Include First WAC Contingent,” *The Hopewell News*, January 17, 1949, “WACs at Camp Lee Scrapbook” Collection, 1949, Box 146, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee.

<sup>115</sup> “History of the WAC Training Center,” 19.

<sup>116</sup> “Inaugural Parade to Include First WAC Contingent,” *The Hopewell News*, January 17, 1949.

<sup>117</sup> “History of the WAC Training Center,” 19.





**Figure 4.** *Fort Lee WAC Contingent Marching in President Harry Truman's Inaugural Parade, January 1949. Army Women's Museum.*



**Figure 5.** *Fort Lee WAC Contingent Marching in President Harry Truman's Inaugural Parade, January 1949. Army Women's Museum.*

It is important to clarify that black women served only in Company B of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, though the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions at the Fort Lee WAC training center had Company B's of their own. The other two Company B's from 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions were presumably composed of white and non-black women, of which Asian Americans and Latinos were included. For the parade, those in charge of selecting Wacs to participate clearly chose white Company B Wacs from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and/or 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions, and not the black women of Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. The Women's Army Corps' conscious decision to maintain segregation by excluding black Wacs in the inaugural parade of 1949 violated President Truman's Executive Order 9981. Truman was not the same champion of civil rights to Army leadership as he was to the African American community. In fact, of all the military branches, the Army was the fiercest opponent to the President's order to desegregate.<sup>118</sup> Still, even though the Women's Army Corps ignored the new policy of desegregation at President Truman's inaugural parade in 1949, the Corps was soon to be one of the first branches to complete the process in April 1950.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the Women's Army Corps struggled to recruit and retain servicewomen between 1948 and 1954 due to a lack of permanent status within the armed forces. Enlistments continued to depreciate in the 1950s because of a shift in public opinion against women in the military and a commanding social magnetism towards domestic life. While these circumstances were detrimental to WAC enlistments at the time, the Army's continued practice of segregation and discrimination proved the largest detriment to black recruitment.

Despite all the reasons which deterred most Americans from considering postwar service in the Women's Army Corps, ultimately, the several thousand women enlisted in the WAC

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<sup>118</sup> Richard Dalfiume, "The Fahy Committee and Desegregation of the Armed Forces," *The Historian*, Vol. 31, No. 1, (November, 1968) 2.

between 1948 and 1954 found reasons compelling enough to join. For the WAC's shortcomings at mid-century, Army service did offer benefits. Most prominently, service offered funding for college and higher education through the G.I. Bill; permitted young women opportunities to leave home, learn new skills, and develop a sense of independence; military service also provided women opportunities to travel not only the continental United States, but frequently, overseas, too. Still for other women, enlisting in the Army provided accommodations and security while they transitioned from high school to the workforce or college; additionally, enlisting in the Army served simply as something to fill their time.

The women interviewed for this project subscribed to the reasons listed above in their decision to enlist in the WAC between 1948 and 1954. Joyce Jackson Button “found out that if I went into the service I would qualify for educational help, money for college. So that was my motivation.”<sup>119</sup> Kay Turner Greczkowski noted that, “When I graduated from high school, I didn't really know what I wanted to do...so the Women's Army Corps was very attractive.”<sup>120</sup> Florence Saunders Farley joined the service in 1951 after learning that with having a college degree she could enter the WAC as an officer and then earn money to attend graduate school.<sup>121</sup> Ramona Vincilione Chipman decided that in the face of being overlooked for positions in favor of men in civilian life, that “the Army at that point was the only equal opportunity place around. You joined the Army and you took a lot of tests and you were able to have a job depending on your abilities and that appealed to me. So that's why I went in the Army in the first place.”<sup>122</sup> Enlisting in the WAC, though socially disagreeable at the time, did not repel every young woman, and in fact,

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<sup>119</sup> Button Oral History, August 20, 2019.

<sup>120</sup> Greczkowski Oral History, September 22, 2019.

<sup>121</sup> Farley Oral History, October 1, 2019.

<sup>122</sup> Chipman Oral History, August 26, 2019.



those who served and trained at Fort Lee came out the other side of their service having largely enjoyed the experience.

While both women's motives for either disregarding or enlisting in the WAC and also the organization's motives behind desegregation at Fort Lee in 1950 are more clear, the accuracy of the 1951 black press articles which described the base as "an island of integration in an otherwise sea of segregation" remains to be examined. While the white servicewomen at Fort Lee were tolerant and amenable to desegregation in April 1950, their actions were not necessarily motivated by any moral effort to promote racial equality, but rather due to the practical reality that not enough black women existed on base to justify segregated units. Though desegregation was the official military policy, the WAC simply saw the transition as logical and pragmatic. Despite this, however, the enlisted women and officers—as oral history demonstrates in the following chapter—embraced Executive Order 9981 and fostered a tolerant and peaceful community at Fort Lee in which to train and live in the early 1950s.

*Chapter 2 | Open Bay Barracks: Life on the Ground at Fort Lee, 1948–1954*

“Through the portals of the Women’s Army Corps Training Center at Fort Lee, Virginia, pass young women from all walks of life, from all parts of the United States. All are volunteer trainees for the serious business of national defense.”<sup>123</sup> –Lieutenant Colonel Ruby E. Herman, WAC Commanding Officer, Fort Lee (1951)

Executive Order 9981 alone did not make the Fort Lee Women’s Army Corps training center an “island of integration in an otherwise sea of segregation,” as the Baltimore *Afro-American* described in 1951.<sup>124</sup> This phrase connotes both a physical space and a culture. Given the South’s Jim Crow status in the early 1950s, this solitary desegregated Army base in Petersburg, Virginia was a physical anomaly. However, a term like “island” also conjures sentiments of peace and remoteness. In examining the process of desegregation of basic training at Fort Lee starting in 1950, oral histories from racially diverse subjects with firsthand knowledge revealed that the WAC recruits maintained peaceful and tolerant racial attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, the servicewomen who trained at Fort Lee during this time remain vital actors in fostering an amicable environment in which to train and live. An accurate characterization, an island of integration formed at the Fort Lee Women’s Army Corps training center not only in a physical sense via Executive Order 9981, but also in a cultural sense through the shared experiences between WAC recruits as they progressed through the daily routines of basic training.

While a top-down policy like President Truman’s Executive Order 9981 can tell one how to behave, laws cannot dictate how to think, and nor was the Order intended to do so. Florence Saunders Farley, an African American Wac who grew up in the Jim Crow South, commented that

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<sup>123</sup> “The Information Section: Women’s Army Corps Trains at Fort Lee,” Lt. Col. Ruby E. Herman, WAC Commanding Officer (1951), Box 260, 228-01, Permanent, WHC-385, Fort Lee, General Orders (1948 – 53), Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

<sup>124</sup> “WAC Center Real Model: Stands out as Good Example of Integration,” *Afro-American*, August 4, 1951, “WACs at Camp Lee,” Box A151, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

“nobody was trying to change anybody’s heart, or thinking, [but simply], ‘break down those illegal laws, those unjust laws’.”<sup>125</sup> By 1948, some leaders in the armed forces recognized the imminent nature and pragmatic necessity of desegregation, but rarely promoted its moral value. In her 2012 work, *In The Shadow of the Greatest Generation: The Americans Who Fought in the Korean War*, Dr. Melinda L. Pash argues that basic training “existed only to create competent service members, not to alter prevailing societal attitudes or to effect social change.”<sup>126</sup> In putting black and white recruits together, the Women’s Army Corps training center at Fort Lee was simply implementing President Truman’s executive order, not trying to enlighten anyone’s conscience or expand the military’s moral fabric. Moreover, although President Truman and Women’s Army Corps Director Colonel Mary Hallaren mandated the monumental policy change of military desegregation, they did not truly implement the new law in its earliest days. Rather, the credit belongs to the one thousand WAC recruits and officers training at Fort Lee between 1948 and 1950.

Basic training was a multi-faceted and binding experience for those who participated, especially as the Women’s Army Corps underwent the critical transformation from segregated to desegregated in 1950. Actions as mundane as helping to straighten one’s bed, or as regimented as marching in formation, and every shared experience in between, helped break down the military’s color barrier.<sup>127</sup> Therefore, there is no better place in which to assess the effects and process of desegregation than at the basic training level. Only through examining the camaraderie and relations amongst basic recruits can one truly observe how deeply desegregation was felt on a one-to-one basis. Executive Order 9981 mandated changed behavior and protocol; the policy, however,

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<sup>125</sup> Farley Interview, October 1, 2019.

<sup>126</sup> Pash, *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 82.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

did more than affect the operational façade of the WAC by permeating deeper levels between the young servicewomen training at Fort Lee.

By examining the components of WAC basic training, including but not limited to, practical and classroom instruction, life in the barracks, and off-duty recreation, this chapter seeks to analyze the racial attitudes and culture amongst the recruits and officers at the Fort Lee WAC training center in the early 1950s. Investigating a specific culture within the confines of a precise timeframe can be a difficult task even with the best of literature available; to attempt this challenge with few applicable sources may be a fool's errand. However, the methodological backbone of this chapter is rooted in oral history interviews with Women's Army Corps veterans who trained at Fort Lee between 1948 and 1954. Combining oral history from Fort Lee Wacs with official base reports, memorandum, and photographs, chapter two explores the elements of basic training with desegregation in mind.

Despite President Truman's signing of Executive Order 9981 in July 1948, white leadership in the Women's Army Corps remained in league with the male Army and its staunch opposition against the President's order. As such, when the WAC training center officially opened at Fort Lee on October 4 of that year, "the first Negro trainees to enter the Regular Army" were sent directly to the segregated Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.<sup>128</sup> As noted in chapter one, Fort Lee maintained five basic training companies at this time. In addition to Company B, there was Company, A, C, D, and E, all of which "trained only white women."<sup>129</sup> Therefore, black recruits entered WAC basic training at Fort Lee "during every fifth increment," whereas white women arrived at the training center much more frequently.<sup>130</sup> Simply through composing one-fifth of the

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<sup>128</sup> "First Negro WACS to Graduate at Camp Lee," February 2, 1949, Department of the Army Press Release, Box 146, Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 1.

<sup>129</sup> Morden, *The Women's Army Corps*, 86.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

basic training companies, black women began their journeys at Fort Lee vastly outnumbered by their white counterparts.

Following its activation on September 22, 1948 and the subsequent official opening of the WAC training center a couple of weeks later, Company B received its first black recruits in mid-November.<sup>131</sup> The sixty-two women in the inaugural Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion began their eight weeks and three-hundred-twenty hours of basic training under the command of Captain Bernice Gaines Hughes.<sup>132</sup> As per standard military structure, Captain Hughes served as the “company overhead,” with the assistance of “five officers and two cadre” per platoon.<sup>133</sup> Segregated from the rest of the WAC recruits, except when on camp-wide parades, this first class of sixty-two black Regular Army Wacs graduated basic training at Fort Lee on February 2, 1949. Only six went on to become officers.<sup>134</sup> The Women’s Army Corps continued segregation for another fourteen months. The last class of black Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion recruits graduated Fort Lee in April 1950, at which time, the base’s policy changed. Henceforth, incoming recruits were assigned to whatever company needed filling, regardless of race or color.<sup>135</sup> While integration distributed black recruits across the companies after April 1950, low enlistment rates at mid-century—as explored in chapter one—continued to result in a disproportionate black-to-white ratio in the WAC.

Four of the Women’s Army Corps veterans interviewed for this project attended Fort Lee before desegregation took place, and they recalled the strict separation between black and white recruits during basic training. Doris L. Caldwell, who went on to hold a distinguished career in the Army, completed her basic training at Fort Lee in late 1948 through early 1949. When asked about

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<sup>131</sup> “History of the WAC Training Center, Camp Lee, Virginia, From 15 June 1948 to 24 January 1949,” Internal Army Report, Box 251, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 4.

<sup>132</sup> “History of the WAC Training Center,” 5.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>134</sup> “First Negro WACS to Graduate at Camp Lee,” February 2, 1949, Department of the Army Press Release, Box 146, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 1.

<sup>135</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 86.

African Americans on base, Doris, a white Wac from Sacramento, California, remarked, “we were not allowed to talk to them.” The black recruits were kept entirely separate from the rest of the young women. Coming from the West Coast where legal segregation did not exist, Doris was unfamiliar with the Army’s policies towards black servicewomen and found having separate mess halls, bathrooms, classrooms, and recreational facilities at Fort Lee peculiar. Despite her inability to associate with black recruits during her eight weeks in basic training, Doris fondly remembered that “the most gorgeous music” came from the Company B barracks “across the field” from her own Company C in the evenings.<sup>136</sup> Moreover, Kathleen “Kay” Turner Greczkowski, a young white WAC recruit from Bowdoinham, Maine arrived at Fort Lee in January 1950, just a few months before the base desegregated in April. She recalled that the black recruits lived

next door to us but the distance was enough that you never really saw each other, but we could see there was someone standing out there in front of the barracks. We would wave to them, but there was no integration. We didn’t mix...When we happened to be outside at the same time we would wave to the black girls. They would timidly wave back, but would never initiate the exchange of greetings. Understandable for the times.<sup>137</sup>

Doris remained in the Women’s Army Corps through 1952 and then rejoined in 1956, thus witnessing the WAC’s transition to desegregated training and service. Though she felt that the women “integrated beautifully” in the early 1950s, Doris also believed that “there weren’t enough blacks to separate them,” thus expediting the desegregation process.<sup>138</sup> Ramona Vincilione Chipman, of Novato, California, completed Officer Candidate School at Fort Lee in April 1950 and she agreed that the WAC efficiently desegregated basic training that same month because the

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<sup>136</sup> Doris Caldwell Interview with Meika Downey, August 15, 2019; Naddaff Interview with Meika Downey, September 13, 2019.

<sup>137</sup> Greczkowski Interview, September 22, 2019 and Email Correspondence, August 11, 2019.

<sup>138</sup> Caldwell Interview, August 15, 2019.

small number of black recruits made segregated units impractical. Ramona noted, “there weren’t very many [black women], I remember that.”<sup>139</sup>

Clara Chapala, like many, looked forward to the day she left for Fort Lee, and she recounted that “basic training was an opportunity for me to meet and interact with [diverse] women...from all over the U.S. and Hawaii.”<sup>140</sup> In basic training, as multiple oral history accounts noted, recruits “didn’t visit between companies...we only operated within [our own].”<sup>141</sup> As such, throughout the eight weeks of training, the young recruits spent the vast majority of their time with the same people and thus built meaningful relationships despite one’s hue or origin.<sup>142</sup> Arriving at Fort Lee as a basic recruit meant entering what would become an intimate community with women from a variety of backgrounds and learning to coexist with each other in support of a joint cause. In large part, as oral histories revealed, there was a larger purpose at stake than being concerned about the skin color of the girl standing next to you.

Furthermore, simply from their status as volunteers, those who joined the armed forces inherently abandoned any pre-conceived notions or opinions they may have held, and accepted the

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<sup>139</sup> Chipman, August 26, 2019.

<sup>140</sup> Chapala, “A WAC Story,” 2.

<sup>141</sup> Button Interview, August 20, 2019.

<sup>142</sup> The number of weeks in WAC basic training altered as America transitioned from peacetime in 1948-49, to mobilization for Korea in 1950. The earliest groups of recruits to train in the Women’s Army Corps at Camp Lee after the WAC gained Regular status in June 1948, attended basic training for thirteen weeks. Afterwards, the new Wacs were assigned to their Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) training schools for usually an eight-week course. (MOS were numerous in scope and skill. Determined by one’s aptitudes, prior knowledge or experience, and preference, Wacs could be assigned to clerk typist school, dental or medical technician school, telecommunications, cooking and baking, and so on). In the years immediately following World War II, while the Army was eager to build up its female reserve strength, there was not an urgent need to expedite WAC basic training. As such, Camp Lee afforded to take thirteen weeks to craft its recruits. However, by September 1950, the demand changed and with an exodus of men needed in the Korean Theatre, there likewise was a new need for servicewomen, too. Subsequently, “to get the new troops where they were needed as quickly as possible, the Army cut basic training for both men and women to just eight weeks.” While women received thirteen weeks previously for basic training, men had been given sixteen, and now, the Army had to produce quality and field-ready servicemen and women in half the time. In added stress for the Women’s Army Corps, enlistment rates remained insufficient and a source of tension for the Army. Witt, et. al., “*A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value*,” 92.

conditions of their service, which in the case of the WAC at Fort Lee, meant desegregation. Florence Saunders Farley noted that when “the military lays down the law, you follow it.”<sup>143</sup> Therefore, simply adjusting to desegregation was the only option, even for those who disagreed with the policy. As Melinda L. Pash acutely described, “regardless of what one might have preferred, from the moment of swearing in, recruits and inductees had no alternative but to do things the military way—even if that meant bunking, eating, or sweating with someone of a different color.”<sup>144</sup> Not only did the women abide by the new law, but many of the recruits, such as those featured in this study, readily acknowledged and embraced desegregation.

The majority of white women who provided oral histories for this project had few or no interactions with segregation or southern Jim Crow laws prior to arriving at Fort Lee. Therefore, they felt it perfectly normal to serve and live with black women. This seeming acceptance of integration, even for those who may have held private doubts, helped to foster a peaceful and tolerant community at the WAC training center. Joyce Jackson Button, a white woman from Kenosha, Wisconsin reflected upon desegregation at Fort Lee:

I didn't know anybody that was upset about [integration]. I didn't know anybody that made a fuss about it. [They were] girls...learning the same things we were learning and if they needed help, we helped. If they were doing better, we asked help from them. That was it...We entered the Army to be of service, [not to make a spectacle in challenging desegregation].<sup>145</sup>

Joyce's recollection conveys that for the most part, within the rigors and bonds of basic training, the young women did not object to the Corps' policy. In this, these women were all working towards contributing to the success and positive representation of the Women's Army Corps, and

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<sup>143</sup> Farley Interview, October 1, 2019.

<sup>144</sup> Pash, *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 83.

<sup>145</sup> Button Interview, August 20, 2019.



for the first time in the military, the Fort Lee Wacs demonstrated that it was okay to rely on and learn from each other, regardless of race.

While the WAC training center came to be characterized as an island of integration in 1951, Florence emphasized that such a designation did not “imply...everybody was hugging and kissing” all the time. Just because “it was against the law to do what you used to do,” meaning enforce segregation, did not equate to prejudice and discrimination being altogether eliminated from the Women’s Army Corps.<sup>146</sup> When racial unrest or tension occurred amongst the ranks—and, although Florence did not recall a specific example, there surely were such instances—“it would be dealt with,” added Joyce. “Nobody’s forcing you to have a friendship with anyone else, [but] we’re all together in this, we are all soldiers.”<sup>147</sup>

Furthermore, WAC Director Colonel Mary Hallaren responded to a questionnaire interview in 1979 which included a query about black servicewomen and discrimination at Fort Lee during her tenure as director between 1948 and 1953. When asked whether she had “observe[ed] any tendenc[ies]...of prejudice against black officers and enlisted women,” Hallaren responded: “If there were such prejudices, it was well concealed. It would not have been tolerated.”<sup>148</sup> Though Hallaren did not go on to describe the consequence for acts of racial discrimination in the WAC, her point of such behavior being “well concealed” is poignant. As soon as racial lines were eliminated at Fort Lee in April 1950, every new recruit and officer would have been aware of the policy and knew that “acting upon any [previously held] prejudices” would

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<sup>146</sup> Farley Interview, October 1, 2019.

<sup>147</sup> Button Interview, August 20, 2019.

<sup>148</sup> Mary Hallaren, Interview March 29 1979, Mary Hallaren Speeches, Box 2F9, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 13.

be fruitless.<sup>149</sup> In her oral history interview, Florence remarked that to segregate and discriminate in the WAC

was against the law. *You can't do it here. If you do it here it's illegal.* And [segregation laws] were broken down, so it *was* an island of integration, because you dare not openly try to segregate. So all the overt segregation was over. Now, what people did on a one-to-one basis...[was] just like people break[ing] other kind of laws...they're breaking laws.<sup>150</sup>

However, if any one-to-one discrimination took place, and if it was well-concealed as Colonel Hallaren hypothesized, rooting out such injustices would likely have been difficult to do. The WAC veterans interviewed for this project never witnessed or experienced any explicit discrimination or segregation at Fort Lee after 1950.

Theoretically, experiencing desegregated basic training with a diverse group of women would have aided the recruits' development, both in racial tolerance and as soldiers.

Because the WAC desired well-trained servicewomen ready to assist in whatever the military may need, whether at home or abroad, one might assume that being able to closely interact with individuals different than oneself would prove a useful competency. With no power to combat integration, the women focused their efforts on becoming well-trained Wacs. By choosing to be—at the very least—civil with one another regardless of race, trainees could operate more effectively as a unit versus compromising efficiency by openly challenging Executive Order 9981. As such, the Fort Lee Wacs—like those interviewed for this project—established a positive and tolerant racial culture in the Women's Army Corps and demonstrated the effectiveness of integration.

Furthermore, resisting segregation would have violated the WAC's high standard of deportment on and off duty. Women's Army Corps historian Bettie Morden insisted that “before they left the training center, the newly enlisted women understood ...that their performance in the

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<sup>149</sup> Pash, *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 83.

<sup>150</sup> Farley Interview, October 1, 2019.

service would be highly visible. To disgrace themselves through poor deportment meant disgracing the platoon sergeants and officers who had given them their initial training.”<sup>151</sup> The Women’s Army Corps did not tolerate poor decorum towards the other recruits or officers, especially on the basis of race, because of, if for no other reason, the negative impression such behavior would give of the WAC.

The Women’s Army Corps practiced a short, yet standardized process for enlistment and arrival at the Fort Lee training center. Doris Caldwell commented that she took three trips to the local recruiting office before departing for the East Coast on December 26, 1948. Most young women who enlisted visited the recruitment office first to express interest and complete paperwork; returned a second time to take the entrance test and satisfy any supplemental requirements; followed by a third and final visit in which to be sworn in to the Women’s Army Corps. “When you came to take your oath, you came with a suitcase” and left that very afternoon. In Doris’ case, she bid farewell to her family in Sacramento, boarded a train, and arrived in Petersburg, Virginia five days later on New Year’s Eve, 1948.<sup>152</sup>

When considering Army basic training, one often invokes stereotypical images of waking up to reveille bugle horns early in the morning, scrubbing barracks floors with tiny toothbrushes, scrambling over obstacle courses, and taking orders from bellicose drill sergeants. While the Fort Lee recruits experienced some of these quintessential characteristics of basic training and boot camp, the Women’s Army Corps aimed to “prepare...the women graduates of the WAC Training Center...to serve their nation in the varied tasks of national defense.”<sup>153</sup> To that end, recruits were

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<sup>151</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 83.

<sup>152</sup> Doris Caldwell Interview with Meika Downey, January 16, 2020.

<sup>153</sup> “The Information Section: Women’s Army Corps Trains at Fort Lee,” Lt. Col. Ruby E. Herman, WAC Commanding Officer, Women’s Army Corps Training Center, Fort Lee, Virginia (1951), Box 260, 228-01, Permanent, WHC-385, Fort Lee, General Orders (1948 – 53), Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

given instruction in a wide variety of subjects and skills, which Morden asserts “the women had no trouble learning.” Morden added, however, that “becoming accustomed to Army life was another matter.”<sup>154</sup>

A 1954 Women’s Army Corps orientation pamphlet explained that “Army life beg[an] the moment of [one’s] arrival at the WAC Center,” and each young woman who crossed Fort Lee’s threshold drew comfort from the fact that everyone was beginning from the same place, regardless of race or background.<sup>155</sup> Pash argues that “from that point forward, it no longer mattered who or what one had been in civilian life—male or female, white or black, rich or poor, educated or unschooled. The only thing that mattered was that trainees learned to be homogenous...disciplined, and prepared...for duty.”<sup>156</sup> In this, no one recruit began her journey at Fort Lee at a higher station than another, even during the days of segregated training at Fort Lee from October 1948 to April 1950.

Before getting to know one another more personally, the young women had only their rookie status in common—a status that easily crossed the color line. “Basic training oriented Wacs to the Army and their place in it,” said Doris; and in her oral history, she emphasized that upon arrival to Fort Lee, their place was as recruits.<sup>157</sup> Again, for the first time in the Women’s Army Corps, black and white recruits progressed through the rigidities of basic training in pursuit of a common goal: graduating as privates. “We did not wear the gold buttons of the uniforms; we had to wear plastic buttons,” recalled Doris. “When we graduated, we became Privates, [but] we had

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<sup>154</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 8.

<sup>155</sup> “WAC Center Mission,” Box 260, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 1.

<sup>156</sup> Pash, *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 56.

<sup>157</sup> Witt, et. al., “*A Defense Weapon Known to be of Value*,” 40.

to earn [those gold buttons].”<sup>158</sup> The shared experiences of earning their gold buttons promoted a degree of unity amongst the recruits despite one’s race.

Arriving at Fort Lee in the daytime in late April 1954, Clara Chapala, a first-generation Mexican-American from Detroit, Michigan entered her barracks only to be “disappointed that there weren’t many other people there.” A mere eighteen years old, Clara recalled that as she sat alone in her barracks that day, she felt anxious but “positive or expectant that it was going to be a good experience and curious to see” who she would meet. Other young women soon trickled into Clara’s Company C, Second Platoon barracks, and she quickly formed a “swell” nucleus of friends composed of a Native American, Chinese-Hawaiian, Puerto Rican, and two black “gals” with whom she spent much of her time on and off-duty. Clara credited her diverse Detroit upbringing for her effortless transition to living and training with the most varied group of women she had ever met. “I had no reservations about making friends with somebody. If they invited me in, in a sense, you know, ‘hello, how are you?’ ...it was just a natural thing.”<sup>159</sup>

Clara’s daytime arrival at Fort Lee in 1954 was more the exception than the rule, as most trainees “approached the camp well after dark.”<sup>160</sup> Such was the case for Kay Turner Greczkowski, who referred to her arrival at Fort Lee in January 1950 as “a little spooky”:

I had a companion. Another girl and I took the trip together; she was from Portland. I didn’t know her but we became friends on the way. And so there were two of us and they put us on an evening train. We got off at Petersburg and it was after dark...We were met by a woman in fatigues with a big Army truck and she apologized that it was the only vehicle she could get from the motor pool, but we had to scramble up into the back with our suitcases and ride to Fort Lee...She had to leave us in an empty barracks because there were still girls coming in. The other buildings apparently were filled up and there was no more room, so they had to start another building. So we were the only two in that building that night.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Caldwell Interview, January 16, 2020.

<sup>159</sup> Chapala Interview, September 29, 2019.

<sup>160</sup> Pash, *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 57.

<sup>161</sup> Greczkowski Interview, September 22, 2019.

Imaginably, being alone in the Fort Lee barracks at any time of day, let alone after dark, would be disconcerting for the buildings' poor and haphazard condition.

In addition to passing the Women's Armed Services Integration Act in 1948 (which made the Women's Army Corps a permanent branch of the military), Congress also designated Fort Lee as the new WAC headquarters. However, since the end of World War II, Fort Lee had not been used, and much of the camp—particularly the areas destined to become the Women's Army Corps training center—had fallen into disrepair. Though WAC Director Colonel Hallaren found Fort Lee's conditions “discouraging,” she determined to revive the base and make the Fort Lee WAC training center “a model for future centers.” The Women's Army Corps training center during World War II at Fort Des Moines, Iowa had not been luxurious, but at least the structures in which the women trained and lived were not contaminated with “sulphurous smoke from a nearby chemical plant” like the buildings at Fort Lee. Layers of filth permeated the “dilapidated... uninsulated, unfinished buildings,” surrounded by “a wilderness of weeds.” Under Colonel Hallaren, the officers who would be training the new WAC recruits in a matter of weeks also had the responsibility of the “back-breaking task of cleaning the buildings and the grounds.”<sup>162</sup> Still, a notable feature of the training center, which would go on to be an important aspect of desegregated basic training, were the open bay barracks.

The barracks represented some of the most intimate experiences one had during basic training, and after desegregation took place at Fort Lee in April 1950, life in the barracks provided numerous opportunities for “close contact” between the races.<sup>163</sup> “Open bay barracks” simply refers to a large building with an open floor plan in which thirty or forty “army cots, footlockers, and steel wall lockers” existed in straight rows, with a couple of enclosed rooms in the back of the

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<sup>162</sup> Morden, *The Women's Army Corps*, 73, 76–77.

<sup>163</sup> Pash, *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 84–85.

barracks for officers.<sup>164</sup> These barracks afforded the WAC recruits no privacy and only a couple of feet between each bed. In such close quarters, the young women really had only two options when assigned beds next to women of a different color; they could simply ignore said person and only be civil when required, or in an effort to make every aspect of basic training a positive one, get to know those around them—regardless of race.

Mary Ann Smith Harrington, a white recruit from McKeesport, Pennsylvania, remembered the open barracks when she arrived for basic training at Fort Lee in July 1950, three months after the WAC desegregated. Mary Ann remembered that there “were quite a few black recruits in our company” with whom she made “good friends.” In her Company C Fourth Platoon barracks, Mary Ann recalled that she had “one black friend to my right and a white friend to my left. Just friends helping each other get through a pretty strenuous thirteen weeks.”<sup>165</sup> With enduring such a regimented lifestyle in the military, having time to rest and relax in one’s barracks was very important, and because one was surrounded by the same people day and night, many women did not see the point in making that valuable time a negative or stressful situation on account of race. Multiple oral histories remarked how most friendships were forged in the barracks during off-duty hours, including interracial friendships, too. Florence recalled that a white WAC officer in her company in 1952 was her “best friend.” While in the world of Jim Crow, whites and blacks “weren’t together, but being at Fort Lee, being a soldier, you gravitated towards people you wanted to. That’s something else segregation brought on; you didn’t have to be black to have a black friend. You just had a friend because you had a friend. And that’s the way [Liz] and I were.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 76.

<sup>165</sup> Harrington Email Correspondence, August 17, 2019.

<sup>166</sup> Farley Interview, October 1, 2019.

Furthermore, some recruits' most defining memories from basic training at Fort Lee took place in the barracks. Joyce Jackson Button, who trained at Fort Lee in 1951 after the Women's Army Corps desegregated, recalled that "the only real excitement occurred in the barracks":

We were in old barracks, they were wooden barracks, and one side in the back was an old furnace room. And opposite that was the bathroom area and my bunk aligned on the side of the barracks where the furnace was in the back. And we found out that one of the girls went right up close to it and she said, 'There's a knot hole that goes right into the furnace room and there's somebody looking at us!' So we reported it to our sergeant and they investigated it and sure enough they had assigned men – I don't know where they were from – but they were assigned and one of their duties was to keep the furnace stoked with coal and the guy was peeking at us through the hole!<sup>167</sup>

Indeed, Fort Lee housed not only the Women's Army Corps recruits, but served as the Quartermaster School for the entire Army, meaning thousands of men also trained on the base.

While the men and women rarely interacted during basic training, as Joyce's memory reveals, various instances of overlap existed between the WAC and the Quartermaster.

The new recruits soon "developed a sense of individual responsibility and an understanding of their obligations as servicewomen."<sup>168</sup> Mary Ann characterized her arrival at Fort Lee as a "whirlwind of activity" as each new batch of recruits went



**Figure 6.** *WAC recruits leave the Quartermaster in summer uniforms, 1953. Army Women's Museum.*

<sup>167</sup> Button Interview, August 20, 2019.

<sup>168</sup> "The Information Section: Women's Army Corps Trains at Fort Lee," Lt. Col. Ruby E. Herman, WAC Commanding Officer, Women's Army Corps Training Center, Fort Lee, Virginia (1951), Box 260, 228-01, Permanent, WHC-385, Fort Lee, General Orders (1948-53), Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, VA.



through processing and indoctrination.<sup>169</sup> The Women’s Army Corps, like any other military organization, valued homogeneity, and the first step to dismantling individuality was through dress and physical appearance.<sup>170</sup> For Mary Ann, and the other new recruits, indoctrination began at the base beauty parlor. “I was escorted to a beauty salon to have my hair cut. It was too far down on the back of my neck,” she recalled. The Quartermaster then outfitted the young women in their WAC uniforms. “After breakfast” on the second day, Clara Chapala remarked, “we went to the Quartermaster [where] we were measured and issued a pile of clothes...we were issued a summer-like dress that had a stripes, and I think it was a fabric that was a little bit crinkly...we were issued boots, dress shoes...socks and underwear; everything you needed.”<sup>171</sup> After the recruits received their haircuts and uniforms, they then underwent a series of inoculations. Ethel Barnes Naddaff from Walpole, Massachusetts noted that, “We’d pass in a line between two chaps and get stuck in both arms at the same time. I did that pretty well, [but] some others ended up on the ground in a faint.”<sup>172</sup>



**Figure 7.** *New recruits receive inoculations upon arrival to Fort Lee, 1953. Army Women’s Museum.*

Clara noted that recruits learned to march right away on the first day of training. “We began to get in formation when we went to meals...and then we would break to get in a single line to go

<sup>169</sup> Harrington Email Correspondence, August 20, 2019.

<sup>170</sup> Pash, *In The Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 55.

<sup>171</sup> Chapala Interview, October 2, 2019.

<sup>172</sup> Ethel Barnes Naddaff Correspondence to Meika Downey, September 13, 2019, 1.

into the mess hall. We marched every day.”<sup>173</sup> Traveling to and from activities and lessons was an important step in learning to operate cohesively with one’s platoon. While Clara took well to marching, Joyce jokingly recalled that not everyone succeeded in marching with their platoon:

We had one girl in our platoon, and I do remember her because she was from Canada and we figured that’s what her problem was. She could never tell her left from her right. I mean she was totally confused. We tried putting a chalk mark on her left foot. We even tried putting a pebble in her left shoe. She could not identify left and right. They’d say left and she’d put her right foot forward.<sup>174</sup>

More than just a humorous anecdote, Joyce’s memory illustrates how all the women worked together for the success of their platoon, company, and the Corps as whole.



**Figure 8.** *Wacs marching at Fort Lee, 1952. Army Women’s Museum.*

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<sup>173</sup> Chapala Interview, October 2, 2019.

<sup>174</sup> Button Interview, August 20, 2019.

The Women's Army Corps maintained a rigid basic training system in which recruits had to complete three-hundred-twenty hours of theoretical and practical instruction.<sup>175</sup> Ethel remembered that “the classes were sometimes interesting, often dull, as we learned how the Army functioned.”<sup>176</sup> An internal Army report on the WAC training center in 1949 detailed the many categories of



**Figure 9.** *Classroom Instruction in Map Reading.* Army Women's Museum.

training. The bulk of a recruit's required hours were spent in “physical training and athletics” (forty hours), “maintenance of clothing, equipment, and quarters” (forty hours), and “dismounted drill” (thirty-two hours). In addition, WAC recruits also partook in more niche instruction such as “ceremonies and parades,” “map reading,” “military law” and “internal guard duty.”<sup>177</sup> Joyce recalled that guard duty meant one had to:

walk the perimeter [of the training center] at night with rifle. If anybody approached you, you had to say ‘Halt! Who goes there?’ They sent people out to test you! And we didn't have any ammunition or anything, so they weren't afraid we were going to shoot anybody. When [you had guard duty], you went out by yourself...and it was dark! And you had a certain length of time; maybe an hour? I can't remember exactly. We [then] had to come in and wake up the person that was supposed to take your place.<sup>178</sup>

<sup>175</sup> “History of the WAC Training Center, Camp Lee, Virginia, From 15 June 1948 – 24 January 1949,” Unpublished Internal Army Report, 1949, Box 251, Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 5.

<sup>176</sup> Ethel Barnes Naddaff Correspondence with Meika Downey, September 13, 2019, 1.

<sup>177</sup> “History of the WAC Training Center,” 5.

<sup>178</sup> Button Interview, August 20, 2019.



**Figure 10.** *Platoon Calisthenics, summer 1953. Army Women's Museum.*

In addition to enforcing desegregated barracks, Women's Army Corps basic training presented the young recruits with a variety of new and foreign experiences which veterans looked back upon fondly.

Developing homogenous bonds with those with whom one served was just as important as learning specific drills and instruction. Therefore, unlike guard duty, in which recruits performed the task individually, much of the Women's Army Corps basic training was facilitated in platoons, usually equating twenty-five or thirty women in a group. Company platoons traveled to and completed each of their lessons and activities together throughout the day. "We had to do everything together," recalled Kay Turner Greczkowski, "but we had a great spirit de corps."<sup>179</sup> The training center planned each minute of a recruit's day beginning at 6:25 a.m., and concluding with dinner at 6:00 p.m. and taps at 11:00.<sup>180</sup> During basic training, the intervening hours included calisthenics and physical exercising, military courtesy and custom, WAC heritage and achievements, and marching, amongst other courses.

<sup>179</sup> Greczkowski Interview, September 22, 2019.

<sup>180</sup> "Goals of the WAC Training Center, Fort Lee, Virginia," Box 260, 228-01 Permanent, WHC-385, Fort Lee General Orders (1948-53), Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 2-3.



After completing officer training in 1952, First Lieutenant Florence Saunders Farley became the first black basic training officer at Fort Lee. Florence looked back on her experiences in her own officers training and as a training officer for new recruits, fondly. At twenty-two years old, Florence had at least one hundred WAC recruits under her command every eight weeks as companies arrived and completed their training. When asked about the demographic of the recruits she trained,



**Figure 11.** *Marching with broomstick, summer 1953.*  
Army Women's Museum.

Florence noted:

Most of the recruits who c[a]me in are white, and I didn't have any problems. They were from all over the country, from all socio-economic groups, [and] for the most part, most of them were poor, rural, and all. But they learned how to be in an integrated world on that post because that's what it was... There were many from the rural South and so they had to adjust to having their officer be black; ...they were shocked to come down and take orders from an officer who is black when they came from a world where that didn't happen. [But], it was good. We just built beautiful relationships...

Florence instructed her recruits in many aspects of basic training including bivouac, all of which contributed to fostering a positive shared experience between recruits.. Dedicated to providing recruits a training “comparable to male personnel,” the Women’s Army Corps facilitated optional weapons training and a mandatory extended outdoor “field training” known as bivouac.<sup>181</sup> This week-long program instructed the women “in practical phases of camouflage and concealment, tent pitching, preparing a field training site, learning how to prepare hasty

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fortifications, field sanitation, and cooking field rations.”<sup>182</sup> The Department of Defense prohibited deploying servicewomen into war zones, but allowed the Women’s Army Corps to participate in this contingency training. Bivouac served an important part of basic training, but Florence disliked facilitating the week-long exercise:

We went on bivouac every eight weeks [and] I finally decided I wanted to get out of the service as a training officer. I had a new group of recruits every eight weeks and we went out on bivouac. The bivouac...was nothing but woods at that time and we would go out in those woods and pitch a tent. I was never the kind of girl who did that kind of thing (laughs). And a latrine was really a latrine; an outdoor toilet and I had never witnessed that in my life; had to do that. And your mess hall was brought there and you had to eat out of canteens and, oh it was different. And I did it every eight weeks...you had to carry them through it. When they got to their eight weeks, we marched back to post and [I was assigned] a new set of people. [Eventually], I said, ‘I’m not doing this anymore.’ I’d had enough of this.<sup>183</sup>

Although some like Florence disliked outdoor field training, others, like Ethel Barnes Naddaff, enjoyed such activities which previously only men had performed. “We even got a chance to shoot rifles,” Ethel recorded in her oral history. “And you lay on your belly and they tell you. They had a lot of MPs around there and if you had a gun and you turned around to look over your shoulder, somebody would step on your legs so you wouldn’t. I guess they were afraid we were going to shoot each other.”<sup>184</sup> While she enjoyed learning how to shoot a gun, Ethel in fact “loved being a Wac from the day of my arrival.” She looked back fondly on her basic training in the Women’s Army Corps at Fort Lee:

[We] learned to salute, stand in formation, and I especially got a proud lift from Taps at the end of each day. I was comfortable being surrounded by so many other women, sharing space, latrines, etc., and I never looked back...Some others had some difficulties being away from home and family, and after Lights Out at night, there were “noises” to get used to; some homesick tears, some snoring, or talking in their sleep. All new to me, but it didn’t bother me at all. From Day One, I wrote

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<sup>182</sup> “Goals of the WAC Training Center, Fort Lee, Virginia,” Box 260, 228-01 Permanent, WHC-385, Fort Lee General Orders (1948-53), Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 2, 4.

<sup>183</sup> Farley Interview, October 1, 2019.

<sup>184</sup> Naddaff Interview, September 13, 2019.

home to my parents, and my two sisters and two brothers, and thankfully, I received in turn letters from home.<sup>185</sup>

Not only did mail from family and friends inspire high morale amongst the Fort Lee recruits and serve as a welcome distraction to the rigidities of basic training, but so too did having access and opportunity to engage in recreation and athletics.

A WAC recruit's experience in basic training at Fort Lee in the early 1950s went beyond the classroom. The base also offered the young servicewomen opportunities to participate in sports teams like basketball, softball, and swimming. Incidentally, athletics were desegregated a bit earlier than the rest of the Women's Army Corps training center. According to the *Lee Traveler*, the base newspaper, the WAC basketball and softball teams were desegregated in March and June 1949, respectively. Out of fourteen servicewomen on the softball team in June 1949, three were black Wacs from the still-segregated Company B 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.<sup>186</sup> Three years later, African American First Lieutenant Ethel Bridgeforth Sampson of Memphis, Tennessee, played on the Fort Lee softball team. Before she passed away in 2011, Ethel recorded her memories about playing on the softball team in the Women's Army Corps:

The team did very well & we began to get some publicity about their success. Played teams in other locations as well as at home. The enlisted women loved me, but my CO for some reason I couldn't fathom, wasn't crazy about me. (I don't suck up to supervisors or anybody else – just do my job to the best of my ability.) She may have thought I wouldn't like working with the team when she gave me the assignment. But as it turned out, the women loved & respected me. And got quite good at winning & looking very good; got publicity in the newspapers. As we got to the last game of the season, we had a limited number of people who could go, and the CO told one particular woman she couldn't go. The woman came to me and told me about it, so I made the decision to let her go in my place. Case closed.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Naddaff Correspondence, September 13, 2019, 1.

<sup>186</sup> "Members of the WAC Training Center's softball team..." *Lee Traveler*, June 24, 1949, and "The WAC Training Center Basketball Team..." March 25, 1949, Box 146, Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

<sup>187</sup> Ethel Bridgeforth Sampson Personal Collection, 2004.

Positive press coverage of the teams in early 1949 when the first of such articles appeared about the WAC integrated softball team, and again when Ethel played there in 1952, demonstrated that Fort Lee did not shy away from publicly recognizing the interracial achievements of WAC athletes.

In addition to softball and basketball, WAC recruits and officers also had off-duty access to the base swimming pool, where, unlike anywhere in the South, black and white women swam together. As an institution separate from society, the Women's Army Corps did not have to abide by the South's Jim Crow laws and thus, desegregated the base swimming pool. Mary Ann Smith Harrington shared a photo of her and some black women enjoying the pool together in the summer of 1950. However, while Mary Ann had only fond memories of off-duty swim, Florence recalled that swimming produced its own challenges for the black women on base, of which their white counterparts were oblivious.



**Figure 12.** *Wacs in a swimming lesson, 1953. Army Women's Museum.*

While the white women interviewed for this project had no memory of “problems between white and black in the barracks or anywhere else,” Florence, who trained integrated groups of new recruits was very cognizant of “little things, basic things, that

were going on in the life of the [black] recruit.”<sup>188</sup> For example, she noted that the training center

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<sup>188</sup> Greczkowski Interview, September 22, 2019; Farley Interview, October 1, 2019.



opened the swimming pool to the women after the “the on-post beauty shop closed.” Well before it was common to wear “naturals or braids,” black women had to get their hair processed, and because water negates the processing treatments, women needed to go to the beauty salon after swimming.



**Figure 13.** *Mary Ann Smith Harrington (kneeling, center) and friends on the pool deck. Summer, 1950. Private Collection of Mary Ann Smith Harrington.*

“The beauty shop was not open. And they were not going to go out without having their hair processed.”<sup>189</sup> Since the salon was closed in the evenings, Florence said that black recruits often avoided joining the off-duty swim with their white counterparts, and further elaborated: “The Army did not make any account for [the needs of the black servicewomen]. These situations put trainers in the position that we had to advocate and [decide] how we’re going to handle this...Everything was laid out for the majority culture, but the minority culture had to be dealt with also.”<sup>190</sup> Florence felt that in large part the women on base got on well, but some discriminatory treatment nevertheless persisted. Florence was not suggesting that the WAC intentionally scheduled the pool hours at a time when black women could not properly enjoy it, but that the base simply was not aware of such discrepancies and that the 1950s were not a time in which the white population was actively aware of or interested in black culture.

In addition to athletics, the WAC training center made considerable effort to provide other recreational and relaxing accommodations and activities which the servicewomen could enjoy

<sup>189</sup> Farley Interview, October 1, 2019.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

during off-duty hours. Each barracks included “comfortably furnished day rooms,” as well as amenities on and off base.<sup>191</sup> At their disposal during off-duty hours, the base offered “movies, dances, bowling, ping-pong...and sightseeing trips...Tickets [could] be obtained for concerts, the opera, and sports events in adjacent cities.”<sup>192</sup> Fort Lee also had service clubs and the Post Exchange. Though the recruits did not enjoy extensive time off-duty, when they did, many were interested in exploring the local town of Petersburg. Though the young women training at Fort Lee in the early 1950s fostered a cultural island of integration through their shared experiences in basic training, the base as a physical island of integration was never more apparent than when the WAC recruits traveled off-base into the exterior world of Jim Crow, often the first time.

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<sup>191</sup> “WAC Recruits Relax During Off Duty Hours,” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, April 24, 1949, Box 146, “Wacs in Service, 1948 – 1953,” Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

<sup>192</sup> “Goals of the WAC Training Center, Fort Lee, Virginia,” Box 260, 228-01 Permanent, WHC-385, Fort Lee General Orders (1948-53), Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 6.

### Chapter 3 | *Two Worlds Collide: Fort Lee and Petersburg*

In the summer of 1951, a bus full of Women’s Army Corps basic recruits from Fort Lee, Virginia arrived in the nearby town of Petersburg to enjoy some time off base. Before exiting the bus, however, the commanding sergeant addressed the group of thirty young women: “Ladies, I know you have friends amongst the blacks and whites on base, but while you’re in town, we ask you to respect the local custom. Therefore, the black girls will get off in the black part of town and the whites off in the white part of town.” Now eighty-eight years old, Joyce Jackson Button of Kenosha, Wisconsin recalled this “introduction to segregation” in her 2019 oral history interview. Joyce described one of the biggest differences between the Fort Lee WAC training center and the local town of Petersburg in the 1950s: the former was desegregated and the latter was governed by Jim Crow.<sup>193</sup>

While the town of Petersburg, Virginia offered the Fort Lee recruits respite and recreation during off-duty hours in the early 1950s, the segregated community on the outskirts of the base also introduced many white WAC recruits to an unavoidable reality in the American South: “the bitter truths of Jim Crow.”<sup>194</sup> J. Douglas Smith, author of *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (2002), argues that during the mid-twentieth century, due to their paternalist mentality of “managed race relations,” leading white Virginians “refused to accept integration” anywhere in the state.<sup>195</sup> Petersburg was no different from the rest of the South in the 1950s in its “commitment to segregation,” making the nearby desegregated Fort

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<sup>193</sup> Button Interview, August 20, 2019.

<sup>194</sup> William H. Chafe, et. al., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South*, (New York: The New Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>195</sup> J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 4, 9.

Lee WAC training center one-of-a-kind in Virginia.<sup>196</sup> The Women's Army Corps training center existed as a physical "island of integration in an otherwise sea of segregation" in the early 1950s because as young women arrived on base to train, eat, and sleep with fellow WAC recruits of all races and backgrounds, nearby Petersburg reminded them of the presence and power of Jim Crow, even if the town held no authority over racial matters at Fort Lee.

Located on the Appomattox River and incorporated in 1748, Petersburg rests in central Virginia about twenty-five miles south of Richmond. Initially a conglomerate of parts of Dinwiddie, Prince George, and Chesterfield counties, Petersburg later in the eighteenth century accrued the nearby towns of Blandford, Pocahontas, and Ravenscroft.<sup>197</sup> Throughout much of Petersburg's history as a shipping city, local industry dealt in cotton, tobacco, and metal, and in the early nineteenth century, Petersburg became a regional railroad hub. Additionally, much of Petersburg's Piedmont terrain served as battlegrounds during both the American Revolution and the Civil War. During the latter conflict, the Union Army's largest offensive measure against the Confederacy took place there, culminating in the nine-month-long Siege of Petersburg from June 1864 to March 1865.<sup>198</sup>

Moreover, while enslaved Africans resided in Petersburg since the 1730s, in subsequent decades, free blacks from around Virginia gravitated towards the city. In the 1750s, this growing population of freedmen established a community on Pocahontas Island, located on a peninsula on the Appomattox River. By 1800, over three hundred free blacks lived in what came to be

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<sup>196</sup> Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 9.

<sup>197</sup> Sarah Nerney, "A Guide to the Petersburg (VA.) Free Negro and Slave Records, 1787–1865," A Collection in the Library of Virginia, 2007, Web, Accessed March 18, 2020, <https://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaxtf/view?docId=lva/vi02254.xml>.

<sup>198</sup> A. Wilson Greene, "Opening of the Petersburg Campaign," *American Battlefield Trust*, N.d., Web, Accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/opening-petersburg-campaign>.

considered the oldest free black community in the United States.<sup>199</sup> The African American population continued to grow in Petersburg in the following decades, and in 1930, Petersburg became not only the third largest city in the state, but also home to the largest percentage of blacks in any Virginia city.<sup>200</sup> Following the birth of Jim Crow in the post-emancipation South, Petersburg whites sought to intimidate and dominate the city's black population by "regulating every aspect of black life."<sup>201</sup>

Mimicking "racial characteristics of [other] southern cities and towns," Petersburg's "landscape reflected" the realities of Jim Crow and its suppression of African Americans.<sup>202</sup> Whites dictated where, when, and how African Americans lived, worked, provided for their families, pursued education, and simply, the manner in which black citizens took up space. In their edited oral history anthology, *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South* (2001) William H. Chafe et. al. note that southern white supremacy and "Jim Crow customs...seized every opportunity to belittle and humiliate African Americans."<sup>203</sup> Especially after the landmark Supreme Court case, *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, which legalized separate but equal public accommodations between the races, white southerners found new ways to exert power and control over blacks. Southern whites employed an "arsenal of weapons" against African Americans in the decades after the Civil War, including economic measures such as sharecropping, poll taxes and literacy tests to limit political participation, and when those failed to manage the South's black population: racial violence.<sup>204</sup> Additionally, whites weaved strictly enforced segregation into the fabric of everyday life as their most efficient mode of "controlling

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<sup>199</sup> "Pocahontas Island," *Virginia is for Lovers*, May 3, 2013, Web, Accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.virginia.org/listings/CulturalHeritage/PocahontasIsland/>

<sup>200</sup> Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 7.

<sup>201</sup> Chafe, et. al., *Remembering Jim Crow*, 299.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, 299.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, 2.

black bodies.”<sup>205</sup> Southern whites continuously disenfranchised, devalued, and attacked black Americans, forcing them into social, political, and economic subordination.

However, in “The Evolution of Jim Crow Laws in Twentieth Century Virginia,” Charles E. Wynes asserts that in the 1920s and 1930s, “white southerners knew that their world was changing.”<sup>206</sup> Following World War I, black servicemen recognized the inherent contradiction of fighting to defend freedom and democracy abroad when the same rights were not afforded black Americans at home. Whites responded to this discrepancy by tightening Jim Crow and segregation laws.<sup>207</sup> Understanding that a successful civil rights agenda—championed by organizations including the NAACP and Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association—would destabilize managed race relations, whites reified Jim Crow statutes across the country, but especially in the South. These laws and precedents “deprived black Southerners of the ability to vote, live, learn, and earn a reasonable living as full citizens of the United States.”<sup>208</sup> Blacks also faced humiliation and violence; treatment whites felt necessary to inflict “in order to maintain dominance.”<sup>209</sup> Southern whites “assert[ed] and reiterate[ed] black inferiority” even towards fellow veterans, who like many whites in the twentieth century donned a military uniform to defend American ideals.<sup>210</sup>

Black veterans of the First World War soon learned, as did those who served in World War II, that wearing Uncle Sam’s uniform offered no protections against racial discrimination and violence upon returning home from war. “New patterns of race relations overseas” alerted black servicemen, such as the black 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment fighting under the French in World War I,

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<sup>205</sup> Chafe, et. al., *Remembering Jim Crow*, 2.

<sup>206</sup> Charles E. Wynes, “The Evolution of Jim Crow Laws in Twentieth Century Virginia,” *Phylon*, Vol. 28, No. 4, (1967), 416.

<sup>207</sup> Wynes, “The Evolution of Jim Crow,” 416.

<sup>208</sup> Parker, *Fighting for Democracy*, 32.

<sup>209</sup> Chafe, et. al., *Remembering Jim Crow*, 1.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

“to the possibility of change.”<sup>211</sup> As French officers and civilians treated black soldiers with respect, African American servicemen discovered that it was possible for one to feel proud, valued, and appreciated for one’s service. However, upon returning to the United States in their uniforms, these black veterans faced considerable opposition to their newfound confidence. In 1919 during the so-called Red Summer, essentially a season in which whites across the country terrorized African Americans, twenty-six cities, including Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., saw mob violence, lynchings, and destruction of black property.<sup>212</sup> President Woodrow Wilson called up the military to quell the violence. It is estimated that at least one-hundred-thirty-five blacks died, ten of whom were uniformed World War I veterans.<sup>213</sup> The home front experienced similar racial disturbances during and after World War II. Riots took place in Detroit, Harlem, and Los Angeles. Additionally, uniformed African American soldiers were often “denied service and even beaten. In a case at a Kentucky railroad station, a police officer beat three African American Wacs for not moving quickly enough from the white waiting room.”<sup>214</sup>

While black World War I and World War II soldiers faced arrests, beatings, and lynchings, they also challenged Jim Crow and confronted the “illegitimacy of segregation.”<sup>215</sup> One example took place in August 1952 when black Women’s Army Corps Private First Class (PFC) Sarah Louise Keys travelled home to Washington, North Carolina from Fort Dix, New Jersey. In her WAC uniform, PFC Keys boarded the bus in Trenton and sat toward the front of the vehicle. Five-and-a-half hours into her trip, while on a stop in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, a new driver

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<sup>211</sup> Parker, *Fighting for Democracy*, 10, 32.

<sup>212</sup> Stanley B. Norvell and William M. Tuttle, “Views of a Negro During ‘The Red Summer’ of 1919,” *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (July 1966), 210; Abigail Higgins, “Red Summer of 1919: How Black World War I Vets Fought Back Against Racist Mobs,” *History*, July 26, 2019, Web, Accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/red-summer-1919-riots-chicago-dc-great-migration>.

<sup>213</sup> Parker, *Fighting for Democracy*, 38.

<sup>214</sup> Emilie Raymond, “World War II and Civil Rights,” *Gale Researcher Guide*, 2018, 3.

<sup>215</sup> Parker, *Fighting for Democracy*, 163.

ordered Keys to relinquish her seat for a white Marine. PFC Keys refused. Ultimately, the police arrested Keys “on a charge of disorderly conduct and subsequently convicted” the young servicewoman.<sup>216</sup> Keys spent thirteen hours in jail, was fined \$25, and then sent home to Washington, North Carolina. Outraged by Carolina Coach Company’s discriminatory treatment of his daughter, and Keys’ father encouraged her to fight the case.

PFC Keys received legal counsel from a fellow black WAC-turned-lawyer, Dovey Johnson Roundtree, who served in the Women’s Army Corps during World War II. With support from the NAACP, Roundtree took Keys’ case and brought the bus ride affront to the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) in 1953, in an effort to utilize the Interstate Commerce Act to outlaw segregation. Roundtree and a legal team from the NAACP fought Sarah Louise Keys’ case for two years, until the ICC ruled in November 1955 that segregation on interstate busses was unconstitutional. Keys’ experience demonstrates that although wearing a uniform did not protect her from segregation laws, perhaps it did give her the confidence to challenge Jim Crow, an intimidating prospect to many African Americans in the South at mid-century.

By the early 1950s, Petersburg blacks had learned how to “navigate the treacherous waters” of Jim Crow by knowing which parts of the city were accessible and which were prohibited.<sup>217</sup> The city’s black population knew down which streets they could walk; in which restaurants they could eat; in which churches they could pray; in which stores they could shop; in which neighborhoods they could live; and in which schools they could learn. Petersburg is home to one of the oldest black churches in the South: Gillfield Baptist Church, founded in 1788. A longtime pillar in African American culture and society, religious worship provided black populations an important sense of community since before the days of slavery. Petersburg blacks worshipped at

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<sup>216</sup> “Revolution on Rails,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 4, 1955.



Gillfield, and in the 1950s during the Civil Rights Movement, the church served as an active site of opposition to Jim Crow and segregation.

Petersburg blacks attended segregated schools, too. Founded in 1874, Peabody High School served as the black community's public school.<sup>218</sup> Petersburg's white residents, like in many southern towns, vehemently opposed school desegregation efforts in the 1950s, and Peabody High School remained segregated until 1970.<sup>219</sup> Petersburg is also home to the historically black Virginia State University (VSU) founded in 1882. Students from both Peabody High School and VSU participated in lunch counter sit-ins and other non-violent demonstrations in Petersburg in the 1960s under the local leadership of Gillfield Baptist Church minister, Reverend Wyatt. T. Walker.<sup>220</sup>

In addition to being a burgeoning center for the Civil Rights Movement, Petersburg also maintained strong ties to the military. While the town hosted major battles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Petersburg strengthened its ties to the armed forces in the twentieth century when the Army built Camp Lee in 1917 as the Quartermaster School. The city benefitted from Camp Lee's construction, even if the inevitable influx of black soldiers in the community concerned white residents. In *Managing White Supremacy* (2002), J. Douglas Smith writes, "Nevertheless, many whites in Virginia, especially in the area around Petersburg, focused more on the economic benefits to the region of the Army's decision to establish a training facility for black and white conscripts at Camp Lee. The threat of 10,000 armed black men paled in comparison to their impact on the local economy."<sup>221</sup> To this end, the potential for economic gains from the base's

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<sup>218</sup> "Peabody High School," *AfroVirginia Humanities*, N.d., Web, Accessed March 7, 2020, <http://afrovirginia.org/items/show/330>

<sup>219</sup> "Peabody High School."

<sup>220</sup> Lillian Gaskill and Charlene Gregg, *Fort Lee in Transition: 1940s – 1970s*, (Sankofa Publications, 2005), 78.

<sup>221</sup> Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 44.

presence outweighed white residents' discomfort with groups of armed and trained black soldiers in the vicinity. A massive installation in relation to the size of Petersburg in 1917, "Camp Lee's construction [was] a record breaker."<sup>222</sup> Instantly boasting the third highest population in Virginia, the newly established Camp Lee ushered in more than sixty thousand black and white doughboys and featured fifteen-hundred buildings for training the Quartermaster Corps.<sup>223</sup>

Petersburg soon profited as a result of Camp Lee's presence and sought to maintain the pair's relationship in the decades to come. Camp Lee trained servicemen throughout America's involvement in World War I, but at war's end, the new Army base closed and did not reopen for training again until 1941. During the intervening years, Camp Lee "served mainly as a wildlife preserve until the [base] was rebuilt in the buildup to World War II."<sup>224</sup> Camp Lee trained fewer than forty thousand black and white servicemen during the Second World War, yet Petersburg welcomed the revival of the Army base as an economic rejuvenation. Baltimore's *Afro-American* reported that the reopening of Camp Lee would bring five thousand jobs to the Petersburg area.<sup>225</sup>

Camp Lee once again closed as the United States converted to peacetime in 1945 and the base remained vacant for three years until Congress designated it the national training center for the newly elevated Women's Army Corps in October 1948. During the World Wars, Camp Lee's population remained strictly segregated. However, the base underwent two transitions in 1950, the latter of which Petersburg's white residents likely did not respect as much as the first: Camp Lee

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<sup>222</sup> "Camp Lee Construction a Record Breaker," *The Illustrated Weekly Camp Lee Review*, Vol. 1, No. 4, (September 20, 1917), Virginia Historical Society, General Collection U 294.5 L35 I6 1, p. 4.

<sup>223</sup> "Over The Top at 'Em': 100 Years at Fort Lee," *Out of the Box: Notes from the Archives at the Library of Virginia*, July 7, 2017, Web, Accessed March 7, 2020, [http://www.virginiamemory.com/blogs/out\\_of\\_the\\_box/2017/07/07/over-the-top-and-at-em-100-years-at-fort-lee/](http://www.virginiamemory.com/blogs/out_of_the_box/2017/07/07/over-the-top-and-at-em-100-years-at-fort-lee/)

<sup>224</sup> "Over The Top at 'Em': 100 Years at Fort Lee."

<sup>225</sup> "5,000 Will Get Camp Lee Jobs," *Afro-American*, November 16, 1940.

was promoted to permanent status and renamed Fort Lee, and the Women's Army Corps introduced desegregated basic training to the base and the region.

No matter how vehemently Petersburg's white residents sought to protect local segregation in the 1950s and objected to desegregation at Fort Lee, such towns, for the most part, tolerated the military's practices as long as those racial policies did not permeate the external community off base.<sup>226</sup> Fort Lee and Petersburg, like many military bases and surrounding towns, recognized their symbiotic relationship and both sought to maintain positive rapports with each other.<sup>227</sup> To this end, Fort Lee "voluntarily regulated their behavior [in town] in an effort to prevent trouble" and Petersburg residents, including civilians who worked on the base, did not publicly challenged desegregation of the WAC center.<sup>228</sup>

Civilian employees have long been instrumental to the success and operation of military installations, and so it was with Fort Lee in the 1950s.<sup>229</sup> Since the construction of Fort Lee in 1917 and through World War II and into the Cold War era, thousands of civilian employees from Petersburg worked on the base; "quiet professionals [who] have always been a vital part of the Army profession."<sup>230</sup> Much like the utilization of servicewomen during wartime in the twentieth century to free men to fight, civilian employees of the U.S. armed forces have likewise filled "critical support roles" to make soldiers' jobs easier.<sup>231</sup> Since 1775, civilian employees have fulfilled various jobs including working as teamsters, in Quartermaster and supply, as commissioners of pension and public lands, telegraph and telephone operators, mechanics,

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<sup>226</sup> Mershon and Schlossman, *Foxholes and Color Lines*, 245.

<sup>227</sup> Carol L. McKibben, *Racial Beachhead: Diversity and Democracy in a Military Town*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 14.

<sup>228</sup> Mershon and Schlossman, *Foxholes and Color Lines*, 245.

<sup>229</sup> Stephen J. Lofgren, *The Highest Level of Skill and Knowledge: A Brief History of U.S. Army Civilians, 1775–2015*, (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2016), 3.

<sup>230</sup> Lofgren, *The Highest Level of Skill and Knowledge*, 3.

<sup>231</sup> "Army Civilian Mission," *U.S. Army*, N.d., Web, Accessed March 8, 2020, <https://www.goarmy.com/careers-and-jobs/army-civilian-careers.html>.

laborers, secretaries, and in transportation, amongst many other occupations.<sup>232</sup> Moreover, since before the Civil War, civilian employees have served both in stationary positions on bases and have also travelled with their respective service branches, including into warzones. Because of their importance, civilian employees were trained “with the same care given to the training of soldiers.”<sup>233</sup>

When Fort Lee reopened in 1948, Petersburg residents flocked to the base looking for civilian jobs. Between 1951 and 1952, Fort Lee employed more than nineteen-hundred people, eight-five percent of whom resided in the Petersburg, Hopewell, and Colonial Heights areas.<sup>234</sup> In this, Fort Lee and the local community restored their economic relationship. However, while Petersburg and area residents cheered the return of employment opportunities at Fort Lee in the early 1950s, whenever white and black civilian employees arrived for work on base, they entered into a different world: an island of integration. For Petersburg civilian employees to be valued just the same as those in uniform, they had to respect desegregation.

Florence Saunders Farley, who remained in Petersburg after leaving the WAC in 1953, commented that if any civilian employees took issue with desegregated conditions at Fort Lee, that those individuals would simply have to learn to live with the reality. Because civilians who worked on base “had all the benefits of being a federal employee,” those hired from the community did not object to integration on the base. “Because Fort Lee was a source of employment for people in Petersburg,” Florence noted that civilian employees did not wage opposition to desegregation “any more than they would do opinions about any other aspect of living; let’s put it that way.” She explains:

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<sup>232</sup> Lofgren, *The Highest Level of Skill and Knowledge*, 8–15.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>234</sup> “\$6,000,000 Payroll at Lee,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 31, 1952.

[Integration] was an aspect of living. And they might come out without whatever phenomenon impressed them, they didn't see it...it was just the way of life. Segregation was the way of life. So you did it and went on it. The[re were] people who were adamant about keeping it versus the people who were adamant about breaking it down, so eventually you got to that point. But basically it was a way of life.<sup>235</sup>

Working on a desegregated military base in the Jim Crow South likely presented local civilian employees with challenges. However, as Florence alluded, civilian employees adapted to desegregated conditions at Fort Lee in order to keep their jobs. White civilian employees from Petersburg who may have taken issue with the federal policy had little recourse.

Fort Lee not only hired white residents from Petersburg, but also local black civilians. Catherine Lutz asserts in *Homefront: A Military City in the American Twentieth Century* (2001) that military bases “provided jobs for African Americans that paid more in wages than did jobs in town [and] were more likely to pay benefits such as retirement.”<sup>236</sup> To many black civilian employees, Lutz contends, jobs on base represented more than a steady paycheck, but demonstrated the hireability of southern blacks in mid-century for jobs other than for domestic workers or chauffeurs.<sup>237</sup> By working on a desegregated Army base when the rest of their world was dominated by Jim Crow, black civilian employees had the opportunity for better positions.

However, it took the desegregation of the military to bring about expanded opportunities for black employees, for during the World Wars, Fort Lee generally only hired local blacks for manual labor. The *Afro-American* reported in January 1941 that Camp Lee could “find only menial tasks” for the base’s many black civilian employees.<sup>238</sup> The black community expressed frustration

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<sup>235</sup> Farley Interview, October 1, 2019.

<sup>236</sup> Catherine Lutz, *Homefront: A Military City in the American Twentieth Century*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 63-64.

<sup>237</sup> Lutz, *Homefront*, 64.

<sup>238</sup> “Workers at Camp Lee, Petersburg, Va., Find Only Menial Tasks for Them,” *Afro-American*, January 11, 1941.

when Camp Lee's construction expanded during World War II, that "only white men [we]re employed as [higher paying] mechanics." However, with the adoption of desegregation in 1950 and 1951, job opportunities on the base began to improve for black civilian employees.

Carol L. McKibben argues in *Racial Beachhead: Diversity and Democracy in a Military Town* (2012), that while a desegregated Fort Lee had no power to influence race relations in Petersburg, its work environment forced white civilian employees to confront their racist ideologies.<sup>239</sup> Moreover, she asserts that white southern working as civilian employees on a desegregated Army base without incident demonstrated a "model of how people of different races can live and work together."<sup>240</sup> Just as life in the Women's Army Corps barracks provided numerous opportunities for black and white interaction, so did civilian employment on the base. These "opportunities to interact," McKibben discusses, had the potential of "changing attitudes about other races more quickly."<sup>241</sup> By fostering a desegregated work environment for its civilian employees, the base set a precedent for integrationist sentiments to "infuse" the Petersburg community over time.<sup>242</sup>

Still, Fort Lee and Petersburg interacted in other ways, which likely in deference to the town's laws, were segregated. To foster a positive and mutually beneficial relationship, they undertook various community partnerships in the 1950s. Local press including the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, the *Progress-Index*, and Fort Lee's own *Lee Traveler*, reported on local charitable organizations with which the Women's Army Corps worked in conjunction with the town. Fort Lee servicewomen collaborated on social welfare programs, community meetings and celebrations, holiday and WAC-recognition parades, and concerts and dances. The Women's

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<sup>239</sup> McKibben, *Racial Beachhead*, 81.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 81.

Army Corps training center maintained such a positive opinion of Petersburg’s “hospitality” that the *Progress-Index* reported WAC commander Lieutenant Colonel Elizabeth C. Smith praised “the spirit of cooperation and interest of Petersburgers in relation to the center and its WACs who have become part of the community.”<sup>243</sup>



**Figure 14.** *Fort Lee Wacs on Parade in Petersburg, summer 1951. Army Women’s Museum.*

The Fort Lee Wacs especially supported the Petersburg community through annual youth Yule Christmas parties at the WAC—albeit segregated—USO service clubs.<sup>244</sup> The *Progress-Index* reported on this holiday event in the 1950s and wrote how much the “underprivileged tots” of Petersburg enjoyed attending the WAC Christmas parties, receiving gifts, playing games, and meeting Santa Claus.<sup>245</sup> The Yule party in 1952 was held at the two Women’s Army Corps USO

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<sup>243</sup> “WACs Treated Well By Citizens,” *The Progress-Index*, July 7, 1950, Box 148, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

<sup>244</sup> “WACs Entertain 360 at Two Yule Parties in USO Centers,” *Progress-Index*, December 23, 1952, Box 151, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

<sup>245</sup> “WACs Begin Christmas Celebrations,” *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, December 22, 1950, Box 148, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

service clubs in Petersburg. The white Wacs and sixty white children enjoyed the festivities at the Byrne Street club, while as the *Progress-Index* reports, three-hundred black children joined the black Wacs at the Wythe Street service club.<sup>246</sup> Over the years it became evident how much of a staple the WACs' parties were in the community and in the lives of the children who lived there, despite segregated celebrations.

Opened in the fall of 1948, following the creation of the Women's Army Corps training center at Fort Lee, the WAC USO clubs in Petersburg proved incredibly important to off-duty socializing, though black and white women were restricted to their respective clubs. Bettie Morden writes that "in accordance with local custom...USO clubs opened in Petersburg on Byrne Street for whites and on Wythe Street for blacks."<sup>247</sup> Opening October 29 and November 19, respectively, these USO service clubs remained segregated in Petersburg even after the WAC training center desegregated its ranks in April 1950.<sup>248</sup> While these clubs were designed for "women of the armed forces stationed at Camp Lee," the Army did not operate the recreational facilities. *The Washington Post* reported on October 30, 1948 that "the Petersburg USO club[s] will be conducted by the National Catholic Community Service...and the Young Women's Christian Association."<sup>249</sup> Moreover, that "prominent national, state and local...officials" took part in the grand opening indicates the excitement amongst Fort Lee and the Wacs for the USO clubs in Petersburg.<sup>250</sup> This high profile commencement demonstrates Fort Lee's desire to foster a positive relationship with Petersburg, and why, in this vein, the WAC subsequently complied with segregation in the 1950s even after the training center abolished segregated basic training.

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<sup>246</sup> "WACs Entertain 360 at Two Yule Parties in USO Centers."

<sup>247</sup> Morden, *The Women's Army Corps*, 80.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> "New USO Building at Petersburg Will Open Sunday," *The Washington Post*, October 30, 1948, Box 146, Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, VA.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.



However, while the Women's Army Corps respected Petersburg's Jim Crow laws, integrated conditions at Fort Lee and segregation in town produced two different worlds which inherently widened "the country's inequalities and cultural contradictions."<sup>251</sup> Jim Crow practices impoverished and disenfranchised southern blacks while the Fort Lee servicewomen enjoyed a better material quality of life than most African Americans in Petersburg. As McKibben writes, "the base provided everything" to those in the armed services. In the 1950s, the military afforded its servicemen and women with plenty of food to eat, access to medical care, clothing, housing, and so on; all material and personal necessities "that African Americans not associated with the military simply did not have" or have easy access to.<sup>252</sup>

The racial practices between the Women's Army Corps training center and Petersburg seemed especially distinct when WAC recruits, many of whom were not from the Jim Crow South, travelled off base for the first time. Joyce Jackson Button, a white recruit from Kenosha, Wisconsin noted that, "we didn't realize that there was that difference [between segregation and integration] until we went into Petersburg and were told right out, 'do not mingle in this town. Respect their customs, respect their values while you are here. You are a guest.'"<sup>253</sup> While Joyce's supervisor briefed her about what to expect in Petersburg, the WAC policy to comply with segregation off base did not reach every recruit. In the event of being caught unawares, Petersburg business owners, law enforcement, and perhaps local civilians, ensured—much to some of the Wacs' surprise—that the black and white recruits did not mix in town.

Both male and female soldiers from Fort Lee found recreational amenities in Petersburg such as restaurants, movie theaters, and bars, but only enjoyed these spaces as long as they

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<sup>251</sup> Lutz, *Homefront*, 1.

<sup>252</sup> McKibben, *Racial Beachhead*, 5.

<sup>253</sup> Button Interview, August 20, 2019.

respected the community's segregation laws. In demanding that the women from Fort Lee keep to their own "racialized spaces," Petersburg's Jim Crow practices, ultimately, sought to rebuild the color lines that the WAC had been so effective in deconstructing.<sup>254</sup> However, because Fort Lee wanted the Army's presence in the community to be a positive one and not a nuisance or instigator of public unrest, the Women's Army Corps instructed its recruits to obey local custom in Petersburg.

In their oral history interviews, WAC veterans mustered few positive impressions of Petersburg because of negative experiences with segregation and discrimination. Following the WAC's desegregation in April 1950, the young women trained, ate, slept, and enjoyed off-duty activities together. As such, especially for those white recruits who had never before experienced Jim Crow, many women presumed their ability to enjoy sojourns off base with their new friends who happened to be of different races. While some of the WAC recruits like Joyce were instructed before entering town that black and white girls could not mingle, others were not informed, and pursued off-duty recreation in interracial groups.

Petersburg business owners quickly scolded and corrected this massive affront to the town's "managed race relations."<sup>255</sup> For example, Clara Chapala, a first generation Mexican-American from Chicago, trained at Fort Lee in the spring of 1954 and was one of many WAC recruits to see an abrupt end to an off-duty visit to Petersburg before it even began:

I don't remember exactly how we got to town and I don't know if we were on a bus or how we got there, [but] we weren't a huge group; [there were] four or five of us... I think Rogers was in that group, Mary Rogers and Stevie. Both Mary Rogers and Stevie were black... We were in clusters, I do know that, and ours was the most mixed cluster... I remember walking around and we seemed to be in an area [with] restaurants and... stores... I [thought], "Oh let's go in here." [We] walked into [a restaurant] and were sort of looking around... but we didn't even get to sit down!

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<sup>254</sup> Elizabeth Guffey, "Knowing Their Space: Signs of Jim Crow in the Segregated South," *Designs Issues* (Vol. 28, No. 2), Spring 2012, 44.

<sup>255</sup> Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 4.

All I know is that a woman came over and said, “You can’t be here” or something like that, sort of in a quiet voice. I was standing behind or coming in the door, maybe, with Mary and then we didn’t do anything; we just sort of stood around saying, “What?” And then a man came over and he was not friendly *at all* and he said, “You have to get out of here. You cannot stay here.” And I said, “We’re from Fort Lee.” He just wasn’t very nice [and repeated]: “You have to leave, you have to leave, you have to leave” and with that, he, you know, showed us to the door and we sort of turned around and said, “Oh I guess we can’t...what’s going on?” We didn’t really know. Nobody really was able to put words to what was happening to us. I just remember thinking to myself, “What’s going on here? What the hell? What did we do? They don’t like soldiers? They don’t want us?” I was thinking, “Oh they don’t want us here because [they think] we’re gonna cause [a] ruckus...We’re not what they think we are, we’re not gonna come in and make a lot of noise.” ...But we were baffled, you know? “Now what do we do?”<sup>256</sup>

After being rudely ushered from this Petersburg restaurant for the sole offense of entering the establishment with the company of brown, black, and white skinned girls, Clara and her friends returned to their barracks at Fort Lee. Clara added that “it was real clear when we returned to the barracks that other little groups of women had similar [experiences].”<sup>257</sup> Furthermore, Clara, being a young eighteen-year-old and just looking to enjoy some time off base with her friends, had not, until years later, connected her unpleasant encounter in the Petersburg restaurant to race, ethnicity, and discrimination.

I was among one of the groups that were asked to leave an establishment because there was a ‘colored girl,’ and a couple of ‘browns’ in our group. [I] later figured out that included me...I do not remember how we all dealt with these incidents, but I do remember, that I felt shocked that people could prohibit someone from getting service. I also remember that our captain spoke to us at the next morning’s formation apologizing to us for the behavior of the townspeople and their shortcomings... She was angry and outraged and seemed embarrassed that it had happened to us, her ‘charges.’<sup>258</sup>

While Clara’s captain may have been frustrated that she and her comrades had been treated so rudely in Petersburg, ultimately, there was little her captain could have done to rectify the situation.

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<sup>256</sup> Chapala Interview, October 2, 2019.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Chapala, “A WAC Story,” 2.

While black recruits lived on an island of integration at Fort Lee in the early 1950s, Petersburg restricted them to racialized spaces when venturing into town, which inherently re-marginalized the Wacs. Despite wearing their uniforms in town, black Wacs were forced to navigate their visit “around Jim Crow exclusion.”<sup>259</sup> Black servicewomen ate meals alongside their white friends at the training center mess halls, but were not extended the same courtesy in Petersburg restaurants. Additionally, the only hierarchies within the Women’s Army Corps that may expect a black recruit to move out of the way so one could pass, would be on the basis of rank, not race; unlike in Petersburg, where Jim Crow law and custom dictated African Americans availed space on a shared sidewalk for white passersby. More succinctly, “rank, not race, came to determine status within the military, unlike in American society.”<sup>260</sup>

While an external, presentist perspective may consider black Wacs living and training in desegregated conditions on base, yet having to comply with Jim Crow when traveling in town, as an outrageous act of re-marginalization, the black women who experienced this transition from an integrated world back to a segregated world in the 1950s viewed it as “just an aspect of living” as an African American.<sup>261</sup> For those socialized by southern Jim Crow customs, transitioning from integration on base to segregation in Petersburg was not a shock or surprise. For black women, especially those like Florence Saunders Farley who grew up in Roanoke, Virginia, Jim Crow laws were embedded in one’s consciousness at all times and “shaped [one’s] choice of action.”<sup>262</sup> When asked about the experience of living in both an integrated and segregated world, Florence explained:

So when we left the post in our uniforms, we still out here in Petersburg... and the Petersburg community was very, very, segregated. It was two different worlds, but

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<sup>259</sup> Guffey, “Knowing Their Space,” 41, 51, 47, 42.

<sup>260</sup> McKibben, *Racial Beachhead*, 14-15.

<sup>261</sup> Farley Interview, October 1, 2019.

<sup>262</sup> Guffey, “Knowing Their Space,” 41, 51, 47, 42.

many of us had come from a segregated society...It was nothing unusual...I knew it. I lived it. And so it wasn't any conscious thing. You knew. You grew up knowing where you go and where you don't go...But that was nothing new. What was new to us was the post. The post was the new place, not the city. The city was from your old world...But there was nothing shocking because I had grown up in Roanoke; The laws were the same in Petersburg as they were in Roanoke...it was nothing unusual.<sup>263</sup>

In this, Jim Crow socialized blacks to know where they could go and where they could not within the confines of the community. As such, the expectation to respect Jim Crow in Petersburg did not astonish black Wacs like Florence as it did her white counterparts.

Because most of the young white Wacs training at Fort Lee between 1948 and 1954 hailed from areas in the United States that did not practice Jim Crow, many white women were astonished that they had to separate from their black comrades whenever they left Fort Lee. Joyce Jackson Button recalled, "Coming from the North, I was not familiar with segregation in any way, shape, or form." Joyce elaborated:

We were told to respect the customs of the area that we were in and everybody did; nobody tried to be heroic or anything else. That's the way it was and we went along with it...We didn't talk about race or anything else among us while we were there. It just wasn't even a topic that was brought up. Nobody thought about it... Yeah they didn't want to stir up trouble. We got that message. 'Behave yourselves, don't make an issue out of this.' This is just the way the South is. Put up with it and come back and everything is fine...<sup>264</sup>

Mary Ann Smith Harrington from McKeesport, Pennsylvania had a unique experience with segregation and southern custom, as well. Ultimately, "Jim Crow signage dictated both white and black space," and as a young white WAC recruit from the North, Mary Ann was unfamiliar with the concept.<sup>265</sup> Unlike Clara who experienced Jim Crow with a group of friends in 1954, Mary Ann Smith Harrington went about it alone in 1950. Mary Ann remembered in her oral history

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<sup>263</sup> Farley Interview, October 1, 2019.

<sup>264</sup> Button Interview, August 20, 2019.

<sup>265</sup> Guffey, "Knowing Their Space," 49.

interview how she encountered Jim Crow while using a Petersburg water fountain, riding on a bus, and attending a church service.

There was no segregation on base but my experience in town was a segregation nightmare with me being the offender. We were permitted to go into town on weekends unescorted. I went to use a water fountain in a store and was told by a black man I had to use the one for the whites. Went to a lunch counter. Was told I couldn't be served until I moved to the white person's side. On the way back to base by bus, the only seats available were in the back. I sat down. The bus started to move. The bus driver saw me in the mirror, stopped the bus and said it wasn't going anywhere until I moved up front. There were no seats left up front, no white person would offer me their seat, so I stood all the way back to the base. I was in uniform. The ultimate segregation I experienced there was when I went into town to attend Mass at the Catholic Church. Since the priest was already at the altar I sat in the last row in the back of the church. There was a tap on my back and I was told to go up front where I belonged. Segregation in a house of God?! I walked out and never went back to town again.<sup>266</sup>

Mary Ann was completely unfamiliar with what the Jim Crow town expected of her and thus, she was unaware she had violated the law.<sup>267</sup> However, she and her fellow Fort Lee WAC recruits were only shushed, driven out, harshly tapped on the shoulder, scolded, and in one case, yelled at by police for their transgressions.<sup>268</sup> As discussed earlier, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, African American servicemen and women often encountered various violent responses to disrupting Jim Crow segregation; none of the Women's Army Corps veterans interviewed for this project faced such harsh consequences.

Segregation truly fostered two different worlds between the Fort Lee Women's Army Corps training center and Petersburg, and while Mary Ann and the other white WAC recruits in the early 1950s had the ability to leave town and not return, black women from the South did not

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<sup>266</sup> Harrington Email Correspondence, August 17, 2019.

<sup>267</sup> McKibben, *Racial Beachhead*, 81.

<sup>268</sup> In an oral history interview with the author, Ramona V. Chipman remembered one night during Officer Candidate School in which she went to Petersburg with a mixed group of friends to attend a drive-in movie. Strikingly, in addition to being bullied by the police for being in their car with both white and black women, the lot of them "almost got arrested." The fact that Ramona's car was inspected at a public drive-in demonstrates the extent to which Petersburg's police went to enforce segregation. Chipman Interview, August 10, 2019.

have the same luxury. Jim Crow was the reality for millions of black Americans—including Florence Saunders Farley and Ethel Bridgeforth Sampson, who also contributed to this study—not something you endured only once during an eight-week period of basic training. Jim Crow was not easily escaped or challenged, as demonstrated through the Red Summer in 1919 and many less publicized acts. All the young women training in the Women’s Army Corps at Fort Lee in the early 1950s lived in a protective bubble—an island of integration—against “the unforgiving [Jim Crow] South.”<sup>269</sup> However, whenever the recruits ventured off their isolated island, they were expected to modify their behavior in compliance with southern segregation—a demand far more astonishing to those recruits who were not socialized under Jim Crow than to those who were.

The women interviewed for this project often mentioned that they infrequently or even never spoke about race relations and segregation amongst themselves on base; perhaps Fort Lee only maintained its positive relationship with Petersburg because the two communities likewise ignored discussions of race and Jim Crow. Separate worlds but closely interdependent, both Fort Lee and Petersburg sought to maintain their equilibrium by appeasing the other over the most divisive aspect of their relationship: Jim Crow and segregation.

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<sup>269</sup> Parker, *Fighting for Democracy*, 113.

## *Conclusion*

For two weeks in the summer of 1952, Women's Army Corps First Lieutenant Ethel Bridgeforth Sampson attended advanced officer Chemical, Biological, and Radiological (CBR) training at Fort Devens, Massachusetts. A black WAC officer from Memphis, Tennessee, Ethel was the only woman in the CBR class. After completing her training course, she caught a train to Boston from which she planned to take a connector to New York City. However, finding herself with "some hours" on her hands between trains, Ethel decided to explore Boston. In what would become a lasting memory, she cheered on Jackie Robinson, in town with the Brooklyn Dodgers, in their defeat of the Boston Braves.<sup>270</sup>

One may assume that young Ethel, like most African Americans, considered Robinson a hero. When Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers as the first black player in 1947, he placed the prospect of desegregation in "civilian settings."<sup>271</sup> His incredible on-field success propelled public conversations on civil rights and desegregation to the national level and confronted those "who had previously ignored the nation's racial dilemma."<sup>272</sup> Subsequently, as historians Sherie Mershon and Steven Schlossman estimate, Robinson's pioneering career with the Dodgers provided the "public legitimacy" needed for President Harry Truman's initiative to desegregate the military a year later in 1948.<sup>273</sup> However, did Ethel connect Robinson's integrating major-league baseball in 1947 with her own contribution to desegregating another major institution in

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<sup>270</sup> Ethel M. Bridgeforth Sampson Personal Collection, Courtesy of Julia Sampson. Ethel originally recorded this event as having taken place at Fenway Park, but research revealed the Brooklyn Dodgers never played at Fenway Park in July 1952, but rather played at Braves Field that month. It is likely that Ethel Bridgeforth Sampson misremembered the location of this detail as she recorded her memories decades after the event.

<sup>271</sup> Mershon and Schlossman, *Foxholes and Color Lines*, 159.

<sup>272</sup> Michael E. Lomax, "Baseball's Great Experiment Revisited," *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Summer 2010), 200.

<sup>273</sup> Mershon and Schlossman, *Foxholes and Color Lines*, 159.



the United States? Although she and many other black servicewomen did not necessarily consider themselves heroes, they likewise helped dismantle color lines in the Army.<sup>274</sup>

As this thesis established, the Women's Army Corps training center at Fort Lee, Virginia adopted Executive Order 9981 and desegregated its ranks with relative speed, efficiency, and tolerance in April 1950, while its male counterparts "refused to comply."<sup>275</sup> As the Korean War began, the Army revived its World War II-era argument against desegregation, claiming that social experiments had no place in a wartime military.<sup>276</sup> However, Alfred H. Hausrath argues that the Army's racial dilemma "became especially acute after the outbreak of the Korean conflict."<sup>277</sup> "Dire need of replacements" in Korea eventually wore down the Army's resistance to desegregation, and as early as August 1950, some units in Korea experienced "ad hoc, unauthorized integration."<sup>278</sup> Pash discusses how desegregation on the front lines in Korea—in such individual units as the 9<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Infantries—demonstrated to American commanders like General Matthew Ridgeway "the smooth transition to mixed units in the field."<sup>279</sup> Piecemeal integration with relative success disproved the Army's previous claims that desegregating in wartime would cause racial havoc, destabilize morale, and compromise "combat efficiency."<sup>280</sup> Though "desegregation [in those token units] proved a great success on the battlefield," Pash notes that

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<sup>274</sup> While WAC Officer Candidate School training had been integrated all along, beginning with the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps at Fort Des Moines during World War II, the women never shared barracks or recreational and leisure accommodations. Once Fort Lee desegregated in April 1950, every aspect of officer and basic training was mixed, including barracks, mess halls, bathrooms, and lounges, etc. Therefore, arriving at Fort Lee in the summer of 1951, Ethel entered a desegregated world and her officer class was one of the first following desegregation to complete the six months of training in absolute integration.

<sup>275</sup> Richard Dalfume, "The Fahy Committee and Desegregation of the Armed Forces," *The Historian*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (November, 1965), 9.

<sup>276</sup> Dalfume, "The Fahy Committee and Desegregation of the Armed Forces," 6.

<sup>277</sup> Alfred H. Hausrath, "Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Army," *Journal of the Operations Research Society of America*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (February 1954), 17.

<sup>278</sup> Pash, *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 173; Hausrath, "Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Army," 20.

<sup>279</sup> Pash, *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 174.

<sup>280</sup> Dalfume, "The Fahy Committee and Desegregation of the Armed Forces," 12.

achieving full integration still took almost the duration of the war.<sup>281</sup> In September 1953, ninety percent of the Army's black personnel served in integrated units, and by October 30, 1954, the military—at long last—abolished racial segregation.<sup>282</sup> Despite the success of integration during the Korean War, the Army lagged behind their female branch, for those like First Lieutenant Ethel Bridgeforth Sampson helped Fort Lee adopt desegregation years earlier.

A product of the Women's Army Corps' enlistment panic in the early 1950s, Ethel bypassed the traditional avenue of Officer Candidate School (OCS) and entered Fort Lee from civilian life as a Second Lieutenant on July 25, 1951, just weeks before the black press deemed the WAC training center an island of integration.<sup>283</sup> A member of Florence Saunders Farley's officer training company, Ethel and Florence composed two of the five black women represented in a group of one hundred Wacs. While she "didn't think much about it at the time," First Lieutenant Ethel Bridgeforth Sampson's participation in CBR training at Fort Devens in 1952 is significant, because just seven years prior in 1945, black Wacs stationed at Fort Devens were not only segregated, but restricted to menial labor in the base hospitals and motor pools.<sup>284</sup> Though some forms of racial discrimination persisted in the WAC even after desegregation took place in April 1950, breaking down color lines at the Fort Lee training center—the national WAC headquarters—subsequently destructed racial barriers at other military bases, thus expanding occupational and training opportunities for black Wacs during and following the Korean War era.

Soon, however, the island of integration at Fort Lee—in large part fostered by Ethel and the thirty-nine other black women commissioned as WAC officers between 1948 and 1954—closed its

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<sup>281</sup> Pash, *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation*, 174.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Sampson Collection.

<sup>284</sup> Sampson Collection; Bolzenius, *Glory in Their Spirit*, 3, 35, 37, 44–45.

doors.<sup>285</sup> Interestingly, in 1950–1951, as the Fort Lee WAC training center implemented desegregation, the Army simultaneously began planning construction for a new WAC Center and School to be of higher quality and larger scale than Fort Lee.<sup>286</sup> In November 1950, then-Deputy Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Matthew Ridgeway visited Fort Lee and commented, “The barracks these young American women occupy... can never create any pride of occupancy. They are the dirty old temporary type of wooden shack. I think we can do better.”<sup>287</sup> After long debate over the location for a new and improved Women’s Army Corps Center, the planning committee selected Fort McClellan, Alabama to train future recruits and officers, although the Korean War delayed construction and completion. In the meantime, Fort Lee remained open and actively trained new Wacs, accepting its last company of recruits on June 17, 1954. Therefore, Clara Chapala’s entrance into the Women’s Army Corps in April 1954 made her one of the last women to train at Fort Lee. The Fort McClellan WAC Center and School was dedicated on September 27, 1954. Colonel Doris L. Caldwell noted that Fort McClellan “was the beginning of women” as career Wacs in the military.<sup>288</sup>

Still facing low recruitment rates between 1952 and 1954, the Army hoped that in addition to agreeing to pay the Wacs a competitive salary compared to civilian jobs, that McClellan’s state-of-the-art WAC Center and School would attract more recruits.<sup>289</sup> However, as the Korean War came to an end, the Women’s Army Corps’ personnel strength likewise declined from 11,456 (1,332 black) in June 1952 to 9,924 (1,169 black) a year later; by June 1954, it reduced in strength

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<sup>285</sup> “Summary of Information on Negro Women who have Served or are Serving in the Women’s Army Corps, 1942–1963, with Particular Reference to WAC Officers,” Prepared by Division of Doctrine and Literature, United States Women’s Army Corps School, October 1963, Army Women’s Museum, Fort Lee, VA, 8–9.

<sup>286</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 144–145.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

<sup>288</sup> Caldwell Interview, August 15, 2019.

<sup>289</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 143, 148–149.

again to 7,803 (869 black). While enlistment rates leveled off in the mid-to-late 1950s with an average of about 8,350 between 1955 and 1959, American involvement in Vietnam led to another exponential WAC increase that this time persisted beyond the war years. During the height of the Vietnam War (1967–1970), the Women’s Army Corps enlisted an average of 11,600 servicewomen, with over 12,000 in that latter year. Furthermore, during the last quarter-century as women’s role and presence in the armed forces normalized, the WAC succeeded in reaching new enlistment heights. By 1975, 39,171 women enlisted in the service and by 1978, the year in which the Women’s Army Corps officially disbanded, the WAC counted 52,996 enlisted women and officers. Unfortunately, during the Vietnam Era, the Women’s Army Corps did not maintain statistics on the number of black personnel, but their enlistment rates reappeared in 1972. The number of black Wacs experienced an incline and grew from 2,453 in 1972, to over 14,000 in 1978.<sup>290</sup>

These increased enlistment rates are likely due in part to the Army’s focus on ways to “improve job satisfaction” and its effort to utilize its Wacs in new ways.<sup>291</sup> While servicewomen occupied positions in “administration, communications, and medical care,” the Women’s Army Corps dedicated itself to expanding its offerings within those fields as Fort McClellan ushered in a new era for the WAC.<sup>292</sup> Additionally, as America’s presence in Vietnam grew in the mid-to-late 1960s, the Women’s Army Corps entreated the Department of Defense to not only expand the size of the WAC, but to “explore their utilization in other [occupational] fields” and “urged that more women be stationed overseas.”<sup>293</sup> Doris L. Caldwell, who pursued a long-term career in the Army, served in the Vietnam War. When asked about women in combat in the 1960s, Doris

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<sup>290</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 409–410, 415.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid*, 152.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid*, 152–153.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid*, 223.

notably remarked that, “We never trained the men to command women” which presented problems in Vietnam. She explained:

When I was in Vietnam, I was assigned to the Engineers, and we never went 24 hours where we didn’t have a bombing or something, and we Engineers would be called out, and my job as the admin officer was always to take down the debris and that sort of thing. And we found that they had to leave me back because the men on their own decided I needed protecting...So among themselves they would decide one man had to stay by me. Well you can’t do that because we’re all vulnerable and so [the Army decided] simply not to take me out anymore. And you know, the average American boy, if he has a sister, his parents teach him to take care of his sister. If he has a girlfriend, the parents tell him to take care of the girlfriend. It’s different now...but...I don’t think there was a WAC unit in the United States back in the fifties and sixties that didn’t have a white fence around it.<sup>294</sup>

Doris, who returned from Vietnam in 1967, felt that while “women have now proved themselves,” during her early years in the Army, the Wacs were seen as vulnerable beings needing of protection.<sup>295</sup>

The Women’s Army Corps was institutionally disbanded in 1978 in order to be “fully assimilated into the permanent establishment.”<sup>296</sup> Servicewomen, including African Americans, have achieved great success in all branches of the armed forces, and have even entered the academies. In May 2019, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point graduated its highest number of black female cadets in the school’s history. The *Army Times* reported that while “West Point remains mostly white and mostly male,” that the Class of 2019 featured thirty-four black women—an “historic milestone” for the Academy and servicewomen in the armed forces.<sup>297</sup> Following in the footsteps of 6,500 African American Wacs during World War II; 5,064 in the Korean War; and countless more in Vietnam and since, these young West Point cadets—who hail from fourteen

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<sup>294</sup> Caldwell Interview, August 15, 2019.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Morden, *The Women’s Army Corps*, 397.

<sup>297</sup> Michael Hill, “West Point to Graduate Record Number of Black Female Cadets,” *Army Times*, May 23, 2019, Web, Accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/05/23/west-point-to-graduate-record-number-of-black-female-cadets/>.

states—sustain a strong legacy of black women in uniform.<sup>298</sup> This long history indicates that women of any race, ethnicity, class, or background can possess the “desire and the courage” to be of service.<sup>299</sup>



**Figure 15.** *Class of 2019, United States Military Academy at West Point. Army Times.*

This thesis is the first to examine desegregation of the Women’s Army Corps at Fort Lee and to use oral history to explore the racial culture and attitudes among the enlisted women and officers as the WAC transitioned to integrated service in the early 1950s. Though a historiographical contribution on its own, this research presents myriad opportunities for expansion. Looking forward, should researchers wish to return to the subject of women and military desegregation or the WAC at mid-century, plenty of source material exists. A subtopic, though regrettably limited in this thesis, for which research opportunities are abundant, is further

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<sup>298</sup> “2019 Female African American Graduates States,” Unpublished Report, West Point Office of Institutional Research Email Correspondence with Meika Downey, June 12, 2019.

<sup>299</sup> Private Thelma Lee O’Kelley to Mary McLeod Bethune, Undated Letter 1944, Box 18, Folder 1, National Archive for Black Women’s History, Landover, MD.

exploration of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Council of Negro Women's efforts to achieve racial equality in the armed forces. While cursorily discussed in chapter one, Bethune maintained close ties with the Women's Army Corps during World War II and devoted time, resources, and personnel to advocating for African American Wacs. Today, the National Archive for Black Women's History in Landover, Maryland possesses an extraordinary collection of pertinent records on black Wacs in World War II. Furthermore, other avenues of extended research on the WAC includes more intricately exploring Asian and Latina women serving during desegregation. How did race impact their service and experience? Clara Chapala's oral history contributed greatly to this subject, but her story represents just one of many. In examining company photographs, the Women's Army Corps enlisted significant percentages of Asian and Latina women in its ranks. Their experiences are unique compared to both black and white Wacs alike. Finally, in simply examining women in the service, little research exists on women enlisted in the other military branches in the twentieth century, during desegregation or otherwise. Though this thesis featured original oral histories, there exists an impressive oral history collection with the University of North Carolina Greensboro's Women Veterans Oral History Project; interested historians and scholars ought not overlook these valuable sources in further exploring women in service.

Oral histories proved a vital component of this thesis, not only in accurately piecing together an understanding of the racial atmosphere within the Women's Army Corps training center at Fort Lee between 1948–1954, but also in accentuating the important role of servicewomen in desegregating the military. The ways in which the WAC recruits and officers responded to integration at Fort Lee in the 1950s set positive precedents for desegregation across the armed forces. Nine women, whose biographies are included in the attached appendix, shared

their memories and experiences of basic training at Fort Lee and their impressions of integration. While some hesitated to agree that their time in the Women's Army Corps at Fort Lee contributed to anything larger than themselves—such as the Civil Rights Movement—these women generously shared their experiences. The oral history interviews utilized in this project will be donated to the Army Women's Museum at Fort Lee in the hope that other scholars will continue to glean value from these sources in understanding the process and importance of desegregation of the Women's Army Corps. Furthermore, perhaps these oral histories and this thesis at large, will promote the inclusion of Executive Order 9981 as a monumental advancement for black Americans and more prominently considered within the broader trajectory of the Civil Rights Movement.



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 Ramona Vincilione Chipman, August 16, 2019  
 Florence Saunders Farley, October 1, 2019  
 Kay Turner Greczkowski, September 22, 2019  
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### *Appendix A: Oral History Biographies*

When conducting preliminary investigations about researching the desegregation of the Women's Army Corps in the postwar and Korean War era, and realizing related literature on the subject was incredibly thin, locating WAC veterans for oral history seemed the most promising route to pursuing this topic. However, I had not the slightest idea as to how to find women who would now be in their mid-80s at youngest. I began my search with archives from the Army Women's Museum at Fort Lee and researched various names of black women who had trained at the base in the mid-twentieth century. However, my search of finding women still living soon became discouraging, as numerous results reported "deceased" within the past couple of years. I then contacted the Women's Army Corps Veterans Association, and after not receiving a reply to my inquiry, I began to truly question the feasibility of the project. However, in late summer 2019, my luck turned around. I started to receive phone calls and email messages from elderly women from around the country who had served in the WAC at Fort Lee between 1948 and 1954; all unsure how helpful they could be with my research, but willing to talk with me nonetheless. As it turned out, my reaching out to the WAC Veterans Association was fruitful because there was an announcement about my research and desire to speak with Korean War era veterans who trained at Fort Lee circulating amongst their network. By the October 1, 2019, I had conducted twelve oral history interviews across nine women. These veterans have given not only myself, but the world of academia and society in general, a wonderful gift in sharing their memories, experiences, and in some cases, photos and documentation, of their time serving in the Women's Army Corps. Learn more about their lives and service below.

### **Doris L. Caldwell**

Colonel Doris L. Caldwell was born in 1930 and raised in Sacramento, California. She never intended to join the Women's Army Corps, instead planning to attend college after graduating high school in 1948, but Doris' friend convinced her to visit the WAC recruiting station. Doris then enlisted in the WAC despite its "terrible reputation" because the recruitment officer challenged Doris' ability to pass the entrance test. At a mere eighteen years old, Doris traveled from San Francisco to Richmond and arrived at what was then Camp Lee on New Year's Eve, 1948. When asked about desegregation at Fort Lee, Doris replied, "In the women, there was no problem. We integrated beautifully. We truly did." After completing her basic training at Camp Lee in 1949, Doris was assigned to the Presidio in California and then sent overseas to Tokyo as war burgeoned in Korea. She honorably discharged from the Women's Army Corps in 1952 in order to attend college. Doris returned to the WAC in 1956, remained in the Army for nearly thirty more years and had a distinguished career in WAC recruitment and pursuing racial equality in the Army. Doris served in Vietnam in the 1960s, was promoted to full Colonel in 1976, and worked in the Pentagon on the Uniform Board for Correction of Military Records under Robert McNamara. Colonel Caldwell eventually retired in 2001 at Fort Huachuca, Arizona at 71 years old. She lives in Sierra Vista, Arizona and remains active in her local community.



*Doris Caldwell. Photo courtesy of Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame Society.*

### **Ramona Vincilione Chipman**

Ramona Vincilione Chipman was born in California in 1929 and decided to join the Women's Army Corps in 1949 after high school because there were not enough adequate career opportunities at home. She recalled, "I really wanted to do something. I wanted to work and learn and do something." After enlisting in San Francisco, Ramona traveled to Camp Lee and the first thing she recalled about arriving for basic training was how hot the Virginia temperatures were compared to her native California. Upon graduating basic training, Ramona went on to complete her Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Fort Lee where she again graduated in April 1950—the same month in which segregation ended at the WAC training center. After a period of training new recruits at Fort Lee, Ramona worked in WAC recruiting in California for three years. In 1954, the Women's Army Corps assigned Ramona overseas service and she deployed for two years to Japan. Ramona vividly recalled climbing Mount Fuji while in-country. She discharged in 1956 and returned home to America where she married. Years later in 1977, Ramona re-enlisted in the Army Reserves to complete her twenty years in the service. She finally retired in 1989 as a First Sergeant. Ramona believes "joining the Army was the smartest thing I ever did in my life. I'm very grateful for what the Army taught me. Most of the important things I ever learned I learned in the Army. So, I still consider myself in the Army and I'm going to be 90 pretty soon." Ramona lives in Novato, California.





*Ethel at Fort Lee, 1949. Photo courtesy of Ethel's granddaughter, Shannon Robichaud.*

### **Ethel Barnes Naddaff**

Ethel Barnes Naddaff was born on June 8, 1931 in Walpole, Massachusetts. After graduating from high school in June 1949, Ethel determined that “there was not very much around Walpole in the way of jobs for women, except pushing plugs in the telephone office, [and] when Dad kiboshed college, I decided to see whether I could qualify for military.” Also a young eighteen-year-old, Ethel enlisted in the Women’s Army Corps at a Boston recruitment office on August 19, 1949. After arriving in Richmond, Virginia, Ethel and a small group of recruits “were loaded into the back of a military truck and taken to Fort Lee.” Ethel went on to enter Company D, First Platoon, completed her thirteen weeks of basic training, and then attended stenographer school at Fort Holabird, Maryland. Ethel excelled in her training and “was soon cleared to access and handle Top Secret paperwork” for the Department of Defense during the Korean War. Ethel reflected that “to this day...becom[ing] a

Wac...helped me be successful in the rest of my adult life.” Today, Ethel lives in Norton, Massachusetts.

### **Florence Saunders Farley**

One of nine siblings, Florence Saunders Farley was born in Roanoke, Virginia on May 28, 1928. Florence received a scholarship to attend Virginia State University in Petersburg and earned her Bachelor’s degree in Psychology in 1950. She returned home to Roanoke to pursue a career in teaching, but “there was a recession and few-to-know jobs available for black college graduates. My family couldn’t understand how I could have gone to college and came back and couldn’t get a job.” Interested in saving money for graduate school, at twenty-two years old, Florence found herself in a Women’s Army Corps recruiting office after hearing that women with college degrees could enter as Second Lieutenants. While her brothers—veterans of World War II—were wary about their sister joining the Army, Florence’s mother “was always encouraging of what I wanted to do as long as it wasn’t going to jail.” Joining the WAC in the summer of 1951 and swearing in as a Second Lieutenant, Florence once again



*Florence, Officer Training Company graduation photo, February 1, 1952. Photo courtesy of Julia Sampson.*

returned to Petersburg to begin her officer training course at the Fort Lee WAC center. Serving for two years and eventually training integrated basic recruits at Fort Lee, Florence left the Women’s

Army Corps as a First Lieutenant in 1953. Having saved money to attend graduate school, Florence then earned a Master's degree in Psychology from Virginia State University and joined the faculty in 1962, chaired the department for a few years, and then received her PhD from Kent State University in 1977. Florence said that in the military, she "learned the difference between teaching and education. [Serving in the Women's Army Corps] made me a good teacher... Training is just that; you learn this is the way this is done and you do it this way... There are some things in life that requires training. Then there are other things in life that you get by education and... I think learning in the Army taught me to do both of those things." In addition to serving as an officer in the WAC and earning a PhD in Psychology, Florence also held a distinguished career in local politics. She became the first black woman elected to Petersburg's City Council in 1973 and in 1984 Florence was elected the first female mayor of Petersburg and the first black woman to be mayor of any Virginia city. Florence still resides in Petersburg.

### Joyce Jackson Button



*Joyce's Company A graduation photo, Fort Lee, Virginia, 1951. Photo courtesy of Joyce Jackson Button.*

Born in 1933, Joyce was raised in Kenosha, Wisconsin. She enlisted in the Women's Army Corps at eighteen years old in 1951 to earn money for college. She arrived at Fort Lee in October 1951 and recalled upon departing the truck, someone shouting at her: "Are you a Reb or a Yank?!" Taken aback, Joyce thought, "*What are they talking about?!*" The Women's Army Corps training center at Fort Lee was desegregated at this time and Joyce recalled the several black recruits in her Company A. She was at Fort Lee during the filming of *Never Wave at a WAC* (1953) and Joyce was captured in the film marching but "didn't sneak a peek at anybody important." After completing basic training in December 1951, Joyce returned home to Kenosha for Christmas and then reported to Fort Sam Houston in Texas for medical corps training in January 1952. Joyce trained as a dental assistant. She then went to Fort Riley, Kansas

where she was assigned to the dental clinic and assisted both in the chair and was an x-ray technician "until one of the fella's took over." Joyce's two-year enlistment term expired in October 1953 and while she was offered re-enlistment and an opportunity to serve in Germany or Japan, she decided to go home to Kenosha. Joyce discharged from the Women's Army and attended college at Marquette University. She married in 1957, raised a family, and had a long career as a nurse. Joyce remarried years later and moved to Oregon in 1987 where she still lives today.



### **Mary Ann Smith Harrington**

Mary Ann Smith Harrington was born on July 18, 1931 in McKeepport, Pennsylvania. The eldest of three siblings, she grew up in a religious and strict family. “Mom and dad ran the show,” Mary Ann recalled. She graduated from a Catholic high school and then at at nineteen years old, and without her parents initially knowing, Mary Ann enlisted in the Women’s Army Corps in Pittsburgh. She wanted “to escape small town relatives who hassled me because I wasn’t engaged or ready to marry at 18. I also wanted to go nursing school [but] there wasn’t any money for tuition and the Army promised me medical training.” After her parents signed her enlistment papers since Mary Ann was under twenty-one, she arrived at Fort Lee in July 1950 and was assigned to Company C Fourth Platoon. After basic training at a desegregated Fort Lee, Mary Ann demonstrated great skill in teletype and cryptography. She and her family passed FBI background checks and she attended Signal School in Georgia from September to December 1950. Mary Ann then was “sent to 6<sup>th</sup> Army Headquarters at the Presidio of San Francisco and worked the crypt room on the swing shift. It was a dream assignment.” She married during the last year of her enlistment and discharged from the Women’s Army Corps when she became pregnant. After leaving the WAC in 1952 and ten years of marriage, Mary Ann began what would become a twenty-five-year career in banking. All the while, she remained supportive of the armed forces. Years after leaving the Women’s Army Corps, Mary Ann served six years in the Army National Guard. Additionally, Mary Ann remained involved with the United Veterans Council, WAC Veterans Association, and worked as a volunteer for the VA Hospital among other community engagements. In October 2019, Mary Ann participated in the Honor Flight from San Diego to Washington, D.C. She resides in El Cajon, California.



*Mary Ann at Fort Lee, Summer, 1950. Photo courtesy of Mary Ann Harrington.*

### **Kathleen “Kay” Turner Greczkowski**

Kay Turner Greczkowski was born on January 28, 1931 in Bowdoinham, Maine and was the youngest of six siblings. After completing high school at eighteen years old, Kay did not know what she wanted to do and the “Women’s Army Corps was very attractive.” In short order, Kay enlisted in the WAC in Portland at Fort Preble in January 1950, a couple of days’ shy of her nineteenth birthday. Kay’s family largely supported her joining the service though one of her brothers cautioned her, “You ain’t gonna like it!” Kay arrived at Fort Lee in January, just a couple months before the WAC training center desegregated in April. As such, training remained segregated for much of Kay’s time at Fort Lee. At the end of basic training in May 1950, Kay took Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) aptitude tests and having “wanted to be a nurse, I kept picking the medical kind of questions.” Kay was assigned to the medical corps and sent to Fort Sam Houston, Texas in June 1950 for an eight-week training course as a medical technician. By the time Kay reached Texas, the Women’s Army Corps was fully desegregated and she recalled that the “woman next to me [in the barracks] was black.” After completing her training at Fort

Sam Houston, Kay travelled to Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C. where she worked for almost one year until she was assigned for overseas service during the Korean War. Kay arrived in Okinawa, Japan for assignment in May 1951. During her year of service abroad, Kay met and married a fellow soldier and was afforded a “discharge on account of marriage.” Her husband was career Army and they spent years traveling and living around the world—including a return sojourn in Japan—before settling in California. At thirty-nine, Kay completed a two-year nursing program at a local community college in Santa Rosa. She still lives in California.

### **Ethel Bridgeforth Sampson**



*Ethel, 1951. Photo courtesy of Julia Sampson.*

Ethel Mae Bridgeforth Sampson was born on May 27, 1926 in the Orange Mound community in Memphis, Tennessee. The eldest of four siblings, Ethel graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1949 and went on to attend Le Moyne College. She was the first person in her family to attend college and Ethel earned a B.A. in Humanities. Ethel’s daughter Julia Sampson noted that “she didn’t want be a secretary or a teacher, she...needed another option.” Ethel looked to joining the Women’s Army Corps in 1951, for like Florence Saunders Farley, with a college degree, Ethel could directly enter the WAC as an officer. Ethel enlisted in the Women’s Army Corps in September 1951 and completed her officers training at Fort Lee. Graduating as a First Lieutenant, Ethel was assigned to the 1262<sup>nd</sup> Army Service Unit and reported to Fort Dix, New Jersey where she worked as a Supply Officer. Ethel later attended Chemical Defense School at Fort Devens, Massachusetts in July 1952 for two weeks of Chemical, Biological, and Radiological (CBR) training. Ethel discharged from the

Women’s Army Corps in May 1953. After leaving the armed forces, Ethel held a career in the Civil Service for several years including with the Department of the Army (1955–1958) and Department of the Interior (1959–1961). She later worked in Health and Human Services as the first black claims representative. Ethel married in 1956; her husband was career military and they and soon two children spent years living around the United States before settling in Memphis as her children reached school-age. Her daughter Julia mentioned that Ethel “planted a flower bed everywhere we lived.” Serving in the Women’s Army Corps was formative for Ethel, and instilled a strong work ethic and social justice philosophies—ideals she passed to her children. Julia recalled one of her mother’s life mantras: “To whom much is given, much is expected.” Ethel passed away on June 1, 2011 just after her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### **Clara Chapala**

First generation Mexican-American and one of five children, Clara Chapala was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan on November 18, 1935. Clara joined the Women’s Army Corps at eighteen years old in April 1954. Her parents supported her and trusted her judgement to make such a big decision at a young age. “They had gotten used to their strong-willed girl [doing] what she was

going to do.” Essentially, Clara’s parents could not have convinced her to change her mind if they tried. Arriving at Fort Lee, Clara was assigned to Company C and took quickly to life as a Wac. After completing basic training in the summer 1954, Clara received her Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) as a telephone operator and she reported to Fort Ord, California for further training. She worked “first as a switchboard operator and then after receiving training in Basic Army Administration, I was assigned as an office assistant to the Headquarters Company...I enjoyed the work.” She remained at Fort Ord until January 1956 and discharged from the Women’s Army Corps, and “as a result of this assignment, California has become by home.” Using the G.I. Bill, Clara began college courses in Los Angeles and eventually earned a B.A. in Spanish and teaching credentials from San Francisco State College. Clara noted that joining the Women’s Army Corps was “a life changing and a life forming experience. But I was up to it, I do know that I was up to it. It was a good decision that I made... [One develops] a certain amount of resilience” in the service. Clara remained connected to the military and the Women’s Army Corps by supporting veteran’s affairs and her local WAC chapter. “Although women’s Army service has been integrated [with men] and that is a good thing, in terms of opportunities, my experience was a unique one. The separation of the sexes, in certain situations, provided, at the time a kind of protection, that allowed us to develop our strengths and abilities without the pressure of dealing with the tensions of integration that many women...are struggling with in today’s military.” Clara lives in Sacramento, California.