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THE TRAINING OF WAACS AT STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE TEACHER'S COLLEGE

by Karen Kaemmerling¹

During World War II for the first time the American military experimented with incorporating women into each branch of service. Although women never comprised more than two percent of the United States military during World War II, women soldiers dramatically broke from the traditional American women's sphere.² The Army led the armed forces by seeking congressional approval for an all-female corps. On May 14, 1942, Congress passed the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps Act, designed to enroll 150,000 women between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five for non-combat service. Oveta Culp Hobby, wife of former Texas Governor William P. Hobby, became a colonel and the first director of the WAACs. Army women assisted with the overall war effort and increased manpower by releasing men for combat. Army commanders wanted to use the existing knowledge, skills, and special training of the nation's women – particularly secretarial skills.

Although Congress quickly rejected a proposition to draft women, a huge voluntary recruiting campaign began in a society that traditionally viewed the military as a masculine field. However, poor recruiting statistics resulted from the ambiguous auxiliary status, competition from other services, high paying war jobs, poor organization and discriminatory philosophy of the recruiters, the negative attitude of male GIs, and slander campaigns targeting WAACs.³ In September 1943, Congress granted WAACs full military status, changing the organization's name to Women's Army Corps, lowering the entry age to twenty, and giving WACs pay, allowances, benefits, and privileges equal to men. At the height of expansion in 1943, sixty thousand women had enrolled in the WAAC, and the Army ran five basic training centers and many specialty schools for them. WAACs, including those trained at WAAC Branch No. 1, Army Administration School at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College, worked at eighty-three Army posts, camps, and stations in the United States.⁴

Becoming a soldier was a difficult task, especially in a man's army. The purpose of basic training for WAACs, originally a four-week program, was to provide women a broader outlook on life, an understanding of complex organizations, self-discipline, and skills to cope with military life.⁵ At bases such as Fort Des Moines, Iowa; Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia; Daytona Beach, Florida; Fort Devens, Massachusetts; and Camp Ruston, Louisiana, women received basic and some specialized training. To the surprise of many commanders, training women presented few problems. Trainers initially emphasized military hazing which tried to make a woman a soldier the first day and hurt morale. The Army soon learned to postpone "yuck" duties such as KP – "Kitchen Police" – which entailed cleaning grease traps, scrubbing floors, and emptying G.I. cans (trash cans). Women ate the mess hall's tasteless, heavy food that caused eighty-two percent of the WAACs to gain an

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average of six pounds.⁶ At boot camp, the Army introduced women for the first time to poor-fitting uniforms, crowded barracks, and rigorous Army life.

In 1944 basic training for women included 288 hours of classes, and the Army instructed WAACs in military practices such as squaring corners of the bed, drill, physical training, and inspections. WAACs received five times more instruction in army organization, four times more in military courtesy and articles of war, and one third as much drill and PT as men. Women and men in basic took the same number of hours in Map and Aerial Photography Reading and Chemical Warfare. Unlike men, women took required classes in indoctrination, administration, and supply. Since WAACs were noncombatants, they took no combat courses, whereas men took 153 hours of such courses.⁷ WAACs, however, participated in gas mask drills, tear-gas chambers, guard duty, and a short forced march.⁸ Although the basic training experience for a woman differed from that of a man, WAACs fully experienced Army life.

After basic training, the Army provided instruction for WAACs in tasks that were acceptable for women soldiers. The prominent areas of service were administration, motor transportation, kitchen duty, and communications. In March 1943, WAAC training programs of various kinds opened at twenty-eight colleges.⁹ Specialty training at universities was common for women assigned to the Army Service Forces. In May 1943, sixty-four percent of the WAACs worked in army administration. The clerk's course taught mostly paperwork skills in classes that included Touch Typing, Correspondence and Filing, Company Records and Reports, Personnel Administration, and Finance.¹⁰ The Army located five administration schools at colleges in the southwest. WAAC Branch No. 1, Army Administration School, the first of its kind in the United States, opened at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College, Nacogdoches, Texas, on February 15, 1943. Although many women had worked in administrative positions as civilians and felt the Administration School only delayed field duty, they were enrolled in a six-to-eight-week course to train in military administrative procedures.

Due to a drop in enrollment, the new president of Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College, Dr. Paul Boynton, encouraged the Army to open an administrative school for the WAACs on his campus.¹¹ World War II brought a dramatic drop in enrollment because many men and women had left to participate in the war effort. Boynton thought that the presence of the WAACs would keep the school from closing. Opened on February 12, 1943, the Administration School was the first of its kind in the nation and added to Texas' contributions to the war effort. The Administration School in Nacogdoches was the first to have permanent WAAC enlisted personnel and to be partly run by WAAC officers. Forty enlisted WAACs and twenty-one officers were stationed at SFA. Also, WAAC Branch No. 1, Army Administration School, was the first which operated directly under a branch of the Regular Army, the Adjutant General's Office.¹²

The officers and the SFA band met the first 250 WAAC students on February 12, 1943, at the Southern Pacific Station in Nacogdoches. After the WAACs detrained, the WAACs, led by the band, marched two miles in

military formation through the business section of town and out Mound Street to the college.¹³ At the dispensary, they received a short physical, which included a vaginal examination. The first class brought "that little louse," the crab, with them.¹⁴ The second class humorously called themselves the "Flashlight Brigade," because medical technicians examined them every few days until no eggs appeared. According to the Army, during basic training at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, the women had slept in the bunks of infected soldiers and contracted the louse.

On February 15, 1943, the formal opening and dedication ceremony took place in the Aikman Gym. Lt. Col. Albert L. Price, assistant commandant to the adjutant general, told the audience that in order for the women to be respected they must do their jobs better than the men they replaced. Price told the WAACs they had to maintain a "spirit and fire from within" to prove the corps' validity. President Boynton welcomed the WAACs "to hard work" and told them to "drink deeply from the many springs of human friendship" they would develop in the WAAC and while they stayed in Nacogdoches.¹⁵ Directly after the ceremonies, the female soldiers proceeded to classes.

Although the college housed and fed the WAACs, an Army staff instructed them. The headquarters consisted of military personnel who executed all administration and clerical duties. The Army stationed experienced commanders and qualified WAAC officers at the school. Twenty-one officers came from the adjutant general's department, and twenty-one WAAC officers and forty enlisted women comprised the staff. All together 700 persons, including civilian personnel, constituted the staff, which maintained a strict operating procedure for an efficiently run school.

There were five main offices at WAAC Branch No. 1, Army Administration School. The commanding officer was Lt. Col. Thomas M. Childs. The Adjutant, Cpt. Alford T. Hearne, directed all administrative matters concerning personnel, including recording maintenance and official correspondence. The academic department, directed by Maj. John C. Woodbury, planned instruction, arranged class schedules, and taught the WAAC students. Cpt. Ellen M. Bailey, assistant education director, was the highest ranking female officer at the school. The quartermaster, Cpt. Hiram Clark, handled procurement of supplies and kept records. Maj. James Wolfstein's medical department, which utilized fifty people, including WAAC enrollees, enlisted men, and civil service employees, dealt with health and sanitation. The enrollees, who were part of the permanent headquarters company, were assigned such duties as post sergeant major, mail clerks, correspondence clerks, mimeograph operators, chauffeurs, and x-ray technicians.¹⁶

At Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College, the first class of 250 trainees (Company A) graduated on March 24, 1943, and eleven more classes followed, with the final class graduating on January 26, 1944. The school's capacity was 600 students, with 300 students graduating every three weeks until the course was expanded to an eight-week program in June with an increased emphasis on clerical training. The first class was Company A, Class 1. The next class was

Company B, Class 2, and the next class was Company A, Class 3. Thus the classes were lettered alternately A and B but numbered consecutively.

Four large classrooms were prepared in the basement of the Austin Building, and each room seated 150 students. Students completed eighty-seven courses ranging from one to twenty-six hours on sixty subjects. The classes focused on personal management, business management, and management of records. Students learned skills in typing, military correspondence, and report preparation. The methods of instruction included student participation, visual aids, and teacher demonstrations. Women who graduated from the Administration School served in the Army Service Forces in clerical positions.¹⁷

The WAACs essentially remained separate from the civilian students at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College. Civilian students moved to private homes and boarding houses, while WAACs lived in the dorms. Compared to basic training accommodations, the housing accommodations at SFA seemed plush. Double decker beds were put in the dorms, and the first group of WAAC trainees were housed in Gibbs Hall; others stayed in the former boy's dorm, presently Wisely Hall, and in the remolded Women's Recreation Building. The school added another floor to the men's gymnasium, converting it to a dormitory, where each room accommodated six women. In that dorm one bathroom served two bedrooms, with a sink and a show stall in every room. Offices were put in the basement of the science building, presently the Chemistry Building, and a one-room post exchange and housing for noncommissioned officers was located in the Women's Recreation Center.¹⁸

The WAACs ate in the school's cafeteria where civilian cooks prepared the meals. Male student waiters served each WAAC company in two shifts. The civilian cooks, however, were not appreciated by newcomers who were not accustomed to the Southern diet, which included many fried foods. The northern WAACs thought the cooks used too much grease and seasoning. One student refused to eat "strange looking hominy grits."¹⁹

When WAACs arrived in Nacogdoches, they brought a new aspect of World War II to a small Texas town and college. After a short adjustment period, the conservative, East Texas community accepted the visiting female soldiers, whose money helped sustain local businesses. On the verge of closing, Stephen F. Austin welcomed the Army's business which helped the college survive an economic crisis. Some members of the community opened their homes to the WAACs. For instance, Lena and Leon Aaron welcomed the Jewish girls into their home to observe Passover. However, Clarice Pollard, a member of Class 4, recalled that the girls could not help but giggle as Mr. Aaron read the Hebrew passages with a Texas drawl.²⁰ Organizations and clubs planned events and social activities for the WAACs, and churches welcomed the women into their congregations. Through public subscription, on May 15, 1943, the community opened a USO in downtown Nacogdoches for noncommissioned WAACs and visiting service men. Lt. Col. Childs recognized the work of the War Recreation Council, and he stated that the facility demonstrated the "spirit of cooperation" between the community and the military.²¹

Although many women had positive recollections of SFA and Nacogdoches, Sybil Lightfoot, a member of the first class, recalled that the townspeople listened to ugly rumors about the WAACs. When she attended a Catholic service, the priest welcomed them and then verbally attacked them about the Army's custom of issuing contraceptives, which the WAACs actually never received. In Lightfoot's opinion, the townspeople thought WAACs were all camp followers, issued new nylon stockings and diaphragms, and were pawns of the Axis powers who provide information to the enemy.²² However a member of the second class recalled, "People always treated us very well," and she remembered farmers picking up WAACs as they walked to town.²³ Pollard's impression of the community after her arrival in Nacogdoches was the "glow of a gracious reception and a view from the campus of graceful plantation-style homes, there was an atmosphere of wealth, spaciousness, and lush greenery." Her most significant impression of the WAAC at SFA was the "awareness of that special aura surrounding a colorful Texas town and the Teachers College, where everything, then in short wartime supply, was shared with a great-hearted spirit that made the 'little' seem unendingly abundant."²⁴

The WAACs maintained a busy daily schedule to complete the large number of courses during a short period of time. The women rose at 6 a.m. and had seven hours of classes, two hours of supervised study, and one hour of drill. They received one hour of free time during the day. Lights went out and taps played at 10:30 p.m., except on Saturday and Sunday. Commanders held the Saturday bed check at midnight.²⁵ The WAACs got Sundays and holidays off. For public display, the WAAC held All-Retreats, close order drills, parades, and ceremonies at the Lower Birdwell Field three times a week, with commanders reviewing WAACs on Friday. Unlike other posts, WAACs at Branch No. 1 were not required to do KP or laundry.

WAACs found many activities to occupy their free time. They attended the local movie theater, organized baseball games among WAAC companies, swam at Fern Lake, and strolled to town for shopping and visiting. Lt. Col. Childs found that the women were "just as interested in beauty parlors as before."²⁶ However, trips to town were difficult in the Texas heat, because women wore full dress uniforms with all buttons buttoned, ties tied, and hats on their heads.²⁷ When the WAACs were off duty, they could wear civilian clothes, but the Army encouraged them to appear neat. The headquarters also granted WAACs at the Administration School leaves to visit local towns and cities. Many traveled to see boyfriends, parents, and other family members in Shreveport, Houston, and Dallas.

The WAACs unified and busied themselves with class activities. WAACs elected members to hold offices and to run weekly class meetings on Monday nights. The positions included president, vice president, athletic coordinator, welfare chairman, and social representative. The athletic coordinator planned sports activity schedules, including baseball and basketball games, horseback riding, and golf. The welfare or "gripe" chairman tried to keep the WAACs happy and content. The students also published the first newspaper of WAAC Branch No. 1 on February 27, 1943. The WAAC classes made the mimeo-

graphed service newspaper called the "Tag Echo" only for the WAACs stationed at the school. The articles in the newspapers had information on WAACs stationed at SFA, the school's staff, and current events.

A WAAC talent show, planned by the social representative, was staged before each graduation by the WAACs to demonstrate appreciation for the community and for the entertainment of the next class. The first WAAC variety show drew one of the largest crowds ever to Nacogdoches High school, some 2,000 people.²⁸ The shows became town attractions and involved community members in the WAAC program. Preparations began at least three weeks prior to the performance. The shows generally had a theme and included skits directed and performed by WAACs. Performing a variety show the night before graduation became an integral part of the ceremonies.

Twelve classes graduated from WAAC Branch No. 1 at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College, and residents of Nacogdoches were invited to the ceremonies. Graduation included a processional, the National Anthem, an invocation, a musical interlude sung by WAACs, a graduation address, valedictory remarks by the president of the WAAC class, a benediction, and a recessional. The invocation and benediction were performed by various church leaders of the community. Principal speakers included Brig. Gen. Herbert C. Holdridge, the commanding general of all army administration schools; Col. Joseph S. Harbinson, a veteran of World War I; Dr. William Alton Birdwell, President Emeritus of Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College; and A. J. Thompson, Mayor of Nacogdoches.

After the WAACs completed their courses, they were marched back to the train station and went to their next posts located across the nation and throughout the world. Many women were stationed at Army Air Corps fields, where they served in a secretarial capacity. Some women received commissions and went to OCS at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. Others served overseas such as Lt. Marjorie Stewart, who traveled to Paris and Munich. Women who were trained at WAAC Branch No. 1 contributed to the overall war effort and served their nation with pride at many locations in the United States and abroad.

More than 2,000 women completed training at WAAC Branch No. 1, Army Administration School and lived in Nacogdoches. As the specialty schools became less practical, the Army consolidated training and enrolled women in coeducational classes. The practice of separate WAC administration schools had begun to lose support among army commanders as the costs exceeded the benefits. At many training facilities, cadre outnumbered students four to one. The class sizes had continued to grow smaller, pointing to failures of the WAC recruiting efforts. Rather than run small WAC schools, women attended regular army noncombat specialist schools. After only one year of service, WAAC Branch No. 1 closed in 1944, and the WACs, who possessed the skills, energy, and knowledge that made them valuable assets to a modern army left Nacogdoches.

NOTES

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- ⁵Nancy Shea, *The Waacs* (New York, 1943), pp. 210-214.
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- ⁹V.R. Cardozier, *Colleges and Universities in World War II* (Westport, Connecticut, 1993), p. 145.
- ¹⁰Mattie E. Treadwell, *The United States Army in World War II: Special Studies: The Women's Army Corps, 1944-1946* (Washington D.C., 1954), p. 787.
- ¹¹Nacogdoches Daily Sentinel, "SFA Aided War Effort with WAC," April 14, 1985. Dr. Paul Boynton became president of SFA in 1942.
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- ¹³Nacogdoches Daily Sentinel, "First Unit of WAAC Trainees Arrive in City," February 13, 1943.
- ¹⁴Mrs. Howard Briscoe Michaels letter to Tommie Jan Lowery, February 12, 1992.
- ¹⁵The Pine Log, "Ceremonies Open WAAC Branch at SFA Monday," February 20, 1943.
- ¹⁶The Pine Log, March 6, 1943, WAAC Branch No. 1 Scrapbook, Special Collections in Steen Library, Stephen F. Austin State University.
- ¹⁷Redland Herald, "First Army Administration School for WAAC Training Opens at SFA," February 11, 1943, WAAC Branch No. 1 Scrapbook, Special Collections, East Texas Research Center, Stephen F. Austin State University.
- ¹⁸Redland Herald, "College Facilities Altered to Fit New Training School," February 11, 1943, WAAC Branch No. 1 Scrapbook, Special Collections, East Texas Research Center, Stephen F. Austin State University.
- ¹⁹Mrs. Howard Briscoe Michaels letter to Mrs. Tommie J. Lowery, February 2, 1992.
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- ²¹Nacogdoches Daily Sentinel, "With the WAAC," WAAC Branch No. 1 Scrapbook, Special Collections, East Texas Research Center, Stephen F. Austin State University.
- ²²Sybil Lightfoot letter to Stephen F. Austin History Department.
- ²³Mrs. Howard Briscoe Michaels letter to Mrs. Tommie Jan Lowery, February 2, 1992.
- ²⁴Clarice Pollard, *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, p. 64.
- ²⁵Redland Herald, "First Army Administration School for WAAC Training Opens at SFA," February 11, 1943, WAAC Branch No. 1 Scrapbook, Special Collections, East Texas Research Center, Stephen F. Austin State University.
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- ²⁸The Pine Log, "Variety Show Draws One of the Largest Crowds Ever at NHS," March 27, 1943, WAAC Scrapbook No. 1, East Texas Research Center, Stephen F. Austin State University.