

## **A WAAC At Tradition: How the WAAC Bill of 1942 Passed**

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Created in 1942, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, also known as the WAAC, was a unit comprised of women who replaced men in non-combat roles in the Army. Although women in the WAAC were not officially a part of the Army in the sense that there was no system of military ranking, this was the first time that they were allowed to directly aid the Army in combat zones. The bill that established the WAAC unit became law on May 15, 1942 and allowed thousands of women all over the United States to have the chance to serve their country.<sup>1</sup> Despite this bill being a momentous stepping-stone into what would become a fight for women's rights in the Army, it was a controversial piece of legislation that had its share of enemies and supporters.

According to historian Leisa Meyer of the College of William & Mary, the WAAC bill was not supported by many congressmen because of the fear of the alteration of gender roles.<sup>2</sup> Many people did not support the bill because they did not want women to leave their jobs in homes and factories. Additionally, congressmen and enemies of the bill feared that women would forgo their domestic duties in order to take over what men did in the Army.<sup>3</sup> This left men believing that their masculinity was going to be taken away from them because women would be perceived as tougher and able to do the same things as men.

However, Janann Sherman, a historian who has a PhD in American history and the topic of women in American politics, wrote about reasons why the WAAC bill was supported, stating that many men in the military and other supporters of the WAAC bill believed that women could take over the non-combative jobs in the army in order to allow more men to fight in the war.<sup>4</sup> Sherman also wrote about how support for the bill came from legislators who believed that women had a right to demonstrate their patriotism.<sup>5</sup>

Though these two historians offer differing viewpoints on the reasons behind the support or lack thereof of the WAAC bill, the bill itself was a new piece of legislation that signaled a change in the way America perceived women and the military. Although the WAAC bill almost did not pass due to congressmen feeling conflicted about how the bill would affect traditional American culture, the bill eventually passed because high-ranking members of the Army saw the need for more men to fight, and supporters of the bill were able to assure members of Congress that the WAAC would be closely monitored and restricted.

### **Some Congressmen Hated It**

The WAAC bill almost failed due to congressmen disagreeing about how the WAAC would affect American culture. Some congressmen felt that the bill would result in

women being taken away from their jobs in factories, while others believed that the bill would ruin traditional gender roles in America. During the week that the WAAC bill was supposed to be signed, *New York Times* reporter Nona Baldwin wrote an article about the opposition the bill faced in Congress.<sup>6</sup> She quoted Congressman Clare Hoffman of Michigan who did not support the bill because he saw it as taking women away from factory jobs and homes.<sup>7</sup> To many congressmen and others, letting women work in factories and stay in the home as housewives were integral roles that allowed for America to keep functioning. As women usually stayed at home to take care of the kids and work factory jobs to produce goods for the Army, many congressmen felt that taking them away from those roles would result in America straying from its traditional values. Similarly, congressmen such as Frank Hook of Michigan believed that all the men in the country should be utilized in the Army before allowing women to aid because doing otherwise would be shameful for the men who were still trying to fight.<sup>8</sup> There were many men like Frank Hook, who felt that men would lose their dignity if women joined the Army, thus providing reasons for why the bill was not supported. Believing that the WAAC bill would either take women away from factory jobs or thinking that the bill would be unfair to the men in the Army led to many congressmen feeling hesitant to support the bill.

Furthermore, congressmen were against the idea of passing the WAAC bill because it went against their values. In the debate that took place on the floor of Congress over the bill, Andrew Somers of New York could not even discuss the bill seriously because he believed it to be so “revolting... to [his] sense of Americanism” and “decency.”<sup>9</sup> This sentiment was shared amongst other congressmen including Jennings Randolph of West Virginia who believed that having women aid the Army through the WAAC went against his “idea of the American way of doing business.”<sup>10</sup> The fact that the men voicing these concerns were congressmen who were about to vote on the passage of the bill suggests how much tension surrounded this piece of legislation. Similarly, the objections primarily stemming from their moral feelings and traditional beliefs about American culture reveals how radical this bill was for the time. This ultimately implies that the WAAC was an issue for many because it went against their morals and beliefs, and thus was not a heavily supported bill.

### **Most High-Ranking Members of the Army Loved It**

One of the biggest reasons why the WAAC bill passed was that high-ranking members of the Army supported the bill. They saw the WAAC as a chance to let more men fight in the physical war, an opportunity for women to take over the jobs that they were traditionally better suited for than men, and a chance for women to demonstrate their patriotism for the country.

On many of the WAAC recruiting posters that were sent all over the United States, one of the main ideas being advertised to women was that if they joined the WAAC they would

be allowing a soldier to participate in combat duty.<sup>11</sup> (See Appendix A.) By putting this on recruiting posters, it was clear to women all over the country that by joining the WAAC, they were increasing the efficiency of the Army. This was because they would be taking over the non-combat roles that men had to do in order to keep the Army running, thus freeing more men for combat. In fact, George Marshall, Chief of Staff in the Army, said that the war effort would have to include women because the demand for men to physically fight would be so large.<sup>12</sup> This was because the second World War was different than wars in the past as it was fought on a much larger and more violent scale. Furthermore, other countries such as Britain were already utilizing women as WAACs because the war was so large. It was this enormity of the war that required more of America to be involved in what was going on with it. It was also this large scale that allowed for high-ranking members of the Army to notice the need for women to take part in the war efforts in a larger way, thus leading to their full support of the WAAC bill.

The idea of women directly aiding the Army was a new idea for the time, and as a result it helped that women in the WAAC would not be given combat roles. Instead, women would be taking over the non-combat roles that men had in the Army such as those of clerks, machine operators, switchboard operators, pharmacists, dieticians, hostesses, librarians, cooks, and more.<sup>13</sup> These jobs would let women aid the Army without formally being a part of it, which appealed to many because women would mostly be taking over the domestic duties of the Army without being involved in the fighting that took place. This notion of women not being involved in combat further helped members of the Army support the WAAC bill because they knew that they would not be endangering the lives of women. Similarly, the women only taking part in the domestic duties of the Army helped put the WAAC into perspective for many because it helped remind civilians and high-ranking members of the military that women would not be allowed to engage in combat or interfere in the affairs of the Army in any matter. Instead, they would essentially do work similar to what occurred in their homes and in the factories.

In fact, George Marshall stated that, “there are a great many jobs connected with the Army’s war program that women can handle better than men.”<sup>14</sup> By this, he meant that women had more skills at certain roles than men did: namely the domestic duties of the Army that women were already doing as housewives and homemakers. By having women do domestic jobs and leaving the men to fight, the Army was increasing its productivity without doing anything that would disrupt gender roles. Many males in the Army were supportive of this idea because it was a way of keeping traditional gender roles intact during a time when everyone was needed to fight the war. To elaborate, the WAAC would allow for traditional roles to still be in place because women would be engaging in non-combat roles and men would be the ones who were fighting. This idea not only aided the Army in terms of their efficiency and productivity, but also helped strengthen the Army’s support of the WAAC bill.

Similarly, high-ranking members of the Army supported the WAAC bill because they saw it as a way of letting women serve their country. In a WAAC recruiting pamphlet, women stated that they loved joining the WAAC because they were doing a service to their country.<sup>15</sup> The idea of showing pride in one's country and being patriotic was an important value to Americans. Therefore, as women looked at these pamphlets and considered joining the WAAC, they knew that joining would be a great service to America. It was this feeling of letting all female citizens of the country have the chance to demonstrate their patriotism that led high-ranking members of the military to support the WAAC bill. Even though the WAAC bill, if passed, would not officially allow women to have Army titles and designations, women would still know that, "they [were] making a real contribution to victory."<sup>16</sup> This feeling resonated with many women and high-ranking members of the Army because it gave both groups an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of patriotism for their country.<sup>17</sup>

### **It Would be Baby-Sat**

Another main reason for why the WAAC bill passed was because supporters of the bill were able to convince members of Congress that the WAAC would be closely monitored and restricted. One of the most important things that helped Congress pass the bill was knowing that the WAAC would not officially be a part of the Army. In the *Morning Register*, a popular Iowan newspaper, an article published one week after the WAAC bill was signed specified that the WAAC would not formally be in the Army; instead, the women in the WAAC would just "serve" with them.<sup>18</sup> This idea of the WAAC not officially being in the Army served as an incentive for opposing congressmen to vote for it because members of Congress knew that they were not ruining the masculine version of the military that was known for being filled with tough men. The purpose of not including the WAAC as an official part of the Army was to help slowly make the transition into women being allowed to even aid the Army in the first place. To elaborate, having the women start by not officially being a part of the Army and doing jobs that were not involved with combat was an important factor that helped persuade congressmen to pass the bill.<sup>19</sup>

Another reason why the WAAC bill passed in Congress was because supporters were able to assure members of Congress that the WAAC would be comprised of only the best women for the job. A *Washington Post* article written by Christine Sadler details just how competitive it was to get a job as a WAAC officer. She states that women who wanted to be applicable for training in the WAAC camp must have had their birth certificate, high school diploma, and proof of a clean health examination. From this pool, applicants would be chosen based on their "leadership, personality, past experience, and general adaptability."<sup>20</sup> Of the 120 women who were chosen from this pool in areas across the country, each of them had to take a, "mental alertness test, a physical examination, and an interview according to War Department rulings... and from [the 120]... [sixty would] be chosen for enrollment."<sup>21</sup> These strict requirements provide evidence for why

congressmen passed the bill; because they were assured that not everybody who wanted to be in the Corps were allowed in, congressmen knew that those who did get in were the very best of all the other applicants. Another example of the selectiveness of the WAAC can be seen with Evelyn Fraser, a WAC recruiting officer who talked about how the examinations to get into the Corps included a psychiatric test with personal questions followed by physical tests.<sup>22</sup> Fraser stated,

We took only high school graduates, so few of the women passed. You'd be surprised the number of women we had to reject for physical reasons. There were lots of high school graduates with syphilis who didn't know they had it. Black and white. It was incredible to me. I had thought everybody was fairly healthy.<sup>23</sup>

While both African American and Caucasian women would be given the chance to join the WAAC, not very many would be allowed to get in because of the difficult requirements. Congressmen were aware that these tests would prevent many women from joining the WAAC, thus assuring them that there was still a lot of control over the women who were picked to join the organization. As a result, legislators knew that the women in the WAAC were the best possible ones for the job. Moreover, each selected WAAC officer would not have been able to start their duty until they went through an eight-week training course.<sup>24</sup> This helped women make sure that they knew exactly what they were going to be doing before they started doing their work for real. And since congressmen knew about this rigorous testing in addition to the training course, they would be assured that the women would be monitored and extremely prepared for their position as officers in the WAAC.

Furthermore, congressmen passed the WAAC bill because they knew that the WAAC would be under tight control and regulations. In Report No. 1705 addressed to Congress and written by Andrew Jackson May, chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs, in addition to other members of the committee on January 28, 1942, May talked about how the WAAC, if allowed to exist, would be under the direct control of the Army.<sup>25</sup> This appealed to members of Congress because they knew that the Army would have a close eye on the women and would be there to make sure that they were not breaking any rules. Congressman May went on to add that the WAAC would also be limited by the President, and that the Secretary of War had the ability to directly intervene within the affairs of the WAAC.<sup>26</sup> Making it so that high-ranking members of the War Department, in addition to the President of the United States himself, having the ability to supervise and make changes to the WAAC consoled members of Congress because they knew that the WAAC would not be able to do anything that the President or War Department did not want them to be doing. This is significant because it points to the fact that the WAAC bill, if passed, would be under strict orders and regulations. Everything would be planned and there would be no room for mistakes. Moreover, Congressman May points out that the WAAC would be under a strict hierarchy as well, meaning that there would be one head director who would report to the Chief of Staff of the Army, assistant directors, first,

second, and third officers as well.<sup>27</sup> Having this ranking that was comparable to the Army was another aspect that helped show how the WAAC would be closely monitored and restricted because congressmen knew that the WAAC had levels of authority and control. As a result, a first-class officer in the WAAC would not be able to make decisions that could affect the country or ruin the WAAC itself without having it be cleared by many people who were higher up than her. This was an idea that congressmen understood and was a major factor that helped them pass the WAAC bill.

## **Conclusion**

The WAAC bill of 1942 was a radical idea during a period of history where women were forced to conform to gender roles because it proposed letting women directly aid the Army without officially being a part of it. While it did face significant criticism from many different groups all over, the primary critics happened to be congressmen themselves because of their many objections to what the WAAC would do to tradition in America paired with their moral hesitations about allowing women to aid the Army. However, the people that were finally able to convince members of Congress to pass the bill were high-ranking members of the Army. This is because they were the ones who were able to convince Congress that the WAAC would be beneficial for the Army as a whole, it would allow women to demonstrate their patriotism towards the country, and it would be highly regulated and monitored by the Army and the President.

This revolutionary bill of 1942 was the first in what would be a series of long battles to fight for women's rights in the Armed Forces. It was an instrumental piece of legislation, that although unknown at that moment, would serve as a beacon of hope for patriotic women who wanted to serve their country. It was not until 1943, one year after the passage of the WAAC bill, that the "Auxiliary" was dropped from the title and the Women's Army Corps (WAC) was formed.<sup>28</sup> It consisted of women who were given the same military status, pay, and disciplinary rank as men in the Army.<sup>29</sup> This huge step forward in the rights of women in the military would slowly continue to grow, such that at the beginning of 2016, seventy-four years after the WAAC became official, women were finally allowed to participate in all military positions as long as they met the different qualifications for the roles.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the WAAC can be seen as a huge step forward not only for the rights of women in the military, but also for the rights of women in the United States as a whole.

## Appendix A

Join the "Women's Army Auxiliary" Corps Today



*New Horizons* . . . **new places and people**

. . . Interesting, practical experience with good pay . . .  
and above all, a real opportunity to help your  
country by doing essential military work for the Army, thus  
freeing a soldier for combat duty. These are  
among many reasons why thousands of our American  
women are responding to the army's call for  
patriotic women.

**Inquire at the Army Recruiting and Induction  
Station Today.**

Source: WAAC Recruiting Poster, 1942.

Notes



1. Leisa Meyer, “Creating G.I. Jane: The Regulation of Sexuality and Sexual Behavior in the Women’s Army Corps during World War II,” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 582, JSTOR.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Janann Sherman, “They Either Need These Women or They Do Not: Margaret Chase Smith and the Fight for Regular Status for Women in the Military,” *The Journal of Military History* 54, no. 1 (January 1990): 55, JSTOR.

5. Ibid.

6. Nona Baldwin, “Bill for Women’s Auxiliary Corps of 150,000 Passed by the House,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1942.

7. Ibid.

8. U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record*, 77th Cong., 2nd sess., March 17, 1942, 2606, ProQuest Congressional.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 2607.

11. “Join the ‘Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps’ Today,” poster, *The Charlotte Observer*, 1942, Newsbank.

12. George Marshall, “General Marshall Praises W.A.A.C. As It Opens 4th Training Center.” (statement, February 18, 1943), George C. Marshall Foundation.

13. Committee of Military Affairs, “Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps”, H.R. Rep. No. 77-1705, 2d Sess. 1942, ProQuest Congressional.

14. Marshall, “Marshall Praises W.A.A.C.”.

15. “Woman Power,” pamphlet, 1942 in Repository Images, Northwestern University.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. *Morning Register* (Des Moines, Iowa), February 1943.
19. Marshall, “ Marshall Praises W.A.A.C.,”.
20. Christine Sadler, “WAAC Recruiting To Begin Today,” *Washington Post*, May 27, 1942.
21. Ibid.
22. Evelyn Fraser, interview by Studs Terkel, in *The Good War*, ed. André Schiffrin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 125. The Women’s Army Corps (WAC) was established on July 1, 1943, as an expansion of the WAAC. The major distinction between the WAAC and the WAC was that the WAC was an official part of the Army, meaning that the women had military ranks. Other than that, the women’s role within the Corps remained the same.
23. Ibid., 126.
24. Ibid.
25. H.R. Rep. No. 77-1705.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. “Women in the U.S. Army,” in *The United States Army* (2017).
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.

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*New York Times*. 1942.

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