

DES MOINES TRIBUNE

Saturday, May 15, 1965

“Dandelions on a Field of Memory”

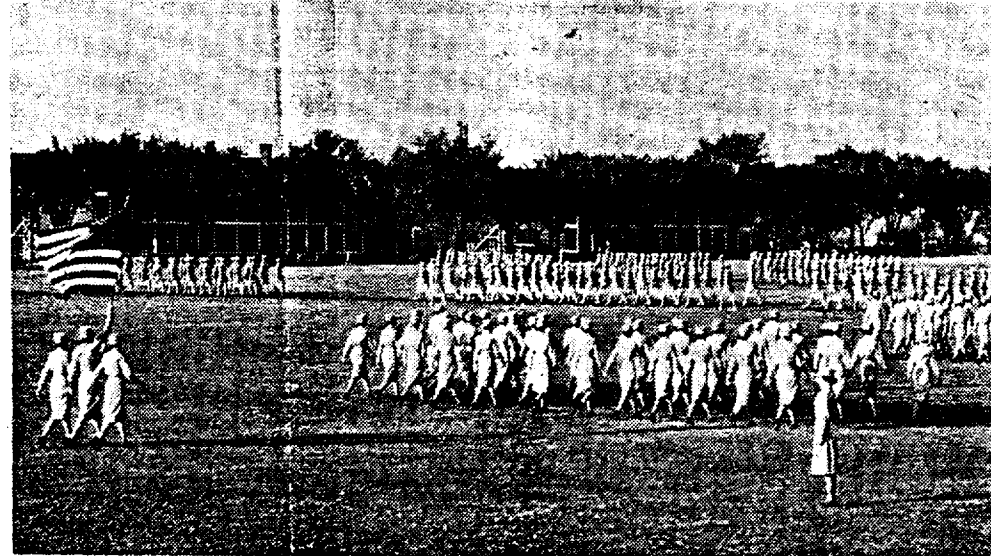
by Lillian McLaughlin

McLaughlin brings the history of Fort Des Moines up to the present date of 1965. There are three WACs in residence and McLaughlin interviews the ranking officer, Lt. Donella Fisher. The photographs which accompany this article are of the parade grounds--in October, 1942, WACs marching and again in 1965 with Lt. Fisher standing in dandelions. She hopes for a spot for a marker some day.

Dandelions on a Field of



Fort Des Moines parade ground today with Lt. Donella Fisher in foreground.



In October, 1942; the first women to serve in the U. S. Army marched with precis

By Lillian McLaughlin

The old parade ground today, Armed Forces Day, is a sight to make 72,141 women weep.

Those are the soldiers, strong women all, who marched and trained at Fort Des Moines in World War II.

They are the WAAC's, later WAC's, who remember the parade ground

as a precisely clipped green square they zealously kept trash-free.

Now the turf is ragged. Dandelions have swept over the



LT. FISHER

greensward like invading Huns.

The fine old houses along Officers' Row either have been bashed down by civilian demolition crews or stand, doomed and waiting, their windows open to bats, porches sagging, chimneys crumbling.

New College

Someday a new College of Osteopathic Medicine and Surgery will rise on the site. (Other parts of the post have been earmarked for a park and Children's Zoo, an elementary, junior and senior public high school, with the government also retaining a portion.)

But in these reconstruction days the birthplace of the Women's Army Corps, like an officer in disgrace, her insig-



SGT. HOLLIDAY SGT. BENSON

nia ripped away, stands forlorn. Busted.

In the few buildings still used by armed service units, three WAC's on duty work in an atmosphere of traditional Army spit and polish.

They are Lt. Donella Fisher, of Los Angeles, Cal., WAC

selection officer; and S/Sgts. Betty Benson of Clinton and Martha Holliday of Oskaloosa, WAC counselors.

Lieutenant Fisher was an 11-year-old when on May 15, 1942, the old cavalry post of Fort Des Moines was named as the "West Point" site for the first women soldiers in U. S. history.

On that day President Roosevelt signed the bill enacted the day before by Congress.

Typical of the finest officers of the WAC today (10,000 enlisted, 850 officers), Lieutenant Fisher trained at a far different post, the Ft. McClellan (Ala.) WAC Center, a beautiful Army post located in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, designed specifically for women.

Her smartly designed, im-

peccably fitted WAC wardrobe is a far cry from the clumsy khaki hats, sensible-heeled shoes her earliest forebears in the WAC wore (and gamely, too!)

But anyone in Des Moines who saw the first earnest 450 WAC's (selected with excruciating care from 150,000 applicants) arrive in July, 1942, for officers training, will spot in Lieutenant Fisher's blue eyes a familiar spark, the same old esprit de corps.

"Whenever I walk by that parade ground—I guess I'm sentimental—but I think I hear the cadence count," she said. "We still use the same at McClellan."

"How I'd love to see a parade out there," she added wistfully.

"I JUST WISH THEY'D

GIVE ME A PLATOON!" she burst out.

The dandelion-blown square has many memories for the sands of American women and Des Moines, too.

Historic Day

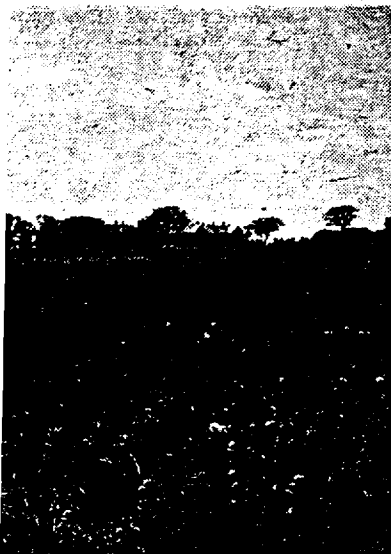
There was the historic day Aug. 4, 1943.

Col. Oveta Culp Hobby, the director of the corps, stood at the reviewing stand before the square of khaki-clad women and administered the oath that transformed them from WAAC's, an auxiliary, into soldiers of the Army.

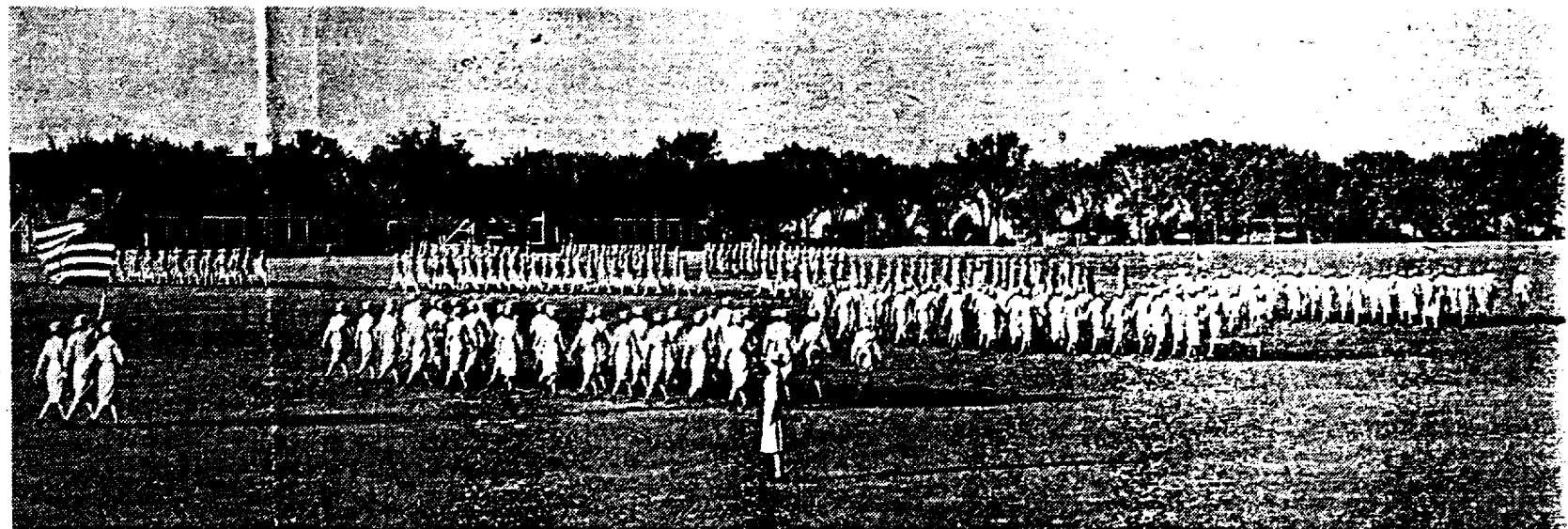
In their eagerness, some of the soldiers repeated the oath too quickly.

At the end, there was moment's silence. The band blared forth, "You're in t

ons on a Field of Memory



Donella Fisher in foreground.



In October, 1942; the first women to serve in the U. S. Army marched with precision and beauty on Fort Des Moines parade ground.

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The dandelion-blown square has many memories for thousands of American women—and Des Moines, too.
Historic Day
There was the historic day, Aug. 4, 1943.
Col. Oveta Culp Hobby, then director of the corps, stood on the reviewing stand before a square of khaki-clad women and administered the oath that transformed them from WAAC's, an auxiliary, into soldiers of the Army.
In their eagerness, some of the soldiers repeated their oath too quickly.
At the end, there was a moment's silence. The band blared forth, "You're in the

Army Now," and the solemn moment was history.
Bedlam broke loose. Khaki hats sailed into the air, hands waved, clapped, gave in mass the V-for-Victory sign.
The unexpected spontaneity brought the audience, including 30 representatives of the War Department on an inspection tour of the center, to its feet.
Colonel Hobby stepped down from the reviewing stand, was engulfed by her troops.
"Be good soldiers, all of you," she told them.
"We will, ma'am," they cried.
Most of them were.
They served overseas, survived torpedoed ships. Many won decorations.
Some died while in the service of their country.

But by far the great number worked through the war in undramatic, backstage, but important jobs.
They worked hard, and they wore well.
The war ended. The WAC stayed.
As of Saturday it has given 23 years of proud service to the feminine part of the Army team.
On the old parade ground Lieutenant Fisher pulled dandelion impatiently.
"It seems a shame somehow that every trace of the WAC at Fort Des Moines is going," she said. "There ought to be a marker, or something."
She'd been looking around for a spot, she said, but she didn't seem to be any place left. . .