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“Ex-WACS gather at Fort D.M. to mark start”

by Susan Caba

Retired Brig. Gen. Elizabeth Hoisington led the dedication of a plaque marking the first Women's Army Corps training center at Fort Des Moines. This event was the focus of the reunion of approximately 50 veterans of the Women's Army Corps. The attendees came from several states and represented various military assignments during the war. Much of the reunion was spent discussing their old uniforms.

Ex-WACS gather at Fort D.M. to mark start

By SUSAN CABA

Register Staff Writer

The formation was loose, to say the least; the outfits weren't militarily crisp, and the blond, brunette and red hairs have turned gray, bluish and white, but the 50 or so veterans of the Women's Army Corps at Fort Des Moines Saturday were as jaunty and raucous as they had been in their training days at the Fort during World War II.

The dedication of a plaque recognizing the Fort as the first WAC training center brought the veterans together.

Between 1942 and 1945 more than 57,000 women attended basic training, officer candidate school and other specialist schools at the Fort.

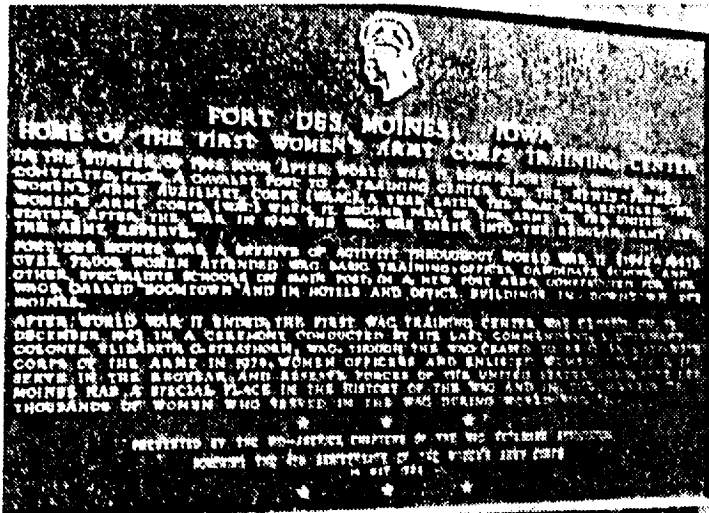
Retired Brig. Gen. Elizabeth Hoisington of Virginia recalled those training days. "There are many stories of training in Des Moines that went 'round the world," she said.

Many of the tales involved Iowa's bitter winters, especially the first after women started training at the Fort, Hoisington said, when the Army couldn't turn out uniforms fast enough to outfit the surge of women enlistees.

As a result, she recalled, the WACs wore overcoats made for male soldiers.

"Of course, the big, tall ones got the short coats, and the short ones got the long coats," Hoisington said. "It really looked funny when you would salute, because the sleeve would hang down to about here," she said, gesturing about a foot beneath her wrist. "But if you got a long coat, you were really lappy, because the winter was really cold."

First stop for new enlistees was the cavalry stables, which had been converted to a giant dormitory for the women. There they were formed into training companies and slept in double-decker beds. After that initiation, the women moved to Boomtown, a cluster of new, red-tile buildings, for basic training.



Retired Brig. Gen. Elizabeth Hoisington helped dedicate the plaque marking the first Women's Army Corps training center, which was at Fort Des Moines. More than 57,000 women were assigned to Fort Des Moines.

"I remember telling my mother about the mud splashing on the walls of those red-tile buildings," said Hoisington. "Since we wanted everything to look neat and perfect, we had to fall out in formation and clean the sides of the buildings."

After basic training, it was back to the stables to receive orders, then out into the world.

Yzetta Nelson, one of 19 Minnesotans who attended the ceremony, finished her basic training at Fort Des Moines on D-Day in 1944. It was the start of 24 years in the WACs, where she completed tours in Germany, Chicago, the Pentagon and Alabama before retiring as a command sergeant major.

The dedication ceremony was attended by women from Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois and Florida, as well as a few from Iowa. Brig. Gen. Roger Sandler, deputy commander of the 103rd Corps Support Command, accepted the plaque on behalf of the Army Reserve.