

**DES MOINES TRIBUNE**  
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**“That D.M. summer of 1942 and the ‘petticoat corps’**

**by Lillian McLaughlin**

Events surrounding the opening of Fort Des Moines in the summer of 1942 are recounted as the author compares the recent 1980 presidential debates and the national news coverage with the earlier 1942 national coverage.

Lillian McLaughlin interviews several former WACS who were either stationed at Fort Des Moines or who were from the Des Moines area and who have vivid memories of serving in the military. McLaughlin asks of them their opinions of the 1980 controversy surrounding the congressional debate on registration and draft including women.

# That D.M. summer of 1942 and the 'petticoat corps'

By Lillian McLaughlin

Des Moines' recent spotlight attention from national news media for the caucuses and Republican presidential candidates' debate was a rerun for persons who were here July 20, 1942.

That was the day the first contingent of dead-earnest young women, hand-picked from across the nation, arrived to begin training at the old cavalry post, Fort Des Moines, as the first women soldiers in U.S. history.

Every foot-loose reporter and photographer available from local and national press was here to greet them — from the New York Times, Daily News, old Herald Tribune, Christian Science Monitor, Chicago Daily News, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, International News and Associated Press, plus others from Universal Pictures, Fox Movietone, Pathe News; writers like Anita Loos ("Gentlemen Prefer Blondes") and Octavus Roy Cohen.

Recollections of that historic day for the Army and Des Moines may be evoked during today's widespread discussion of a proposed registration of men and women and a possible draft.

Des Moines rose to the challenge, flattered that it had been chosen as the training site of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), took to heart the "Waaks" (as President

Franklin D. Roosevelt, when signing the bill creating the corps, first called them unofficially). Many looked with amused wonder at first at this "petticoat corps".

Reporters, hacking through brass in wartime censorship, were hard put to dig up stories. One desperate but sharp-eyed reporter, noting laundry on a line behind the barracks, broke a "big" story: WAAC panties were olive drab!

But amusement soon grew into respect. Those women "learned to drill faster than men," reported one male top sergeant a few weeks after the center opened.

In September 1943, just 14 months later, the WAAC became the WAC, the Women's Army Corps. Instead of training to be "first, second or third officers" they became lieutenants, captains, majors. They then were really "in the Army," with Army benefits as well as discipline.

The first few hundred swelled to thousands. A \$5-million construction program got under way, with barracks converted from the old cavalry stables ("dormitories for Hobby horses," they were called, for the director of the corps, Oveta Culp Hobby).

Before the last WAC left the post in

April 1946 (Capt. Amelia Smith of Osyka, Miss., post transportation officer who spent 44 months here), 72,141 women soldiers had marched and trained here, been assigned to stations in the United States and overseas. Some survived torpedoed ships. Some won decorations. Some died while in the service of their country. But by far the greater number worked through the war in undramatic, backstage, but important jobs.

Today's congressional debate on registration and a draft (whether women should be included in the former, if finally approved, or in the latter, if it is necessary) has become part of the over-all contemporary discussion of women's rights — and responsibilities.

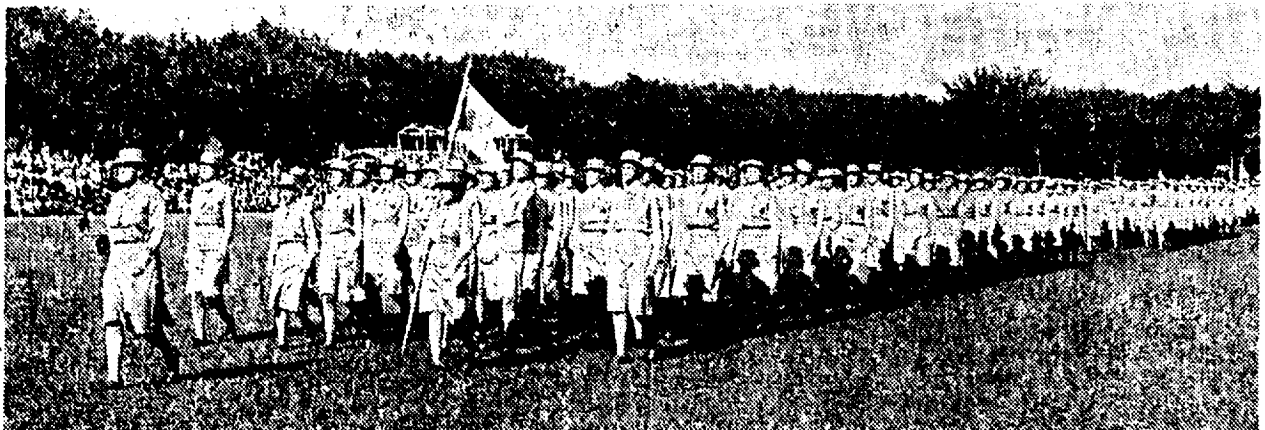
What are the views of some Iowans who were former WAACS, then WACs? The Tribune put the question to a few.

Her opinion, said Marion Lichty of Waterloo, interviewed by telephone at her winter home in Pass Christian, Miss., "hasn't changed through the years."

"I worked hard to get in," she said. "I thought women had the right to

WAC —

*Please turn to Page Eight*



The 4,000 WACs at Fort Des Moines pass in review in 1943.

# That D.M. summer of 1942 and the 'petticoat corps'

## WAC —

Continued from Page One

serve. We accept all the benefits of being Americans."

### First Iowan

Lichty, who took the WAAC oath July 9, 1942, was the first Iowan to do so, several others following the same day. She did recruiting duty for a year with the 5th Service Command at Columbus, Ohio; administrative work in the Air Force at Wright-Patterson Air Force Service Command, Dayton, Ohio; ended up with Lt. Gen. Lewis B. Hershey, then director of selective service, compiling information for veterans' rights and benefits. She is retired now as a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force Reserve (she had reserve training at Offutt Air Base in Omaha and the Pentagon).

"Registration? It's just that. We have a social security number that follows us through life. I'm not a militant, volunteers would probably be accepted — there were thousands in World War II. Probably there wouldn't be a need, because of these, actually to draft women," Lichty said.

But if the need arrives, why not? she believes.

"Our ancestors in Iowa were in the 'front line.' They weren't asked to be drafted. Women are strong, don't need to be protected — except legally and economically," she said.

"On military bases today I've seen women, some pregnant, still doing their jobs. Not everyone would be in the front-line trenches. It's silly, though, to talk about women not being in combat. Israeli women have been in combat. Any woman in Europe in World War II was subjected to combat."

Ruth Putman, 2820 Euclid Ave., had been a teacher at Seymour when



Rosa Cunningham  
Then Now

she enlisted in the WAC. She trained at Fort Devens, Mass., worked there in the separation center as a private first class for three years.

"If you're going to have ERA, girls should go all the way," she said. "I don't think they should fight, though in World War II, those in motor pools overseas, nurses near the front lines, saw combat."

After service, she returned to Des Moines, was employed by the Veterans Administration as a ward secretary, and later in the Polk County recorder's office and as a clerk in the criminal court division. She is a past national president of the Women's Army Corps Veterans Association.

### A-bomb ended it

Mary Elizabeth Simmons, 3210 Seventh St., had her basic training at Fort Des Moines, was stationed at Camp Miles Standish staging area near Boston, Mass., for 2½ years. In 1943, she said, she "got on the list to go overseas" and was sent back to Fort Des Moines for special training for that duty.

"The A-bomb canceled all that," she said. She thinks registration of women would be "wonderful."

"There'll be enough people. If a woman has a family she shouldn't have to leave them. There are so many advantages. I wouldn't have missed the experience for anything," she said.

Jean Gillaspay, 720 Euclid Ave., was in the WAC 3½ years, "just a plain old sergeant," she said.

She sees "nothing wrong with registration."

"If the emergency comes, you're ready," she said. She is the wife of Robert Gillaspay.

"We have three sons, ages 24 to 30,

and I'm not happy about the world situation. Registration (including women) — I see that HAS to be. I'm still not at the point where I see women in combat. I think I'm not fitted to do that. I just want everybody to do the job they're best fitted to do. Some jobs women are not qualified to do. Some jobs men are not qualified to do.

"I believe I would be for a draft if needed. Nurses in World War II had a skill and were needed in the front lines. Now in this age of mechanization, women can do many more things. They could drive tanks...."

As for registration, she said, "It doesn't hurt us to be ready. The world is in such a mixed-up mess."

### ERA activist

Rosa E. Cunningham, now with Veterans Memorial Auditorium's public relations, an activist for ERA and women's rights movements, was in the WAC 8½ years, 2½ of these in postwar Germany, working, through the Army, with German youth. Earlier duty at U.S. posts was mainly recruiting and registering WACs, and some special assignments for men.

"I certainly know something about registration," she said. "I think we should have registration, and I'm sorry if some people seem to equate it with the draft. This is not necessarily so. But registration is a first step. I think women should register also. If we women have had all the privileges of freedom of this nation, we owe it to assume responsibility, if that is service to national defense, then that's it.

"There probably would be provisions that women would not go into direct combat. They could serve in all other capacities that women have marvelous abilities to serve.

"I am not a militant. No one hates war as bad as we who saw it," she said. "But all registration is, really, is protection."



Marlon Lichty  
Then Now