



PROQUEST USE CASE

# African American Women and the Women's Army Corps during World War II

By Morgan Carlton, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of History, University of Michigan



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On Easter Sunday, April 9, 1944, church services at Fort Clark, Texas were well attended by members of the Women's Army Corps (WAC). As the WAC members entered the church, according to documents in ProQuest History Vault from the records of the Women's Army Corps, five Black WAC personnel sat in seats in the middle of the church and Black members of the choir sat in the front pews on the right side of the church. This seating decision by the Black WAC personnel marked a protest of segregation at Fort Clark. Prior to April 9, Black members of the Women's Army Corps had been attending church services and sitting in a segregated area of the church on the left side of the church, and Black members of the choir typically sat in the loft in the rear of the chapel. During the week after the Easter Sunday services, the post commander at Fort Clark instructed the chaplain to enforce the segregated seating policy. The following Sunday, April 16, no African American WACs, except the Chaplain's two assistants, attended the service.<sup>1</sup>

In July 1945, three African American WACs, Helen H. Smith,

March 15, 1943.

**Mr. Walter White, Secretary,  
National Association for the  
Advancement of Colored People,  
69 Fifth Avenue,  
New York, New York.**

**Dear Mr. White:**

Your letter to Colonel Hobby, Director of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, concerning the treatment of Negro women by the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps dated March 3, 1943, has been referred to this office for reply.

We appreciate your sincere interest in the welfare of Negro officers and auxiliaries of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps as well as those enrollees still on inactive duty.

The inflow of newly enrolled members in the Training Centers is controlled entirely by the total capacity those Centers

Georgia Lee Boson, and Tommie D. Smith, were charged by the Army with "being disorderly in uniform in a public place." These charges grew out of an incident at the Greyhound Bus Station in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. On July 10, according to documents in ProQuest History Vault, Helen H. Smith arrived in the bus station in Elizabethtown after a trip to Nashville, Tennessee. Smith found a seat in the white section of the bus station's segregated waiting area. While sitting in this section, two of Smith's fellow WACs, Georgia Lee Boson and Tommie D. Smith, joined Helen Smith in the white section of the waiting room. About one hour after Helen

Smith arrived at the station, police officer Robert Thomas Irwin entered the station and saw the three WACs in the white waiting area. He told them to move into the "colored" waiting area. When they refused Irwin drew his blackjack and started striking Boson and Helen Smith with the blackjack. Boson and Tommie Smith then left the bus station, but Officer Irwin took Helen Smith to the police station in Elizabethtown.<sup>2</sup>

These incidents in 1944 and 1945 involving African American WACs fit into the broader narrative of African American protest during World War II. Since the late 1960s, historians have written about World War II as an important moment in the Black Freedom Struggle. One of the pioneering works on this topic is Richard M. Dalfiume's 1968 essay in the *Journal of American History* entitled "The Forgotten Years of the Negro Revolution." Since the publication of Dalfiume's essay, there has been a significant amount of scholarship on the civil rights struggle during World War, however, in her recent book, *Glory in Their Spirit: How Four Black Women Took on their Army During World War II*, Sandra M. Bolzenius points out that the stories of African American members of the Women's Army Corps are less well known.<sup>3</sup> In this use case, we look at the documentation on African American WACs in ProQuest History Vault and ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

In February 1942, the *Pittsburgh Courier* started the "Double V" drive for victory at home against prejudice and discrimination as well as victory abroad against the enemies of democracy. *The Pittsburgh Courier's* campaign was a response to a letter it published on January 31, 1942 from James G. Thompson of Wichita, Kansas. In the letter, titled "Should I Sacrifice To Live 'Half-American'?", Thompson suggested what he called a Double VV for a doubled victory: "The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory over our enemies from within."<sup>4</sup> The following week, in the February 7, 1942 issue, and two months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Edgar T. Rouzeau, editor and manager of the *Pittsburgh Courier's* New York Office, wrote about Black America's stake in World War II, with words that very much echoed Thompson's letter from the week before. Rouzeau wrote:

Reduced to its very essence, this means that Black America must fight two wars and win in both. ... Our two wars are inextricably intertwined. And this being true, we must believe sufficiently in our cause at home if we are to contribute our utmost toward a successful war effort abroad.<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after the *Pittsburgh Courier* declared the Double V Campaign, in May 1942 the U.S. Congress created that Women's

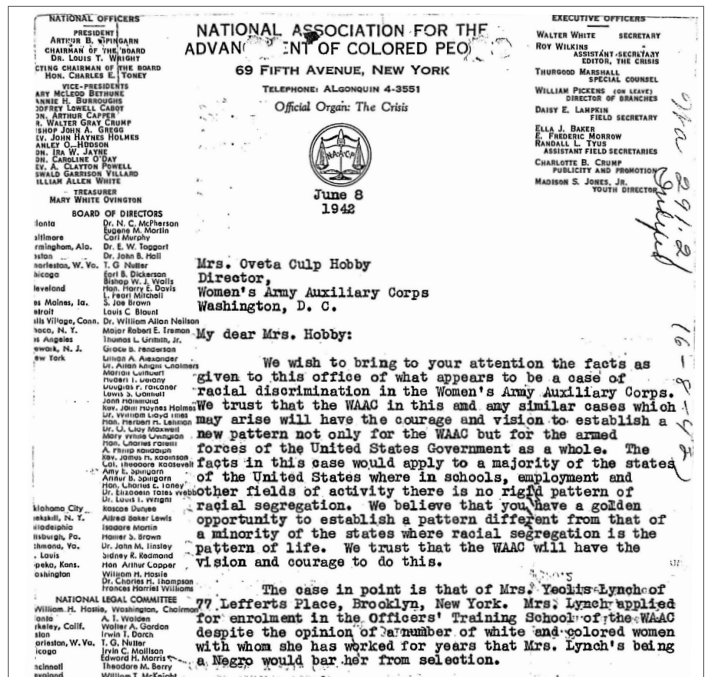
1. "Church Attendance of Colored Personnel" May 4, 1944, found in ProQuest History Vault, Women in the U.S. Military: Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942-1946, Part 2: Personnel, FOLDER ID=103246-022-0734, page 106-107.
2. Memo from Fort Hayes, Columbus, Ohio, July 27, 1945 found in ProQuest History Vault, Women in the U.S. Military: Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942-1946, Part 2: Personnel, FOLDER ID=103246-022-0734, pages 58-59.
3. Bolzenius, Sandra M., *Glory in Their Spirit: How Four Black Women Took on the Army During World War II*, University of Illinois Press, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/demo-myproquest/detail.action?docID=5344287>.
4. Thompson, James G. "Should I Sacrifice to Live 'Half-American?': Suggest Double VV for Double Victory Against Axis Forces and Ugly Prejudices on the Home Front DEAR EDITOR." *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950), Jan 31, 1942, pp. 3. ProQuest, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/202132603?accountid=131239>.
5. ROUZEAU, EDGAR T. "Black America Wars on Double Front for High Stakes"--Rouzeau: Race had to make Choice between Conflicting Ideologies--Now its Destiny is Bound Up with the Protection of Democracy at Home and Abroad." *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950), Feb 07, 1942, pp. 5. ProQuest, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/202132727?accountid=131239>.

Army Auxiliary Corps (in July 1943, the name was shortened to the Women's Army Corps). At this time, the U.S. Army was still segregated and the Women's Army Corps enforced the strict racial quota system that limited Black WACs to 10 percent or less. (Even with the limitation of ten percent, African American enrollment in the WACs generally was less than five percent of the total WAC force during the war, primarily as a result of the high demand for workers in defense-related industries.)

The first WACs arrived at Fort Des Moines, Iowa in 1942 and contained forty black women, exactly ten percent of the WAC population at Fort Des Moines. Nicknamed the "ten-percenters," the Black WACs were heavily segregated from their white counterparts: separate mess halls, separate housing, and separate training.<sup>6</sup> Despite the segregation, the War Department maintained that WAC was a place of equal opportunity.

In the summer of 1942, Vera Knapp, of the Bronx, New York, publicly charged the WAC with racially discriminating against her. She enlisted the help of the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League and asked for an investigation to be completed. In the report, it was explained how "Miss Vera Knapp (colored) was accepted as a member of the Auxiliary Aircraft Warning Service on January 19th, 1942." She was stationed in the New York Information Center where she trained for months in the Aircraft Warning Service. Fort Des Moines requested "the nine best qualified members of the Auxiliary Aircraft Warning Service" out of the New York station and Miss Knapp applied. During her interview she was informed that "Negro enrollment in the Aircraft Warning Service of the WAC was not presently being accepting." She was then advised to submit a general application to WAC and "risk being assigned to any duty required" despite her skilled training over the past seven months. Despite all this information, the War Department concluded there was "no evidence of racial discrimination or bad feeling" in the New York center and emphatically noted "relations between white and colored personnel are cordial and satisfactory."<sup>7</sup>

The fight continued as the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League was given conflicting information and requested "to know whether there are any special regulations regarding the enrollment or segregation of Negroes," specifically within the Aircraft Warning Service. The correspondence suggests limited information being shared with public entities. Initially, the D.C. Office of WAC responded that they had "no regulation available for distribution to the public" and regarding enrollment and segregation, "general regulations for the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps apply to all enrollees whether white or colored and there is no discrimination whatever in the matter of enrollment either as officer candidate or as auxiliaries." The response contradicts the report and suggest Black women are not limited by their race, something the WAC maintained publicly. Later correspondence corrected this notion



6. Sheldon, Kathryn. "A Brief History of Black Women in the Military." *Minerva's Bulletin Board*, vol. III, no. 4, 1995, pp. 6. ProQuest, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/231082169?accountid=131239>.
7. ProQuest History Vault, Women in the U.S. Military: Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942-1946, Part 2: Personnel, Colored Personnel in WAAC, Folder ID 103246-022-0356, p. 4 and 22.
8. ProQuest History Vault, Women in the U.S. Military: Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942-1946, Part 2: Personnel, Colored Personnel in WAAC, Folder ID 103246-022-0356, p. 25, 26, and 31.
9. Rogers, J. A. 1943. "ROGERS SAYS: AMERICA LEADS IN WORLD POLITICS, BUT IS BEING RUN FROM THE SOUTH." *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950), Sep 04, 7.

origin."<sup>10</sup> WAC recruiters even sent letters to interested Black women stating "membership in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps is open to all women between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five who can meet our requirements regardless of race, creed, or color." The public representation of acceptance extended only to membership but not to the assignment of units, as Black women found out during training. Publicly, Black media like Headlines and Pictures fought on behalf of Black women by mailing the director of WAC and disclosing that "Negro WACs have insisted they have been given menial tasks exclusively in some cases."<sup>11</sup>

Another case documented in the Women's Army Corps records is the more well-known court martial of four Black WACs at Fort Devens in Massachusetts. In March of 1945, four Black women stationed at Fort Devens were court-martialed for disobeying the orders of their colonel. The women maintained that the commanding officer stated "I don't want any black WACs as medical technicians. They are here to mop walls, scrub floors and do the dirty work."<sup>12</sup> They also quoted the commanding officer of saying "Negro WACs were supposed to do 'the dirty work.'" Once they arrived at Fort Devens, WACs were given a uniform: white for medical technician and blue for hospital orderlies. "All colored WACs were made hospital orderlies; some reduced from the rank of medical technicians."<sup>13</sup> Their story echoed Vera Knapp's and the experience of the Black WACs at Fort Des Moines. WAC used race to restrict the career options of Black women. Initially, they were dishonorably discharged and sentenced to one year of hard labor. Less than a month later, the case was voided by the Judge Advocate General Office of Boston.<sup>14</sup>

The segregation in the Women's Army Corps was not restricted to facilities in the United States. Segregation also impacted the

assignment of WAC personnel to overseas service. On September 29, 1943, the NAACP sent a letter noting "150 WACS were sent to Canada for a parade, Negroes were excluded." When the commandant was questioned, it was explained "that to send Negro WACs would be an international faux pas," reinforcing American segregation on the international stage.<sup>15</sup> In May 1944, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt wrote to Oveta Culp Hobby asking if African American WACs would get a chance to serve overseas. Roosevelt's letter is just one of many from civil rights leaders inquiring about racial discrimination in the Women's Army Corps. Other correspondents asking about this topic included Gloster B. Current of the NAACP, Mary McLeod Bethune of the National Council of Negro Women, Thomasina W. Johnson of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, Lula Jones Garrett of The Afro-American Newspapers, and others. Correspondence between African American leaders and the War Department discussing the discriminatory deactivation of the first and only all-black female band in military history. The letters and black national concern pressured the War Department to reactivate the band "based on the importance of the band to morale."<sup>16</sup> Within the collection, the War Department has their own separate discussion that referenced the outside pressure black newspapers and leaders put on them.<sup>17</sup>

The episodes described here are just a small sampling of the stories of African Americans WACs during World War II. In addition to other documentation in ProQuest History Vault, ProQuest Black Historical Newspapers contain over 2,000 articles on the Women's Army Corps. Secondary sources on African American WACs include dissertations, journal articles, and books in ProQuest Ebook Central.

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10. ProQuest History Vault, Women in the U.S. Military: Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942-1946, Part 2: Personnel, 291.2 [Race], Folder ID 103246-023-0001, p 4
  11. ProQuest History Vault, Women in the U.S. Military: Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942-1946, Part 2: Personnel, Negro WAC Problem at Fort Des Moines, Folder ID 103246-022-0734, p 54-55
  12. "Review of Court-Martial Given to Four Negro Wacs: Similar Previous Case Review Granted to Negro Wacs." 1945. *The Christian Science Monitor (1908-Current File)*, Mar 21, 1. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/514555431?accountid=14667>.
  13. Army discrimination charged by negro wac at court-martial: Discrimination charged uniforms changed. (1945, Mar 20). *The Christian Science Monitor (1908-Current File)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/514531994?accountid=14667>.
  14. "Review of Court-Martial Given to Four Negro Wacs: Similar Previous Case Review Granted to Negro Wacs." 1945. *The Christian Science Monitor (1908-Current File)*, Mar 21, 1. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/514555431?accountid=14667>. More information on this court-martial case at Fort Devens can be found in Bolzenius, Sandra M., *Glory in Their Spirit: How Four Black Women Took on the Army During World War II*, University of Illinois Press, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/demo-myproquest/detail.action?docID=5344287>
  15. ProQuest History Vault, Women in the U.S. Military: Correspondence of the Director of the Women's Army Corps, 1942-1946, Part 2: Personnel, Negro WAC Problem at Fort Des Moines, Folder ID 103246-022-0734.
  16. Ibid.
  17. Many Black newspapers monitored the WAC, as well as the Navy and Army. They asked the War Department pointed questions about discriminatory practices as illustrated by the following headlines: Johnson, E. E. (1944, Jan 16). Johnson, Ernest E. "CONTENDS ARMY EVADES ISSUE ON NEGRO WACS: CONTENTS ARMY EVADES ISSUE ON NEGRO WACS ONLY 4,000 WOMEN OUT OF 62,889 ENROLLED NEGROES." *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*, Jan 16, 1944, pp. 1. ProQuest, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/490727810?accountid=131239>; "Negro WAC Band is Inactivated." *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*, Aug 18, 1944, pp. 5. ProQuest, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/490745282?accountid=131239>; Within FOLDER ID 103246-022-0734, you will also see Black newspaper editors requesting the War Department complete an investigation to determine discriminatory practices.



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