

Women Make WAVES in World War II

Story compiled by MC2(AW/SW) Jason R. McCammack

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941 every American was asked to make sacrifices and contributions to the war effort. One of the finest examples of how our nation pulled together in a time of national crisis was the contribution made by Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) in the Navy.

Passed by Congress in 1942 and signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Women's Reserve Act paved the way for thousands of women to serve as both enlisted Sailors and commissioned officers.

Response to the legislation was swift. Women responded to the call to service in scores. Training programs were immediately developed to indoctrinate the new recruits into the Navy.

The women who joined the WAVES contributed to the Navy in a far wider capacity than ever before. In years past, women had served in clerical and secretarial roles and as nurses, but during World War II women worked in intelligence, science and technology and medical professions, just to name a few.


The WAVES were led by Mildred McAfee, who took a leave of absence from her job as President of Wellesley College, Wellesley, Mass., to become director of the Navy's newly-formed Women's

Reserve. On Aug. 3, 1942, McAfee was commissioned as a lieutenant commander and became the Navy's first female line officer.

Under McAfee's leadership, 27,000 women wore the WAVES uniform by the end of the Navy Women's Reserve Act's first year, and by 1945 more than 84,000 women were enlisted in the Navy and 8,000 female officers were commissioned.

One example of the immeasurable contribution made by WAVES was a group of codebreakers. The Navy sent over 600 WAVES to Dayton, Ohio, to help build and train on cryptanalytic machines called Bombes. These machines were to be used to help break coded German messages.

During World War II, women throughout the country filled jobs and accepted roles that had been held predominantly by men prior to the war. They worked in factories and managed businesses. They toiled in the fields on family farms and turned double-plays on the baseball diamonds.

The WAVES were one example of how women's contributions to the war effort, both in the European and Pacific theaters, played an invaluable role in winning the war. 

McCammack is a photojournalist assigned to the Naval Media Center, Washington, D.C.



Illustration by MC2 Washington Calcedo

Copyright of All Hands is the property of Superintendent of Documents and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.