

The Women's Army Corps during the Vietnam War

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Background

The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps was established in May 1942 to increase the strength of the Army to fight World War II. Within a year the Corps had 60,000 women—the equivalent of approximately 3 divisions—performing jobs in administration, communications, and logistics (maintenance, repair and supply). Congress was impressed with the women's contributions and, in 1943, the Women's Army Corps received military status. The Corps reached a peak strength of 100,000 officers and enlisted women in April 1944. A few years after the war, Congress integrated that WAC into the Regular Army of the United States (1948).

Thereafter women in Army uniform became almost as familiar a sight at the Pentagon, at overseas stations and at posts throughout the United States as Army men. Though greatly reduced in strength after World War II, thousands of patriotic young women served in the Corps during the Korean War, the Berlin and Cuban Crises. During these years the Corps averaged approximately 7,000 enlisted women and 800 officers. Most of the enlisted women served as typists, stenographers, finance clerks, telephone and teletype operators, medical specialists, dental technicians, cryptographers, photographers, and supply specialists. WAC officers were assigned to positions in administration, finance, intelligence, signal operations, recruiting, automatic data processing, training, quartermaster, special services, publications, legal and civil affairs.

WACs in Vietnam

Before the Pentagon had any requisitions for Women's Army Corps members to serve in Vietnam, officers and enlisted women of the Corps were submitting volunteer requests to serve in Vietnam. Though women were not permitted to serve in combat roles, their duties in past wars in communications,

supply, and administration had taken them into all theaters of war.

In 1964, the Commander of Military Assistance Command (MACV), General William C. Westmoreland, asked the Pentagon to provide a WAC officer and noncommissioned officer to assist the Republic of Vietnam in organizing and training a Women's Armed Forces Corps that would assist the men's forces. Major Kathleen Wilkes and Sergeant First Class Betty Adams, seasoned WAC trainers and administrators, arrived in Saigon in January 1965 to begin their duties. When their tours ended, they and their successors were promptly replaced by just as competent women. Only one WAC officer had served in Vietnam up to that time—in 1962-63 Major Ann Marie Doering had been assigned to MACV headquarters as a plans officer.

Later in 1965, General Westmoreland requested fifteen WAC stenographers for assignment to MACV Headquarters. The Pentagon selected highly qualified and experienced noncommissioned officers in the grade of sergeant and above to fill these positions in Saigon. By June of 1970, over 20 women filled these special jobs at MACV Headquarters. They lived in hotels in Saigon. City dwellers were constantly harassed by Viet Cong terrorists and the WACs were no exemption. Their work bus was fire-bombed one morning and its route often had to be cleared of anti-personnel bombs. The women worked six-and-seven-day weeks but after a six month stint they received rest and recreation leave at safe distances from the Viet Cong.

In 1965 at General Westmoreland's request, a dozen WAC officers arrived to fill noncombat positions at his headquarters and at the newly established headquarters of the U.S. Army Vietnam (USARV). The first officer to arrive was Major A. Ann Fisher who was assigned to that headquarters. Some of the WAC of officers went to the U.S. Army Central Support Command at Qui Nhon and Cam Ranh Bay.

The officers and NCO's assigned to MACV and USARV proved so helpful that the next year, General Westmoreland asked for a small detachment of WACs — primarily clerk-typists—to work at HQ, USARV, and other U.S. commands in Vietnam. An advance party led by Captain Peggy E. Ready and First Sergeant Marion C. Crawford arrived in October 1966. They helped the Army engineers arrange the buildings in which the women were to live at Tan Son Nhut Air Base (just outside Saigon) and established the administrative and supply procedures for the unit. Early in 1967, approximately 80 eager and hard-working enlisted women arrived for assignment to the WAC Detachment. They were assigned to offices throughout the headquarters. Like their sister WACs in Saigon, they worked six-and-seven-day weeks without complaint. Enlisted men assigned to the HQ, USARV, also lived and worked at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Both the men's and women's quarters and offices were guarded day and night against attack by Viet Cong terrorists.

In July 1966, the entire USARV command moved to Long Binh Post, an Army camp built for it some 27 miles northeast of Saigon. Life at this inland post was trying. Red dust covered everything and the weather was hot, humid, and uncomfortable. Clothing deteriorated quickly. The women lived four or five to a room in four two-story buildings that could house approximately 130 women. For recreation, they had a patio and swimming pool in their area. The pool was donated by the National WAC Veterans Association and installed by Army engineers.

Despite the adverse conditions and long hours, morale of the women assigned in Vietnam remained high because they knew their work was important to the success of the Army in Vietnam. Peak strength of WACs assigned to Vietnam (at any one time) was reached in January 1970— 20 officers and 139 enlisted women. The Director of the Women's

Army Corps, Colonel Elizabeth P. Hoisington (later Brigadier General) visited the WACs in Saigon and Long Binh in September 1967 and her successor, Brigadier General Mildred I. Bailey, visited the Detachment in March 1971.

The Viet Cong frequently lobbed artillery shells into the post, aiming at the ammunition depot at Long Binh. Though the women were jarred from their beds and suffered scrapes and bruises from flying debris, none was killed nor seriously injured in these attacks. Having no combat training it was stressful for these young women— most of them privates first class between the ages of 19 to 24—to be exposed to enemy fire. After a few weeks, they became used to the noise and the racket caused by the shelling and no one asked to be transferred to a safer area.

Many women were decorated for meritorious service while in Vietnam. As merited, they received the Legion of Honor, Bronze Star Medal, Army Commendation Medal, Air Medal, Meritorious Service Medal, or Joint Service Commendation Medal. One officer, Capt. Catherine A. Brajkovich, was decorated for heroism for alerting residents of a hotel in Saigon of a fire in the building. Major Gloria A.S. Olson received the Air Medal for her duties as a journalist and photographer at MACV. Major Sherian G. Cadoria received the Air Medal for meritorious service for duty at Cam Ranh Bay. The WAC Detachment received two unit service awards for its service in Vietnam.

In 1972, the withdrawal of all U.S. forces in Vietnam began. After six years, the WAC Detachment, USARV, was deactivated in September 1972 and most of the women returned to the United States for reassignment. A few officers and enlisted women continued to serve in Saigon until May 1973. A total of approximately 700 officers and enlisted women served in Vietnam between 1962 and 1973.

WACs in the Far East during the Vietnam

WarIn the very early 1960's, before WACs were assigned for duty in Vietnam, the Corps had permanent units stationed in the Far East in Hawaii, Japan, and Okinawa. A very small number of WAC of officers and enlisted women were in Seoul, Korea, with the Eighth Army. Altogether, WAC strength in the Far East totalled approximately 45 WAC officers and 230 enlisted women on 30 June 1964. As the situation in Vietnam worsened, additional enlisted women arrived. The largest share of the new arrivals were medical specialists and technicians urgently needed to work in the hospitals in Japan that were receiving and caring for the sick and wounded from Vietnam. Others served in administration, communications, intelligence and logistics in commands in the Pacific supporting the Vietnam war. By 30 June 1970, approximately 165 WAC officers and 1,500 enlisted women were on duty in various countries in the Far East, including Hawaii, Japan, Korea, Okinawa, and Thailand. Their numbers also diminished after the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam.

Conclusion

The Women's Army Corps was disestablished by Congress in October 1978 and, thereafter, instead of being assigned to WAC branch upon entering the Army, women were assigned to all the other branches of the Army (e.g., Signal, Ordnance, Military Police, Intelligence, etc)~except for the combat branches: Infantry, Armor, and Artillery. Since then women have continued to serve in every military action in which the Army has been involved.

The WACs who served in Vietnam and other countries during the Vietnam War contributed to the exemplary heritage of women in military service. They are among the proudest to have served in the Women's Army Corps. In turn, America has shown its pride in these patriotic daughters by saluting them at the dedication of

the Vietnam Women's Memorial in Washington, D.C.

BOOKS ON THE WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS

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