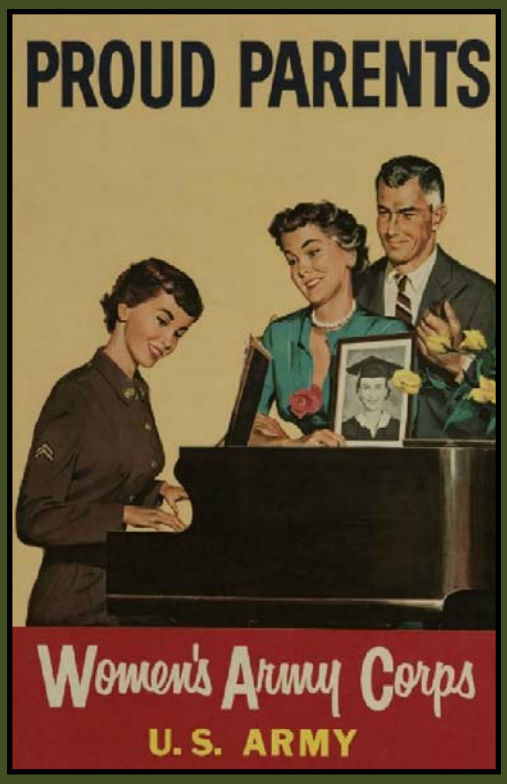
"There are innumerable duties now being performed by soldiers that can actually be done better by women."

General George Marshall
Army Chief of Staff
December 1941

THE WOMEN OF FORT HANCOCK

★ BY MARY RASA ★



The United States military, as well as society in general, changed forever in World War II. Women entered all the military branches and served "in" the military not "with" the military as had been done in World War I. Women war workers or WOWs were taking over jobs on assembly lines that had always been held by men. In addition to women in uniform, and the WOWs, the military began hiring in mass women civilian employees at posts and bases all over the United States.

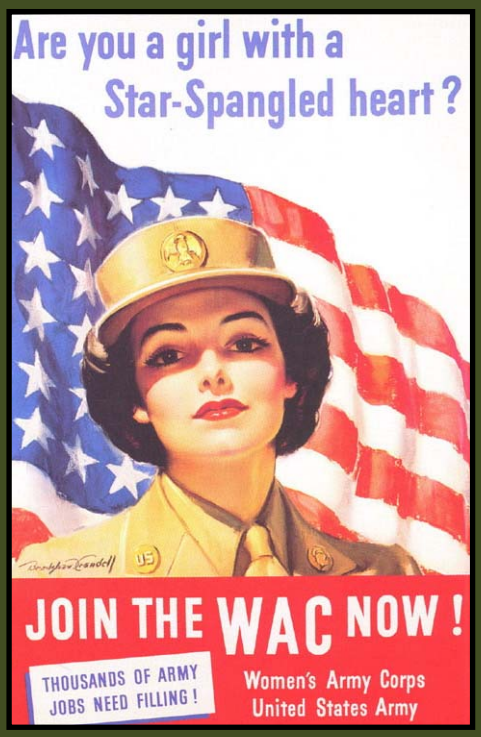
BACKGROUND OF THE WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS

The United States Army was the first of America's military branches to enlist women in World War II. Created on May 14, 1942, the mission of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) was to provide support to the Army by releasing men from administrative duties to serve in combat. Popular advertisements showed a combat soldier in one image with another image showing a uniformed woman at a typewriter. Passing this bill through a Congress and a country where the concept of a woman not only working outside the home but wearing a uniform was not an easy road. The WAAC bill opposition came from the clergy as well as local political, community leaders, and parents. The opposition believed that this type of close-quarters with men, and being without chaperones, would lead to morally unacceptable situations. Other opposition to women in uniform included the defense industry that needed women to work in factories. The United States Government, however, learned from their British allies that women were indeed needed. The British even drafted women, who could choose to work in the armed services or war industries, because it was essential for their country's survival.

Once Pearl Harbor was attacked and the United States entered the war, women worked at aircraft spotting stations without any pay or military status. Six thousand women volunteered to help the war effort. Despite all the opposition, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps bill was signed into law and women in uniform became a reality. The Army was the only service to have women in its own separate corps lead by women with a distinctive insignia. This bill was shortly joined by each of the other services. The acronym WAAC was always disliked post-adaption so subsequent services chose to find a good acronym first and make up the name afterwards

OTHER U.S. ARMED FORCES

On July 30, 1942, the United States armed forces added women to the Navy and the Marines. These naval women were called WAVES, which stood for Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service. The marines, however, chose to call their female members simply women marines. The significant difference between the WAAC bill and the Navy



bill was that the Navy/Marine Corps made their enlistees full members of the military with same ranks and privileges. This was corrected in a later bill for the Army. Women officially served in the Navy Reserve and Marine Corps Reserve, respectively. On November 23, 1942, the United States Coast Guard created the SPARs, their name was derived from the Latin motto for the Coast Guard of *Semper Paratus.*

Other women serving in uniform include the Army and Navy Nurse Corps. Established in 1901 and 1908 respectively, these women were not full members of the military until 1947. 59,000 courageous nurses of the ANC served and 14,000 Navy nurses served with approximately half going overseas wherever our troops were stationed, including battle zones. 77 women became prisoners of war, mostly on the Philippines Islands. 215 women nurses died during the war.

RECRUITMENT AND REQUIREMENTS

Women who wanted to join the Army had to meet different recruitment requirements than men. Some of these included a different age requirement. Men could be 18 while women had to be over 21 and less than 50 years of age. Other requirements were that they be in good health and character, between five- and six-feet tall, weigh between 105- and 200-pounds, and have completed high school. Men, in contrast, did not need to have a high school diploma.

Over 13,000 women applied for the initial 450 WAAC officer's slots. The average woman filling officer or enlisted positions had a Bachelors Degree. Despite the fact that they received less pay and had an obscure ranking system with titles that ranged from Auxiliary to Director, women saw the service as an opportunity for career advancement, a chance to broaden cultural experiences and job skills, and the ability to meet people of different backgrounds. This was especially true of the Army since it was the only service to offer overseas duty to women. These inspirational words to the inaugural commencement training class on July 23, 1942, by Oveta Culp Hobby, the WAACs' first Director, set the tone for this great change.

"You have just made the change from peacetime pursuits to wartime tasks—from the individualism of civilian life to the anonymity of mass military life. You have given up comfortable homes, highly paid positions, leisure. You have taken off silk and put on khaki. And all for essentially the same reason. You have a debt and a date—a debt to democracy and a date with destiny."

By September 1943, the Army dropped the auxiliary status to be in line with all the other services and the Women's Army Corps (WAC) was created. Women received the same pay, ranks and privileges as male soldiers.

Map of the main section of Fort Hancock in 1944. Barracks 25 (highlighted) is the WAC barracks.

FORT HANCOCK'S FIRST SKIRT AND STOCKING-CLAD SOLDIERS

Fort Hancock, New Jersey sits on Sandy Hook, a narrow peninsula of land jutting into New York Harbor. This located has been the object of strategic and navigational importance since colonial days. The United States Army defended New York City from naval attack from this location beginning in the War of 1812. Fort Hancock was named in 1895 and its many gun emplacements were ready to repel an attack from the Spanish-American War until World War II. By the Second World War, Fort Hancock's garrison grew in size from a peacetime force of less than 1,000, to between 7,000 and 12,000 soldiers. In 1943, women arrived in uniform. According to a report in the Post newspaper, the *Sandy Hook Foghorn,* at 3 P.M. on June 23, 1943, Fort Hancock welcomed seven WAACs with their leader. This first cadre of skirt and stocking clad soldier was later joined and increased to a peak of seventy members.

When asked what she liked most about the fort, Auxiliary Virginia Owens answered, "The manner in which the enlisted men have treated us. They have been simply swell." Junior Leader Hedwig Bazarewski felt, "Everyone has made us feel completely at home here. None of us ever had been at a real Army Post before and we were extremely excited when we

WACs taking the oath of allegiance when becoming full members of the Army, September 1943.

arrived. . . . All the officers and enlisted men have been perfectly wonderful to us and we all want to thank them. "

THE JOB

The Army assigned WAAC's to work in the Army Ground, Air, and Service Forces. At Fort Hancock, the WAAC detachment was assigned to the 1225th Army Service Unit, Second Service Command, which provided administrative and logistical support. Women were soon working around Fort Hancock at the Post Exchange, Motor Pool, Post Headquarters, Library, Commissary, Finance Office and Dental Office. One significant change to the work locations was the need to add restrooms for women. Since prior to the war, there were no female civilian or military employees the only separation of restroom facilities was for officer and enlisted personnel.

In September of 1943, the WAAC auxiliary status was dropped. Regarding this change, Colonel J.C. Haw, Fort Hancock Commander, remarked "It is my hope in the near future that every non-civilian job at Fort Hancock which a woman can do, will be assigned to a WAAC. Each job taken over is a contribution toward winning the war, for each WAC will replace a man who is vitally needed for combat service."

THE LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

The Army had great concerns about the living arrangements for the

women. Army Regulations required that the barracks be 150-feet from men's quarters or with an intervening structure. At Fort Hancock, newly renovated Barracks 25 became the women's home and a barracks next to theirs, Barrack 24, was converted into the Post Headquarters building. This barracks was also strictly off limits to male soldiers with one exception. According to the *Sandy Hook Foghorn,* many men wanted to join the newspaper staff to deliver the weekly because they were required to deposit it in each barrack's day room. Just like the men, they slept in wooden bunks and received a GI foot and wall locker. Unlike the men, the WAC barracks received sheets, window shades, showers and toilets with curtains, a laundry with washtubs, drying racks and ironing boards. Auxiliary Camilla Blanton thought the best thing on post was, " . . . the building in which we're going to live. That's a honey."

WACs inside their barracks, 1943.

Civilian women employees at Fort Hancock, 1943.

THE UNIFORM

The design for a uniform for the women was not given much time or thought due to the wartime workload placed on the Quartermaster Corps. It was not until 1945, that the Quartermaster Corps created a design team for this purpose. The part of the uniform that received attention was the insignia. The WAC insignia chosen was Pallas Athene, the Greek goddess of war, who represented victory and wisdom by fighting only just causes. The WACs uniforms had shirt collars and skirts that never fit properly. The ill-fitting skirts did not take women's hips into account, and were designed to be 16-inches off the ground no matter the height of the woman. This created marching soldiers with matching hemlines. Each woman received olive drab underwear and slips, tan oxfords with a small heel, and five pairs of rayon stockings four times a year. Silk stocking were issued more sparely as silk because of rationing as it was used to make gun powder bags. Women's hair needed to be worn in a way as to not touch the shirt collar. Despite these problems, the members of the Corps loved wearing the uniform and felt empowered by it. One woman stated, "The uniform creates a sense of security, I feel perfectly safe when I have it on." The news media was fascinated by the women's uniform and was surprised that women weren't upset with the loss of individuality.

WOMEN AT FORT HANCOCK

While the Army had women in uniform, civilian women also worked at Fort Hancock just like they did at every military post in the U.S. Wives and daughters of soldiers as well as civilian women not connected to the military wanted to do their part and worked in places like the commissary,

WACs in Mess Hall 58, 1943.

Loretta Reilly Hoffman, then and now.

headquarters, post exchange, theater, service club, hospital and in other duties throughout the post. In addition to WACs at Fort Hancock, Army Nurses also served and had their own barracks near the post hospital. The hospital function expanded during the war to include a former double barracks, Barracks 74, connected to the original hospital by a covered walkway.

Through an oral history program created by the author in 2003 and aided by student interns from Monmouth University, we were able to speak to four women who worked at Fort Hancock during this most populous time. Two women were in the WAC and two were civilian employees. Here is a condensed version of their stories.

Loretta Reilly Hoffman who was born in Brooklyn joined the WAC because, "If I had been a man I would have been in." She was afraid to ask her father for fear he would not give permission so she waited until turning 21 to go to the recruiting office on her lunch hour and enlisted. She returned to tell her father, who was thrilled. She was shocked because of his traditional values. In February 1944, she was sent to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia for basic training. Loretta arrived at Fort Hancock in April 1944 where she earned $21 a month. Before joining the service she worked for Western Electric in Manhattan and earned $18 a week. Even thought that was less money, with the expenses of commuting and room and board she thought the Army was a better deal. When asked about her uniform she said she was "thrilled to death" to wear it. Issued fatigue dresses and dress uniforms she had both nylon and rayon stockings. She worked in Post Headquarters so while many women working in places like the motor pool and more remote locations wore rayon or no stockings at all, she had to wear her silk stockings every day. Her work was with special services that provided entertainment to the troops. This is where she received the only negative interaction with a male soldier. The man she replaced for active duty, "gave me a couple of bum steers on how to handle people." She said about the men, "for the most part they were great. There is a war on and do the best we can." Loretta had a part time night job at the Post Theater where earned extra money as an usher and ended up as manager. This is where she met her husband Walter Hoffman who was the movie projectionist. According to Loretta, Walter's technical skill at the theater led the commanding officer to change his unit assignment each time his unit was to ship out. Loretta talks about going on dates with Walter to a diner in Highlands. She also said it was nice to be so close to home and

Loretta Hoffman working in theater, 1944.

going to visit her family on weekend pass by the boat to New York.

Loretta described daily life at the Fort. "You get up and you have your breakfast and we had exercises in the morning. And you got to work and you have lunch and you go back to work and you are finished at the end of the day, at five o'clock. . . . We had a nice sized dayroom and we just sit and relax and some of them played cards. . . . And we sat and talked and wrote letters. . . . I do remember the dayroom was a large room. They had radios and chairs and tables and we would sit and talk and relax. And then the dayroom was where we had our exercises." After the war, the couple was married and Loretta went to college on the GI bill and spent the rest of her career as a school teacher in New Jersey.

May Siciliano

May Siciliano, was a civilian employee with Signal Corps Radar, 1942–1943. This function was part of Fort Monmouth and it moved in 1943 to Camp Evans, NJ. Radar sets known as SCR 268 and 270 were developed on south beach at Fort Hancock between 1933 and 1943. This Signal Corps station contained many buildings for working on the radar systems with many employees to complete these tests. SCR 270 was the radar set that detected the Japanese on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

May was born in Asbury Park, New Jersey and graduated from Asbury Park High School. As she explains, "Well, just before graduation, six weeks before, the government came and they asked . . . they were giving courses and one of them was mechanical drafting. So I signed up and for six weeks we took lessons and then they gave you a test and if you passed the test then they would hire you and you would continue your school. So that's when a lot of the kids went to Fort Hancock." She worked at Fort Hancock from June 1942 until the work was moved to Camp Evans in 1943. She continued to work with the mechanical drafting for four years at it and earned about a thousand dollars a year. She describes the work as being given assignments by the engineers, "They gave us things to do, draw, and we had to do it by scale. It was always machinery, because I didn't know what they wanted. It was a secret. They wouldn't tell us what it was for." To get to Fort Hancock from Asbury Park, "I had to get up at five o'clock every morning. There was one bus. That's all it was, one bus. One time I woke up too late and I had to have my father drive me to the Gate and he couldn't go in. So, I had to get a ride with somebody that I didn't know, which I was scared to death. . . . I loved it there. At lunch time we ate over

at the bay. . . . In the summer time it was really nice. Then they had a bomb shelter for us because of the German submarines off the shore there. Every time they rang that bell, boy, we had to rush into the shelter."

Her thoughts on the experience, " . . . I had a lot of fun. It was terrible to say that during the War that I had a lot of fun. I was lucky. My father couldn't afford to send me to college because I always liked art. I was lucky that this job came along because back then most of the girls ended up at a five and ten or being a waitress. That's one thing I didn't want to do. I love art. The drafting is art, but its a little harder. You have to know figures and drafting. But art, I loved the other art . . . you know painting. In fact, I still do it today."

Margaret Wright McCausland

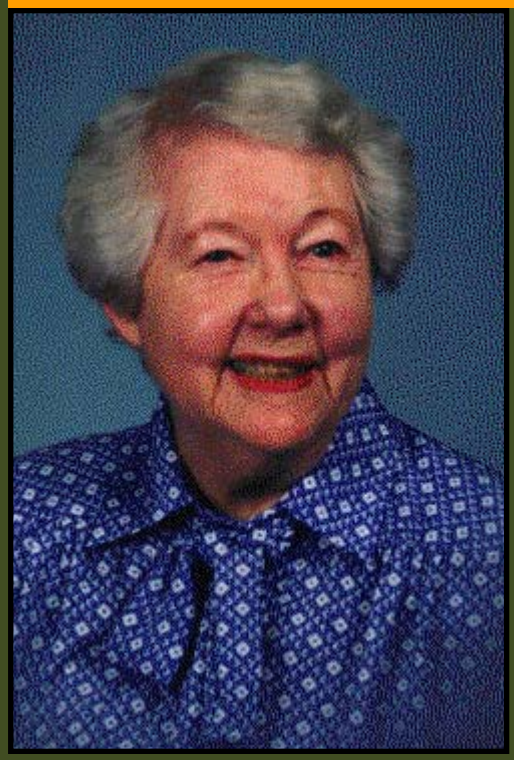
Margaret "Peg" Wright McCausland, a Quartermaster Corps civilian employee assigned to work at the Post Commissary was born in Asbury Park, NJ and graduated from Asbury Park High School. A commissary is a food store for the Army. Peg took the civil service exam for clerk typist and started working at Fort Hancock the fall of 1941 and stayed until June 1945. She commuted to her job from Avon-by-the-Sea with another woman by car. Describing her hours, "Well, I'd come in at eight o'clock in the morning 'til five. And then of course when war was declared, we'd work seven days a week. Say, we even had to come in on Saturday and Sunday's." Peg talks about how occasionally during storms they had to spend the night in barracks that were set up visitors.

Having started working just prior to Pearl Harbor, Peg originally worked with all military men. This soon changed once war was declared to seven civilian women with one enlisted soldier and an officer in charge. The enlisted man was later replaced by a WAC. The work consisted of receiving food shipments by truck daily and issuing the supplies to each company of soldiers as well as selling food to the military families. Peg remembers air raid sirens that would cause them to, "we would have to run from the Commissary . . . to those bunkers where they had the artillery guns, ya know? Now that's quite . . . quite a run! So finally, one day I said to them, now this is crazy. I could be killed going there, I said I'd be better off right where I'm not—I'm not doing this no more. 'Cause I figured I could get under sacks of potatoes or sugar or something."

Peg explained that the civilian employees could purchase food from the commissary or the post exchange but that was not done often by the women because of the dominant male culture. She talks about how, "they really didn't really have any facilities there for women. And they didn't even have a bathroom. We had to use, ya know, the man's—men's restroom and finally . . . it was upstairs, and they built one for the women. And while they were connecting all the pipes and everything, one of the soldiers went up to use the men's restroom and when he flushed the uh,

toilet, it'd come down on the sergeant's head and desk. And I'll tell you, you thought World War Three was declared at that time. . . ."

(Top) Mary Duff Heckendorn standing on left at library orientation board, 1944.



Peg met her husband, Joseph McCausland at Fort Hancock. He was in the 61st Coast Artillery, and in charge of getting his barracks' rations from the commissary. They got married on the 2nd of April in 1944. He was later sent overseas.

Peg said she earned around $50 a week which was a huge pay increase over her last job in a law firm making $10 a week. Her overall impression of working for the Army was great. "We all enjoyed it. I think because most of us had just came out of the Depression and we were so thankful for those jobs that we didn't find it depressing or anything. The only thing that was bad was when they started taking the different troops out and marching to the boat landing. And they would get on the ships there, and then they would go overseas . . ." After the war Peg moved with her husband to his home in Illinois.

Mary Duff Heckendorn was born in Prince George's County, Maryland and graduated from Annapolis High School. She enlisted in the WAC after having worked at the Newark (NJ) Public Library. She worked at the Fort Hancock library under a civilian woman librarian and also wrote a column for the *Sandy Hook Foghorn,* called "Column Left," beginning in February 1944. Her thoughts on this "offbeat" column, " . . . it was fun. I was not restricted in any way. I could be funny or I could be informative, but it was a good deal. I had written columns before. Well, I was working in the library which gave me access to a lot of people coming in and out and I could pick up good gossip that way. People who were married or engaged."

Mary describes her living arrangements, "I think it was called Barracks 25. It was a big two story, two story building with a big stairway in the middle. And two rooms, each one accommodated I guess about twenty cots . . . twenty or twenty five cots. And all the showers and everything else was downstairs. So we slept upstairs, but went downstairs to brush our teeth and so on." She further describes life in the barracks, "And the barracks was supervised or the whole thing I guess, run by (a) first sergeant who was probably about 50. And she and her husband lived in an apartment somewhere nearby. And she was universally called, "Mom." (Her last name was Johnk.) People were very fond of her. I was never disciplined by her. Which I understand she was very harsh. But she was a nice person. And I

Red Cross worker driving out of the motor pool,1943.

For more information about the Fort Hancock Oral History Program please visit:
http://www.nps.gov/gate/historyculture/sandyhookpeople.htm

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All Fort Hancock pictures are courtesy of the National Parks Service.

don't, it was amazing it seemed to me that she was as old as she was. I suppose she was more than 50." Mary also talks a little about the social life on Fort Hancock, "I went to the Service Club and danced a bit. I went down to . . . of course I loved the water. Having been raised in the Chesapeake Bay area, I used the beach. It was surprising how many people did not use the beach. I often many times had it all to myself. The big thing for me was that I had dear friends in Greenwich Village in New York and the Coast Guard ran a boat every weekend over to New York and I could get off and enjoy the city. Anytime. Almost every weekend, I was standing on the street corner one day and someone came up to me and handed me two tickets and it was for a relatively new musical called, "Oklahoma." And I just loved it. And I got the seats for free. And it was really a departure from any musical I had ever seen. I really love the theater anyway." She describes some of the new personalities that she met, "I was thinking of various people. When we went down to the mess hall, there was a woman called Brodsky who delighted in, I mean we weren't marched down, but she set the rhythm. And did that little song, "You had a good home but you left." And of course, your left foot went down on the word left. And she put us in a good rhythm (of marching).

Mary's thoughts on her experience at Fort Hancock, "For me it was a wonderful experience. I was sent down there from Madison Barracks, New York at Watertown. I had frozen to death and they were closing the unit. . . . And it was spring and a nice job in the library and all together it was really pleasant. If I hadn't had my heart set on going overseas I would have gladly stayed there." She went to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia in June for overseas training and traveled through Europe.

The military originally requested women to do clerical work. It was believed they did this better than men, but the Army soon realized many other skills. By the end of the war, women were in 401 of the 625 Army occupation codes. This also included war zone locations where 181 died. The advancement of women in the military was made possible by changing technology. Jobs were more technical and these educated women worked well in the early computer age. At the Corps peak in 1945, there were 99,000 women serving in the army. In June 1948, the Womens' Army Corps became a permanent part of the Army. Combining all services for the entire war, 400,000 women served in uniform. An additional estimated 2.2 million civilian women worked in war industries.