

Society WAVES Goodbye:
The Question of a Servicewoman's Role After World War II

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Abstract

The women who served in the Navy's Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, or WAVES for short, experienced many liberties previously withheld from them, and made great strides towards equality. This was due in part to their service taking place in areas previously held by men. After the war, these hard-earned advances essentially disappeared due to the larger societal desire for women to return to the domestic sphere. The push to move women into the domestic sphere began well before the war ended, and only intensified. In the decade following the end of the war, these women were pushed into low-ranking clerical jobs that were typical for women of the time, and were given no chances for upwards mobility. It wasn't until Second-Wave Feminism and other larger social movements appeared in the 1970's that the advancements originally made by the WAVES were met and then exceeded.

Introduction

Historically, no branch of the United States Military has had more women involved than the Navy. As early as the First World War, women participated in the Navy in an official capacity, serving as Yeomen (F), a type of clerical worker. During World War II, these women's roles in the Navy became all the more important, as they began to serve in traditionally male roles. With the entire country mobilizing in the wake of Pearl Harbor, it was soon realized that action needed to come from everyone, not just men. Many women chose to enter the civilian workforce in wartime industries to help the effort. The absence of men was hard felt in all areas, particularly in the home front military operations. While women had officially served in the Navy as Yeomen (F) in the first World War, their influence became widespread as large numbers were accepted in multiple branches of the military. The women who served in the Navy in traditionally male roles during World War II broke a multitude of societal norms. After the war, these hard-earned advances essentially disappeared due to the larger societal desire for women to return to the domestic sphere.

In popular culture, there has been immense focus on the women who participate in wartime industries, including the well-known 'Rosie the Riveters,' who symbolized the civilian women who joined the industrial effort. The population of women who served within the Armed Forces during World War II were largely neglected in both pop culture and scholarship for decades. Beginning in the 1990's, there was a greater focus on the women who served in the war, not just those in wartime industries. Lining up with the 50th anniversary of the war, many memoirs of women who served were published including *More Than a Uniform: A Navy Woman in a Navy Man's World* by Captain Winifred Quick Collins and *Navy Wave: Memories of World War II* by Lieutenant Helen Clifford Gunter. It is important to note that most memoirs written

were by women who continued to work within the military after the war or were high ranking, and therefore a minority. Along with these personal recounts, several narrative histories of women in the Navy over the course of its existence began to appear as well, like *Serving Proudly* by Susan H Godson and *Crossed Currents: Navy Women in a Century of Change* by Jean Ebbert and Marie-Beth Hall. Several publications acknowledged that WAVES broke boundaries within the Armed Forces and paved the way for future women in the military. I examine to what extent the WAVES involvement in World War II led to larger social changes in the Navy following the war.

WAVES in the war

The first all-female organization to be formed during the war was the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) in May of 1942. The creation of the WAAC faced a lot of difficulties, mainly with the fear of female involvement in the military, and the gendered implications that their service brought.¹ The Navy looked to the WAAC for guidance on the creation of their own all-female organization, as they had paved the way. Not long after, on July 30 1942, Public Law 689 was signed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. This law was responsible for creating the women's reserve that became known as Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, or WAVES for short. Although these organizations were similar, one key difference between these two was that the women in the WAVES were embedded within the Navy rather than just an auxiliary organization compared to other branches like the Army.² Because of this, the

¹ Leisa Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps during World War II*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 20-21.

² Susan H. Godson, *Serving Proudly: a History of Women in the U.S. Navy*, (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 112.

WAVES was one of the largest of these organizations, having over 100,000 members at one point, and made up 2.5% of the Navy's force during 1945.³

Due to their placement in the male focused military, these women faced many challenges in society. Many feared that it would result in "mannish" behaviors with prominent organizations like the Catholic Church claiming them as a threat to the values of the country.⁴ This threat was combatted in multiple different ways and that was easily evident from the creation of the organization. From the outset, the WAVES were initially limited to 11,000 members and they would not be allowed to serve overseas. In the beginning many of the positions held by the Women's Auxiliary Corps fit into the traditional womanly jobs that didn't require a lot of physical effort, like clerical duties. This signals the reluctance to have women within the military and the effort to keep them from upward movement.⁵

There was also a focus on the temporary aspect of their positions. It was said initially that the organization would be disbanded, and all the women would be discharged within a year of the war ending.⁶ This focus on the temporary served to reassure the public that female service would not lead to any drastic long-term effects. In the case of the Army, the most convincing argument for female service was patriotism.⁷ They supposedly were only serving out of love for their country, meaning that, if not for the war, they would not be working. This initial focus on the temporary made the public eager to send the women back home at the end of the war in spite of their importance to postwar military needs.

³ Gail M. Beaton, *Colorado Women in World War II* (Louisville, University Press of Colorado, 2020),

⁴ Zoë Catherine Robinson, "Women in Blue: Women in the US Navy During World War Two." MA diss., (The College of William and Mary, Virginia, 2001 ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global), 34.

⁵ Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*.

⁶ Robinson, *Women in Blue*.

⁷ Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 21.

In addition to this, other methods reinforced the idea that these women were still domestically inclined despite their military positions. Specific uniforms were designed for these branches that highlighted their femininity, including heels and skirts. These uniforms were not practical and were meant to separate the women from the men. Propaganda posters for the military, like those for industry, featured women with perfect hair and makeup, which visually spoke to the femininity that would have been maintained within these positions.⁸ (Figure 1) This poster means to demonstrate that women are placed on equal footing with men by having a woman stand side by side with them. The woman has on a full face of makeup, and her features are very soft, especially compared to the men behind her. Although the goal of this poster is trying to convince women that they are “On the Same Team” as men by joining the Navy, the depiction of the woman in the poster serves to show that women can still remain feminine in the Navy.⁹

⁸ Kathleen M. Ryan, “When Flags Flew High”: Propaganda, Memory, and Oral History for World War II Female Veterans,” Order No. 3325683, (University of Oregon, 2008), <http://argo.library.okstate.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/when-flags-flew-high-propaganda-memory-oral/docview/304507457/se-2?accountid=4117>, 177.

⁹United States Navy, “On the Same Team – Enlist in the WAVES.” Hennepin County Library, 1943.



(Figure 1)

Military leaders did everything within their power to ensure the public that these women would retain their femininity. There were strict requirements placed on the women who did enlist, as they had to be well educated. Due to this, one of the main arguments for their enlistment were that their education would be continuing through the military.¹⁰ Oveta Culp Hobby, the Director of the WAAC assured mothers that service was a positive experience.

... I wonder if you have considered the new values which the military experience that are living now is bringing them. I am not referring now to what they will learn as part of their military education, and yet I want to stress that they are acquiring a great deal of knowledge which they could have learned in no other way.

¹⁰ "Oveta Culp Hobby, Director of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, Talks to American Mothers, 1943." In *Major Problems in the History of World War II* Edited by Mark A. Stoler and Melanie S. Gustafon, (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2003) 249-251.

Throughout her whole speech, Hobby assures the mothers of the WAAC that the women serving had everything to gain and nothing to lose. Earlier in the speech, Hobby thanked the mothers for allowing their ‘precious’ daughters to serve. This makes it seem that even though most women enlisted of their own volition across all branches, their agency was overshadowed by their parents. This changed following the war, as it seemed as though a woman’s agency was handed off from her parents to her husband.

The strict requirements did not end once they were enlisted however, as women faced many restrictions that were meant to preserve their femininity. Uniforms worn were meant to be worn to perfection.¹¹ Women were expected to always act with the upmost decorum: to properly uphold the expectations set forth by the public. There were also strict regulations within the women’s personal lives, as they were often not allowed to interact with male GIs in social manners. Not only did the Navy want women to maintain professionalism throughout the barracks, but they also greatly wanted to discourage pregnancy and venereal diseases. From the beginning of the war, venereal diseases became especially prevalent in male barracks, and much of this was blamed on “victory girls,” who hung out around military bases. As women and men began to work together, many leaders thought that disease would continue to spread exponentially. In an effort to prevent this, strict restrictions were placed on the women, including their right to marry. Initially, women were unable to marry other servicemen. This was eventually repealed in stages over the course of the war as leaders realized that the strict regulation was preventing women from enlisting.¹² In addition to this, if any woman was even

¹¹ Kathleen M. Ryan. “Uniform Matters: Fashion Design in World War II Women’s Recruitment,” *Journal of American Culture* 37, no. 4 (2014).

¹² Beaton, *Colorado Women*, 66-84..

suspected to be participating in ‘lesbian’ behaviors, they were to be dishonorably discharged, which was a common rule amongst the branches.

These strict regulations did not do much to dissuade fears of having women in the military. In 1943, an unorganized slander campaign against these women was conducted primarily by other navy servicemen, but also included many others outside of the service. Women faced verbal and sexual harassment simply for their position within the military. This took different forms depending on the stature of the man, though all had to overcome the change of working side by side with women. Lower ranking and enlisted men opposed women partially out of fear that they would take over their positions due to their higher education.¹³ Some older male officers did not want women working under them, and only fully accepted them once they had proved themselves, despite their high levels of education.¹⁴ It was because of this hesitance that women often faced difficulties getting into favorable positions within the service. Captain Winifred Quick Collins describes what was typical when it came to WAVES being assigned to a male officer for the first time.

The effect of some negative attitudes about women in the navy put great strains on individual navy women. Each WAVE— officer or enlisted— had to go through a continual process of proving herself to her male associates in every new situation. It was usually the case that once a commanding officer has WAVES assigned to his command, he became impressed with their education and proficiency and would then request additional WAVES.¹⁵

All these factors placed a lot of pressure on the women’s shoulders that would not have been felt if they were men.¹⁶ The women who enlisted initially saw it as an opportunity for long

¹³ More than uniform 90

¹⁴ Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 123.

¹⁵ Captain Winifred Quick Collins, *More than a Uniform: A Navy Woman in a Navy Man’s World*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1997), 91.

¹⁶ Robinson, *Women in Blue*.

term change. These new positions brought about the elimination of different spheres, even though their work remained primarily within clerical duties; however, the new prosperity after the Great Depression subconsciously encouraged the creation of families, even before the war ended.¹⁷ Marriage rates and birthrates had skyrocketed from their depression numbers by 1942¹⁸. While in the service, several WAVES met and married their husbands, most of whom were GIs, despite having to immediately separate to serve in their respective stations. Those who became pregnant were honorably discharged. As seen at the end of the war, those who married servicemen were granted special leave to be with their husbands. By both enforcing and allowing leave to women who were in the process of creating a family, the navy was actively pushing for domesticity.

Throughout the war, WAVES were employed in many different occupations, ranging from radiomen to storekeepers.¹⁹ Despite this new range of opportunities, the WAVES functioned similarly to their predecessors, the majority of them were Yeomen, or clerical workers. The largest WAVE training site, Oklahoma A&M University, which produced nearly 11,000 graduates, was primarily devoted to clerical training. The training lasted around four months, regardless of specialty, and topics at Oklahoma A&M included shorthand, typewriting, personnel and Navy history. Despite these women experiencing the liberties that came with their service, they still were placed within positions available to them outside of the military. After the majority of demobilization, the need for women in unconventional jobs disappeared and clerical training became the norm for women in the Navy for the next 30 years.²⁰

¹⁷ Nancy Cott, *No Small Courage : a History of Women in the United States*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 488.

¹⁸ Cott, *No Small Courage*, 488.

¹⁹ Godson, *Serving Proudly*.

²⁰ Ebbert, *Crossed Currents*.

Despite most women serving in clerical positions, as the war raged on, the WAVES' importance continued to grow. Even after VE Day, the women continued to grow in prominence and numbers, even if they primarily remained in the same roles. Radio Washington, the largest communication station in the Navy, had WAVES comprising 75% of its workforce, despite the WAVES accounting for less than 2% of the whole military. WAVES were prime candidates to work in Washington, as their strong education in mathematics naturally inclined them to code breaking.²¹In 1944, Several WAVES began to be assigned in Hawaii, despite the initial claim that the organization would remain stateside. This came about through a bill proposed by Representative Margaret Chase, which allowed for women from several branches of the military to serve in Hawaii, Alaska, and the Caribbean that was signed into law that same year.²²

Although their service was very important, the end of the war was felt very early on for many WAVES in comparison to their male counterparts. In the case of Lieutenant Helen Clifford, who helped work to create training and recruitment videos, her work was no longer considered for publishing in the months leading up to the end of the war.²³ For these women, the looming end of the war posed many uncertainties, and the only certainty was that they would no longer be needed, which had been made clear from the beginning of the WAVES. Some women speculated on what they would like to do after the war, but a general consensus was the desire to not return to their pre-war lives.²⁴

Other branches of the military experienced this premature push for female demobilization. As early as March 1944, Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, the home of the

²¹ Beaton, *Colorado Women*, 83.

²² Judy Barrett Litoff, and David C. Smith. *We're in This War, Too: World War II Letters from American Women in Uniform*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²³ Helen Clifford Gunter, *Navy Wave: Memories of World War II*, (Fort Bragg, CA: Cypress House Press, 1992), 123.

²⁴ Clifford, *Navy Wave*, 123.

Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs) began to liquidate. Claiming that there were plenty of pilots in the Army Air Forces, those in service in Sweetwater were reassigned across the branch, ranging from foot soldiers to clerics. One WASP, Marion Stegeman, dreaded her destiny within the army.

If I go into the Army, they could chain me to a typewriter for the duration plus six months, in spite of anything they might promise. (4) I can't see myself running around saluting and kow-towing and obeying orders from [those who]... will really dish out the works to those of us who have been in only a year and will be mere Second Lieutenants. I can do what I'm told gracefully now only because—underneath it all—I know I don't *have* to.²⁵

Marion's sentiment reflects that of a lot of women in the service. While serving in the WASPs, she was able to experience liberties that weren't granted to even other servicewomen. Before the war even ended, the threat to those liberties was all too real, as she was going to be forced into a traditional female working role in clerical work.

The push towards domestic life began well before the war ended, even for those outside of the service. In a 1944 edition of *Life Magazine*, General Electric pushed an advertisement (figure 2) for women, encouraging them to buy war bonds. In the smaller text, it is stated "each extra dollar does an extra bit to speed victory."²⁶ By buying war bonds these women would help end the war sooner so they could get to their new home (with General Electric products) sooner.²⁷ The large text that says "Women Want Homes Like This!" signals that GE is trying to say that if you don't want a welcoming home, then you are not like other women.

²⁵ Susan Ware, *Modern American Women: a Documentary History*, (New York, McGraw Hill, 1997).

²⁶ "Preparing for the Postwar World." From *Life*, February 7, 1944. Reprinted with permission of General Electric Company. In Rupp, Leila J. *Mobilizing Women For War: German and American Propaganda 1939-1945*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978, 164.

²⁷ "Preparing for the Postwar World."

This domestic push was felt in many more ways by WAVES. In addition to the widespread propaganda of the American dream, these women were encouraged to leave their positions for their husbands. A special policy was made for the wives of servicemen in the Navy. If their husband returned home, they would be allowed 45 days leave to spend time with him. If a woman was married to an injured serviceman, however, she was allowed to leave the service immediately. By allowing for these accommodations to married WAVES, the Navy was reinforcing the woman's role as a caregiver, both for their husbands and their future children.



(Figure 2)

In a 1946 edition of the Oklahoma A + M alumni magazine, the article welcoming their new editor, Pansy Rutherford Williams, a former WAVE instructor, included information about her husband's station overseas, as though his deployment would be the explanation for such a woman to be working, despite the position being well within the accepted female range of work.

In the very short section, the magazine also mentions that the former editor resigned to go live with her husband.²⁸ Even though the position fit into the traditional clerical role that women occupied, the former occupant of the position did not continue to work there because of her husband. These women's postwar careers and lives revolved around their husbands, especially if their husband also served in the war. These women were pushed out of the workforce, and they were encouraged to follow their husbands wherever their post war job led them.

The Return Home

The length of time that women continued to spend within the armed forces following the end of the war varied greatly depending on location, branch, and position. The WAVES chose to demobilize based on a point system that was determined by several factors including age, time served, and dependents. This plan was announced in the days immediately following the victory over Japan, and by Sept 30, 1945, nearly a month after the beginning of demobilization, the WAVES had shrunk to 77,032 members.²⁹ The timeline of demobilization was constantly being updated to reflect the needs of the military. In March 1946, WAVE officers were able to apply for extension of active duty through July 1, 1947, and approximately 1,800 took advantage of this.³⁰ All others were transferred to separation activities on August 20, 1946.³¹ This new allowance came mainly as a response to the staff shortages created by the quick demobilization.

²⁸ "Office Staff Changes" *Alumni Magazine*, Oklahoma A&M College, May 1945.

²⁹ Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES. "SERVICE WOMEN GET OLD JOBS BACK: THE WAC, WAVES, SPARS AND MARINES, SPEEDING DISCHARGES, REPORT FEW COMPLAINTS." *New York Times* (1923-), Oct 23, 1945. <http://argo.library.okstate.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/service-women-get-old-jobs-back/docview/107405636/se-2?accountid=4117>

³⁰ Ryan, "When Flags Flew High," 186.

³¹ United States Naval Reserve. *Waves News Letter*. 1943-1946.

The process that the women went through to be discharged from the WAVES was highly organized. Each region had a dedicated separation center, where women would be sent to gradually ease out of the service. These separation centers were located across the country and women were sent to the center that corresponded with the region that their home was located in. There, they would enter civil readjustment, which taught them many things that would help them succeed after their discharge. The WAVES received the same benefits as the male GI's and while in civil readjustment they were able to learn more about the benefits like health care, loans, and the GI bill, which allowed for education.³²

The similarities of services offered to male and female veterans did not stop at the benefits they received. As many were displaced from their job at the end of the war, many career programs were created simply to help veterans, no matter the gender. The Veterans' Assistance Program of the Selective Service Handbook was meant for both men and women. The only sections within the handbook where women are mentioned separately from men are there solely to explicitly state that all benefits that men and women receive are identical.³³

Many of the women working in the WAVES had been replacing men who were sent out overseas. This proved to be an important detail when the war ended, as when the men returned, the women were promptly removed from their positions. This phenomenon was not unique to the Navy, for Marine Technical Sergeant Libby Schwartz her release was immediate, or "on the spot".³⁴ This was one major difference between the women who worked in traditionally male roles during the war, as opposed to female ones, even though 'freeing men to fight' was merely a concept, it was treated as though that was what actually happened. For example, Nurses were

³² United States Selective Service System. *Handbook, Veterans Assistance Program of the Selective Service System. 1945.*

³³ United States Selective Service System. "*Handbook.*"

³⁴ Peter A. Soderbergh, *Women Marines: the World War II era*, (Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers, 1992).

required for many years after the war to tend to injured GIs, and those who were sent overseas often had to facilitate the return of numerous soldiers before they could return themselves. In contrast to this, WAVES who were stateside were initially not given much option to stay, unless they were officers. This changed in 1946, as the efficient discharge system proved to be too effective. The Navy faced staffing shortages. and to manage them, they began to allow for the reenlistment of women, as well as some relaxed guidelines to accommodate this discrepancy.³⁵

As the WAVES quickly moved to demobilize, the public began to push for the women's return home. The head of the National Association of Manufacturers, Frederick Crawford said, "From a humanitarian point of view, too many women should not stay in the labor force. The home is the basic American institution."³⁶ Crawford held a lot of sway in his high position, and by having this sentiment, he not only pushed for civilian women to go home, but also military women. To make matters worse, female service was predominately overlooked by the return of men to the states, and the victorious feeling that came with 'bringing the boys home.'³⁷ Once they were fully released from the service, many who worked prior to the war returned to their original jobs, however, it was not always easy for veterans to return to civilian lifestyle. Those who were not in clerical work had a very specific skillset gained by serving that was relatively useless in any other profession. Many women sought to remedy this by furthering their education, but that too often proved futile in the face of a public majority and a job market flooded by men returning from war.

Leaving the military proved to be an anxious affair for many women. There were many uncertainties that the women faced. Some felt as though all they knew was the war, and were not

³⁵ Godson, *Serving proudly*, 159.

³⁶ Cott, *No Small Courage*, 484.

³⁷ Soderbergh, *Women Marines*.

eager to leave.³⁸ Lieutenant Helen Clifford Gunter feared the economic changes that would happen at the end of the war. She had anticipated a conflict in the job market as men flooded back into the country while women were concurrently being forced to find new jobs. In her words, “When the soldiers come home there will be tie-ups with war profiteers that include capitalists and laborers.”³⁹ This was not the only fear regarding the impending postwar economy for women, as their job stability was threatened by the end of the war. Their fears were not unfounded, as they were pushed out of the workforce for many different reasons, including their unique circumstances. Because of this, many of the women went down several different paths in the immediate postwar years.

One of the major benefits of enlisting in the WAVES was the GI Bill. As they were considered actual members of the military, they were given the same benefits as their male counterparts. The same cannot be said for women serving in other branches of the military. Many women took advantage of this, returning home and enrolling in colleges and universities to advance their studies. There was a dramatic change in the demographics of college students in the post war years, not just because of the returning men. During wartime, women had made up the majority of students, but that disappeared at the end of the war, even though there was still an increase in women attending, the ratio of women to men changed significantly.⁴⁰ However, there are many instances of women not completing their degrees, and getting married before graduating. One possible cause of this is an underlying social ideology that a woman should not be educated to the same level as men, so as to not compete with them. This resulted in only 25% of women in college seriously considering careers.⁴¹ This low number could also be contributed

³⁸ Litoff, *We're in This War, Too*.

³⁹ Gunter, *Navy Wave*, 123.

⁴⁰ M. C. Kratz, “Commerce Division Postwar Plans.” *Alumni Magazine*, Oklahoma A+M College. 4 1946.

⁴¹ Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 178.

to the thought that there would be no need for an education once marrying and entering the home. Even though women were able to continue to enjoy some of the liberties gained during the war, it often did not last as many got married and were sequestered to their husband and their home.

The women who graduated often returned to work for the government in some capacity, as the women were familiar and their accomplishments were well understood and respected. One such instance was Lieutenant Geneva Enid Walker, a WAVE who was from Stillwater and had trained at Oklahoma A+M, who served with the Bureau of Ordnance in Washington DC after being discharged in February 1946.⁴² Lieutenant Walker is just one example of the women who were displaced at the end of the war, despite continuing to work within the Armed Forces. Most of the women who worked in the government however, held the same positions that many civilians held.⁴³ Even though these women chose to continue to work outside of the typical feminine sphere, they were still assigned to the traditional clerical and ‘feminine’ work, and continued to be for many decades.

Those who did graduate often did not stay within the workforce for many years, as they were often pushed out when they became mothers. Like their counterparts who immediately married at the end of the war, they were sent home when they became mothers or even got married. The general expectation for mothers of young children was to stay at home to care for them. Several years after the war, the demographic of women in the workforce was mainly comprised of single women who had older children in school. This was astonishingly different

⁴² Hamilton, John. W. “Class of 1938 Carries On.” *The A. and M. College Magazine*. Stillwater, OK: June, 1943.

⁴³ Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 190.

from the lives that these women had held during the war, as their service did not allow for any type of domestic life.⁴⁴

While many of these women did not see themselves settling down during the war, many got married in the immediate postwar years. Some, like Nance, met her husband while they were both in school using the GI Bill. In her case, she was not necessarily looking for a husband, but rather saw herself falling in love unexpectedly. Many GI's who were returning from overseas were very eager to get married. As Lieutenant Helen Clifford Recounted, a man she had only met in person briefly sent her letters discussing marriage, and she chalked it up to his imagination running wild while at sea.⁴⁵ "Obviously his imagination worked overtime during those long months at sea." Most of these women, who were very independent during the war, got married of their own free will. In many accounts, these women focused on how they found domestic life on their own terms, rather than being pushed into it.

Lasting Impacts

This importance of women by the end of the war showed just how capable women are, despite the majority of them remaining in low ranking positions. Even though there were many arguments against their involvement, military leaders and the government realized that women's work was highly valuable. This recognition ultimately did little to dissuade fears that their femininity was compromised. With the war over, there was very little patience for the suspected masculinity of women. However, many still saw a need for women within the service. Petitions began for the permanent placement of women into the military as early as 1946, while some

⁴⁴ Cott, *No Small Courage*, 486.

⁴⁵ Gunter, *Navy Wave*, 131.

women were still completing postwar tasks. Commander Joy Bright Hancock, a former WAVE, was assigned to the Bureau of Naval Personnel for the purpose of drafting congressional proposals.⁴⁶ Some of the largest arguments in favor of female permanency was this continued service, as well as the potential for another war with the Soviet Union. If another war were to break out, the government could avoid the months that it would take to establish and train a new force of women.

These arguments did not deter fears of female service. As there was not an urgent need for soldiers, there was the opportunity to debate the consequences of having women within the military. In addition to fears of the deteriorating of traditional femininity, there were also questions about the capability of these women. Even though the women had provided the power needed on the home front to help win the war, many congressional members believed that their gender proved them incapable of performing the same service as men. One of the most debated questions was the question of menopause. Several committee members believed that a woman became incapacitated during menopause, and it required a testimony on behalf of multiple admirals and the Navy's surgeon general to convince the committee otherwise.⁴⁷

In addition to menopause, pregnancy became a concern for the committee, although for entirely different reasons. While they believed that menopause medically incapacitated a woman, pregnancy incapacitated a woman bureaucratically. Representative Dewey Short of Missouri believed that there was some kind of discipline attached to women who became pregnant, as he assumed that the women who became pregnant were unmarried. When Commander Hancock pointed out this assumption, as well as the assertion that these women received the same discipline as the father, there were no more concerns regarding pregnancy being a negative factor

⁴⁶ Ebbert, *Crossed Currents*, 113.

⁴⁷ Ebbert, *Crossed Currents*, 121.

in female service. “Are you under the impression that these women who became pregnant weren’t married?”⁴⁸ These concerns prove that a woman’s femininity was not the only concern, but also their biological ‘inferiority.’

Despite the debates over a woman’s physical ability to serve within the military, a new era in the role of service women began on June 12, 1948, when President Truman signed the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act into law. Also known as Public Law 625, this admitted women into the existing military structure permanently, and gone were the days of female reserves. However, this law also included many limitations, just like its predecessors. Women were not allowed to make up more than 2% of each branch, and restrictions were placed on the number of female officers. In the Navy specifically, women were not allowed to be assigned onto ships, with exceptions made for transportation and medical reasons. These restrictions reflected the same fears held during the war.

It was after the passing of Public law 625 that women’s service in the Navy truly stalled. Despite the heavy Navy involvement in the Korean War, the limitations imposed by the law did not allow for any upward movement within the navy and made enlisting unattractive to many women. Because of this, the small amount of women in the Navy stayed steady through the 50’s and 60’s, as very few joined.⁴⁹ Without a major war on the same scale as World War II pushing for growth and expansion, many began to see the permanent placement of women as a failure, as they did not appear to contribute anything meaningful and advocated for the abandoning of female service.⁵⁰ These women continued to live and work in this limited lifestyle until the 1970’s, when the Navy went under many transformations.

⁴⁸ Ebbert, *Crossed Currents*, 121.

⁴⁹ Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 199.

⁵⁰ Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 190.

Although these women were now considered a part of the actual Navy, rather than just a reserve, the mentality that they were separate persisted. This is partly due to the fact that their work remained largely the same. They also were not allowed to move within male ranks, and the number of female officers was greatly limited. This mentality of separation is easily shown through the continued use of the WAVES acronym, even though the reserve no longer existed. This trend also existed in other branches of the military, making it a widespread phenomenon.⁵¹ Many women sought to hold onto the terms of the war in a bid of nostalgia. For many, the women who served in World War II were the women who broke barriers, and they were a part of that legacy. By holding onto this name, the navy women were still holding onto all of the limitations that the WAVES held.

This mentality persisted throughout the 1950's and 60's, when the branch stalled due to low enlistment and little mobility. However, as time moved on and the demographics of the Navy changed, many began to move away from this nostalgic view of women's service.⁵² Several changes began when the US entered the conflict in Vietnam. In 1967, the 2% restriction on women was finally lifted in anticipation of the impending conflict, but still maintained restrictions on work based on their gender's physical capabilities.⁵³ It wasn't until a change in leadership in 1971 that women's position in the navy truly began to change.

Appointed in January of 1971, Captain Robin Lindsay Quigley was not a member of the WAVES during World War II, and had enlisted in the Navy in 1954. She was much younger

⁵¹ Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 168.

⁵² Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 228.

⁵³ Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Jennie W. Wenger, Jennifer Kavanagh, Jonathan P. Wong, Gillian S. Oak, Thomas E. Trail, and Todd Nichols. "History of Integrating Women into the U.S. Military." In *Implications of Integrating Women into the Marine Corps Infantry*, 7–16. RAND Corporation, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt19gfk6m.10>, 9.

than her predecessor, and represented a group who did not share the nostalgic mentality that dominated the 50's and 60's.⁵⁴ Her different perspective on women's service and persistence towards equality ultimately ended the stagnancy of women. Her major argument was that women could not achieve equality if they did not fully integrate into the navy. One thing that she had noticed, is that while these women wanted to be seen as equal, they still acted as though they deserved special treatment as 'WAVES'. In order to push away from this mentality, Quigley eliminated the use of the WAVES acronym and removed several of the women's support structures.⁵⁵ This was a rough transition, as many women were apprehensive at being placed at the mercy of men. These large changes came shortly after the US exited the conflict in Vietnam, as the Navy at large was going through many changes.

Quigley's efforts did much to change the status of women, but would have ultimately been for naught if not for outside developments. In the 1970's, federal courts began to uphold women's working benefits, and many cases made a clear stance on what working women had rights to.⁵⁶ Much of these developments aligned with the larger social development of Second Wave Feminism in the US. Another outside factor that had an effect on the military was the Equal Rights Amendment, that prompted multiple branches of the Military to increase the number of women in uniform.⁵⁷ However, the most impactful of outside influences was the fight for equality. Over the decade, women gained access to more advanced training and benefits. Beginning in 1972, orientation schools were merged together, and many other women attempted to gain admission to prestigious trainings like the Naval Reserve Training Corps (NROTC) and

⁵⁴ Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 224.

⁵⁵ Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 224.

⁵⁶ Ebbert, *Crossed Currents*, 211.

⁵⁷ Ebbert, *Crossed Currents*, 192.

the Naval Academy. Female admission to the Naval Academy did not come from an interior regulation, but was fought through the courts until 1976, like many other equality issues in the 1970's.⁵⁸ In 1973, a women could no longer be discharged on account of being pregnant and they were still required to work until well into their pregnancy, which completely contradicted the fears displayed in the 1940's when women's service was being questioned.⁵⁹

Total equality in assignments and positions came in 1972, when CNO Zumwalt convened a committee whose purpose was to examine the existing laws and regulations surrounding women. The committee recommended widespread changes, and the most important was the Z-116 that guaranteed equal rights and access within the Navy. The timing of this came right after the abolishment of the WAVES.⁶⁰ It wasn't until the early 90's, nearly 50 years after World War II ended, when near-equality was reached with the removal of many combat restrictions.⁶¹

The larger amount of women made them a more formidable demographic, and the close working proximity to men created an atmosphere that was ripe for change. The language and harassment of the slander campaigns during World War II only continued within the Navy, and was especially prevalent during the years of stagnancy. However, with the developments of the 1970's, this mistreatment came to light.

Conclusion

The Women Accepted for Volunteer emergency service have always been considered as groundbreakers in the fight for women's equality within the military. Their service was

⁵⁸ Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 230.

⁵⁹ Chief Jessica Myers. *The Navy's History of Making WAVES*. Washington: Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC, 2013. <http://argo.library.okstate.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/reports/navys-history-making-waves/docview/1415808755/se-2?accountid=4117>.

⁶⁰ Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 225.

⁶¹ Captain Winifred Quick Collins, *More than a Uniform: A Navy Woman in a Navy Man's World*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1997), 227.

indispensable to the Navy, and they often worked in positions that were not available to most women at the time. However, at the end of the war, their groundbreaking strides were largely lost to an overwhelming public push to the domestic sphere. Throughout the years following the war, many women returned to their prewar lives, and those who didn't were often pushed into typically feminine roles, even when they continued to serve within the military.

It wasn't until the 1970's and the larger movement towards equality through Second Wave Feminism that the Navy began to make true strides towards total equality. There were internal efforts towards this equality that came largely at the hands of Captain Robin Lindsay Quigley. Her efforts would not have been quite as impactful or permanent if it weren't for court decisions that took place throughout the 70's. Now, as one looks back on the service of the WAVES one can still recognize the impact they made, but it is also important for one to realize how their impact was subsequently erased in the decades following the war.

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