

Tar Heel Junior Historian

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WORLD WAR II



Colonel Westray Battle Boyce, director of the Women's Army Corps, 1945-1947. This portrait shows her War Department General Staff Identification Badge over her left pocket.

WESTRAY BATTLE BOYCE: THE STORY OF A WAC

by Tom Belton*

What jobs did American women hold in the United States military as soldiers, sailors, or Marines when World War II started? None. The military establishment was an all-male organization, although women were employed as nurses in military hospitals.

War in Europe brought changes. The United States government began thinking about letting women voluntarily join the military in case of war. This change in the government's attitude caused much controversy. What could women possibly do in the military during a war? One anxious congressman who opposed the idea bluntly asked, "Who will do the cooking, the washing, the mending, the humble homey tasks to which every woman has devoted herself?" In other words, allowing women to enter any branch of the military would destroy American homes.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor ended much of the debate. America needed all the help it could get to move the huge quantities of men and supplies all over the world. On May 15, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed a bill that created the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAAC). Women who joined the corps performed a variety of noncombat tasks formerly done by male soldiers needed for combat. Women drove military vehicles, rigged parachutes, served as translators, cooks, weather forecasters, and aircraft control tower operators. Nevertheless many male soldiers did not like or accept women in uniform. The WAAAC's auxiliary status also meant that corps members were not part of the regular army organization—they were paid less than male soldiers, and they received no military benefits.

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Even if the picture was not perfect, thousands of women rushed to join the WAAC. Some viewed it as a patriotic duty. Others saw it as an adventure that allowed them to travel, meet new people, and learn new job skills.

One enlistee from North Carolina was Westray Battle Boyce. A Rocky Mount native and working mother, Boyce had moved to Washington, D.C., during the 1930s to work as an administrator for the federal government. When the war erupted Boyce enlisted in the WAAC in 1942 and became a member of the corps' First Officer Candidate Class at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, the "woman's West Point." Working at this old army post and living in former cavalry stables along with other women officer candidates, Boyce reflected the qualities typically found in the WAAC throughout the war. Her educational level and intelligence, ranked by the Army General Classification Test, exceeded those of her male counterparts in the army.

Boyce's natural abilities appeared in her war record as well. After completing officer training Boyce moved quickly through the

military ranks. Starting as a training officer at Fort Des Moines, her administrative skill soon pulled her into another field. In 1942 she traveled south to Atlanta, Georgia, and became the WAAC staff director of the Fourth Service Command. This appointment meant a very big breakthrough for women in the army at that time. It marked "the first time a woman had ever served on a service command military staff." Westray Battle Boyce, then a captain, controlled all WAAC officers and enlisted personnel in seven southeastern states, including North Carolina—and she had been in the WAAC for less than one year.

Staff director Boyce's work brought her intense public and military scrutiny. Newspaper reporters recognized a good story when they saw one and wrote countless articles about this "gentle-voiced, quiet-mannered lady from the Fighting South . . ." with the formidable name. Westray shrewdly used the newspapers to improve the public's view of women in the armed service. Too often Waacs were seen as tough, unattractive women who had stepped outside of their proper place, the home. Westray's professionalism, petite size,



This McDowell County store window display, ca. 1943, captured the pride of area residents in local women who entered the army during World War II.

The photo to the right was taken in North Africa on January 10, 1944. It shows Major Boyce, staff director of all Waacs serving in North Africa, greeting a newly arrived company of Waacs. The photo below shows Boyce seated at her desk in General Dwight D. Eisenhower's headquarters. U.S. Army photos.



and "charm and femininity" destroyed that image of a woman soldier. She knew it and used the publicity to defend and promote the work of her agency.

From 1942 until the end of the war Boyce paraded the accomplishments of women soldiers before the American public. She knew that the excellent character, education, and work of corps members "removed all doubt, and proved once and for all that there is an important place for women in war." Writing to her aunt in Rocky Mount in 1944, Boyce spelled out her feelings.

... the women of America who answered their country's call are among the outstanding women of our country. . . . Few of them were career women or won fame in civilian lives and occupations. . . . But . . . there is nothing small about her background now nor her job. The WAR is her hometown. The WAR is her job. And she is

fighting it just as grimly, just as gamely and just as gloriously as is her soldier brother.

These . . . WACs are of the cut and caliber of the great pioneer women of America who suffered the covered wagon . . . trail because the way lay ahead and the cause was great. They are worthy of the new chapter they are writing in that saga of American women.

Boyce's dedication earned increased recognition from her male military superiors. In 1943 Boyce was transferred overseas to the North African Theater of Operations, promoted to lieutenant colonel, and attached to General Dwight D. Eisenhower's staff. She supervised over 2,000 Waacs as their staff director.

Boyce first reported to General Mark Clark, a tall combat veteran, who surveyed the five-foot, two-inch Boyce and quipped, "I asked for a whole WAAC, not a half of one." Boyce's work and the work of all the overseas Waacs quickly impressed Clark and Eisenhower. Eisenhower, convinced that effective administration of his theater of operations was impossible without them, soon requested additional Waacs for his staff.

While Boyce served in Africa a big change occurred in the women's auxiliary army. In 1943 President Roosevelt and Congress changed the WAAC into the WAC—the Women's Army Corps. This law meant that women soldiers became part of the regular army with full military benefits for the duration of the war. The old WAAC organization disbanded, but more than 75 percent of the Waacs stayed in the WAC. Westray Battle Boyce did too.

American successes in North Africa were followed by the invasion of Italy. Many Wacs moved into the new Mediterranean Theater of Operations after the American advance was secure. Boyce monitored the Wacs in Italy and in North Africa. She described the Wacs in Italy in a 1944 article, noting that the first Wacs sent there "... were particularly pleased because they knew they would be the first women soldiers to set foot on the continent of Europe." Some manned mobile switchboards, lived in tents, and earned the nickname of "the up-forwardest WACs" because they served close to the frontlines.

Lieutenant Colonel Boyce's work as staff director did not go unnoticed. Shortly after she returned to the United States for a new assignment in August, 1944, Boyce received the Legion of Merit for her "stirring leadership" and "outstanding service" while overseas. She was the first woman in the WAC to receive this honor.

Back in Washington, D.C., Boyce represented the WAC in the War Department. The following year, on May 24, 1945, Lieutenant Colonel Boyce became deputy director of the corps, working under the WAC director Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby. Less than two months later Colonel Hobby resigned her office. Boyce succeeded her as the second director of the WAC on July 13, 1945, with the rank of colonel, the highest rank available in the WAC.

Colonel Boyce's leadership received a thorough workout. The approaching end of

World War II brought the question of demobilization before the War Department. The huge army of men needed to be decreased, but what about the 100,000 Wacs scattered around the world? A crisis developed as two opposing camps emerged. Some men and women wanted the WAC to remain a part of the army. The majority of men and women did not. Boyce attempted to study the arguments on both sides before reaching a decision. She obviously agreed that the WAC had proved itself during the war. She tartly stated that, "The Director of the WAC does not consider it her function to comment upon the Army's need, beyond pointing out that the usefulness of women members in a wartime army is no longer a matter of speculation."

Other Wacs, anxious to return to civilian life, pushed for a complete and immediate end to the WAC. Boyce decided that rapid demobilization of the WAC would be best but that an inactive reserve unit should be retained in peacetime America.

While Boyce wrestled with demobilization plans she continued her other administrative duties. These included a tour of WAC installations in Europe, Japan, and the southwest Pacific. During Boyce's absence on this trip the deputy director attempted to implement total demobilization of the WAC. Boyce cut her trip short when she heard the news and returned to Washington to face the issue.

The problem was resolved in 1946 by the War Department. A change in its personnel

Following the end of the war Colonel Boyce, director of the WAC, toured WAC facilities around the world. In October, 1945, she visited Luzon, in the Philippines, on an inspection tour. She is seated with Flight Officer Don Merrifield, her pilot in the Philippines. U.S. Army photo.



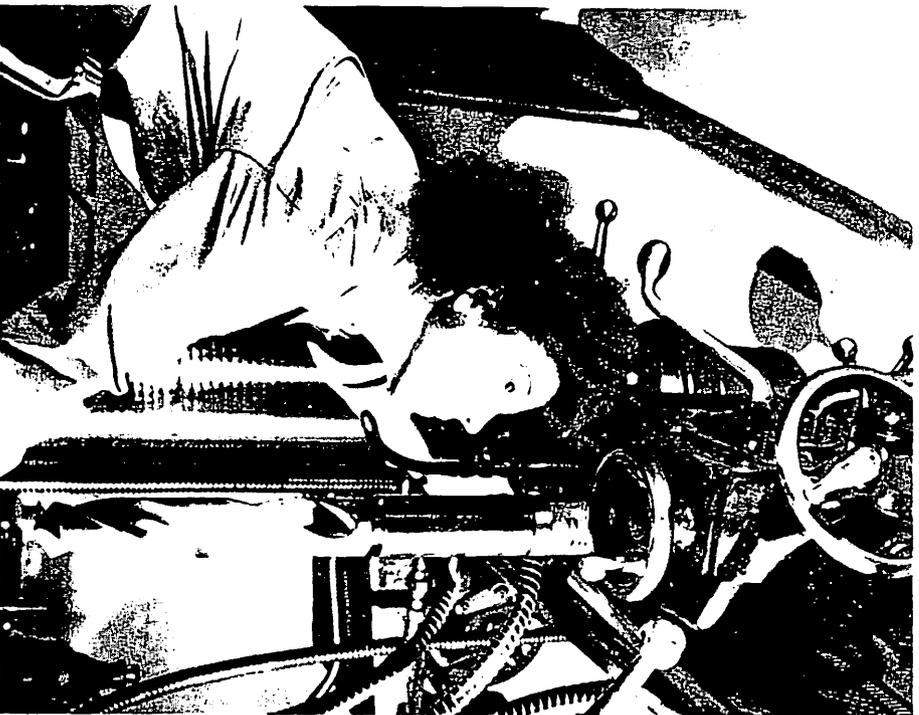
Women served in all branches of the military during the war. These women were WASPs. Women's Air Force Service Pilots. From their formation in 1943 until their dismissal in December, 1944, WASPs flew nearly sixty-million miles for the Army Air Forces—with no military standing or benefits provided until special legislation was passed in 1977 recognizing them as veterans. The WASPs in this photo served at Camp Davis, North Carolina, near Wrightsville Beach. They were part of a target-towing squadron that helped train air-to-air and ground-to-air gunners. U.S. Army photo.



had occurred when Eisenhower and other leaders from the European Theater of Operations assumed control of the department. Eisenhower knew firsthand what a good job the WAC had done. He wanted to keep the corps, and his wishes carried a lot of weight. Boyce's plan for a reserve unit was rejected in favor of securing legislation that would make the WAC a permanent part of the army. On June 12, 1948, President Harry Truman signed the integration act that merged the WAC with the regular army.

Boyce did not remain in the WAC long enough to participate in the new peacetime organization. Ill health forced her resignation on May 5, 1947. Eisenhower wrote her in March, shortly before she stepped down as director. He complimented her work as a member of his headquarters staff in Africa and Italy and added that she had "capably formulated and implemented plans for the demobilization of the Corps, and for its orderly conversion from a wartime organization to one with a peacetime mission. The patience, initiative and wisdom which you have devoted to these tasks are evidence of your sterling leadership."

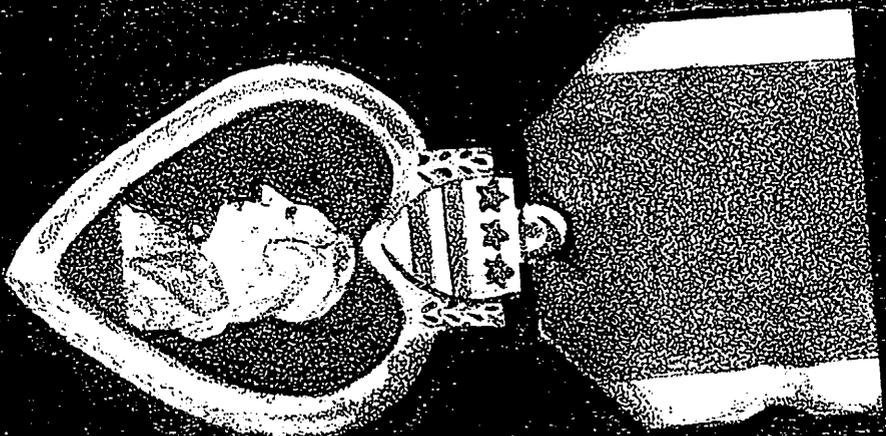
Westray Battle Boyce died on January 31, 1972. She was buried in the Battle family graveyard in Edgecombe County. Before her death she donated her wartime portrait as director of the WAC to the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh, along with her service medals and ribbons. The state is proud to honor the memory of this North Carolina woman who served her country so well during World War II. ☐✪



In 1943 the U.S. Marine Corps Women's Reserve was formed. This private at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, operated a radial drill in the engineering shop. U.S. Marine Corps photo, 1944.

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This issue is dedicated to all North
Carolinians who served their country
during World War II.



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