Female War Correspondents and their Effect on Female Military Positions

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Women began supporting military efforts in official and trained units during World War II as administrative assistants, secretaries, or nurses, organized through the Women's Army Corps (WAC). Their positions, however, were temporary and limited in resources and status. This inequality led to a 68-year journey to bring women into equal status with men in the armed forces through a string of legislation and alterations in military rules and regulations. Immediate credit belongs to the women who served in WWII and beyond; however, female war correspondents also aided in altering public opinion toward the notion of women working in and around the military through their coverage of the WAC, and eventually from within units. During the WAC's progress to gain increased status within the Army, these correspondents worked to attain access to battlefields and soldiers, earning respect from the military and their own colleagues as far back as World War I . Through the work of these civilian female correspondents in tangent with the WAC's progress, the concept of women on and around the battlefield became more feasible and widely accepted, especially after the Vietnam War. The involvement of female war correspondents did not independently lead to the advances for women in the military, but their presence on or near the frontlines and their persistence to be allowed closer to battles and to speak with officials contributed to women demanding greater access and equal treatment.

The WAC began their work in 1943 as the first non-auxiliary organized group of women trained for the military.[1] Training began at Fort Des Moines in Iowa, with their officers eventually deployed to England, North Africa, and other areas of minimal fighting.[2] The male labor shortages during WWII prompted the government to turn to 2.5 million previously unemployed women to fill jobs as secretaries, mail clerks, radio operators, repairwomen, mechanics, and medical lab technicians, with peak WAC participation reaching just under 100,000.[1,2] Women were seen as a valuable asset in order to free up men to fill combat roles, but the presence of women in military positions was debated and "met with resistance in public opinion" as well as in Congress. Both political leaders and the public felt "a mix of both disdain and protectiveness toward women", which led to the consensus that "women were not to go into combat".[3]

Due to the WAC's origin as a temporary support system for WWII, the corps was scheduled to dismantle six months after the war ended; however, the women's substantial contribution to the military's effort in Europe prompted General Dwight D. Eisenhower to propose legislation in 1946 to permanently integrate the WAC into the Army and the Organized Reserve Corps. With the WAC becoming a permanent fixture of the Army in 1948, women were given validation for their work in WWII and allowed a larger platform to strive toward increased roles within the Army.[2] Their change in status was also a sign of a continued shift in public and Army opinion from the years during WWII until 1948. Soldiers and leadership within the Army may have been swayed by witnessing the WAC's contributions and assistance in Europe. However, domestic voters would not have been able to witness those same efforts and experiences without a middle party to translate the battlefield scenes to America—this is where the female war correspondent stepped in to cover the WAC. Often assigned to women because the WAC was considered less dangerous and of more interest to women than the male soldiers' duties, all aspects of the WAC—from training in the U.S. to service in Europe—were photographed, interviewed, and covered throughout WWII. The coverage these female correspondents provided allowed American citizens to understand how the WAC was contributing to WWII, and why the eventual 1948 bill to establish them within the Army mattered.

The WAC's permanent existence allowed the organization to continue recruiting and training volunteers in the years between WWII and the Vietnam War, leading to a tripling in enlistment compared to WWII numbers, and playing an important role in the WAC's ability to fulfill the need for supplies and assistance in the Vietnam War. The WAC's increased presence in the Vietnam War led to increased equality in rankings, benefits, and retirement for officers. Women were allowed to be promoted above the rank of lieutenant colonel, and women in the WAC were able to serve in the Army National Guard in 1967.[2] By the end of the Vietnam War, women were authorized to participate in Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs, which created a pool of women willing and able to enter the Army service upon graduation. While on paper, women achieved training and benefits during the Vietnam War, their presence in Vietnam was limited to a peak of 109 women overseas, while a total of 2.7 million men served.[4] The WAC's progress, despite their limited numbers, can be attributed to the way in which they successfully completed the jobs they held in Vietnam and at home as administration, personnel, logistics, signal, transportation, intelligence, and other operational specialties.[4] Due to the limited number of women directly interacting with soldiers and higher military officials, the large number of female reporters in Vietnam assisted in balancing the gender inequality in Vietnam and the concept of women on the battlefield through their work. Unlike female reporters who moved with units, women officers only traveled near combat zones and aided military personnel. This work demonstrated their emotional and physical strength in a way that had not been seen in past wars.

In theory, WAC volunteers and nurses in Vietnam should have been safe in their restricted noncombat zones. However, because battles in Vietnam employed guerilla warfare, and thus often occurred in villages, on highways, or as surprise attacks, both women reporters and members of the WACs were often caught in battle areas. The Army recognized the experiences women had serving and completing tasks under the stress of surprise attacks, increasing training opportunities after the war—but assignments were still restricted to "safe" areas.[5] Although in 1973, women were allowed to train as pilots and later admitted to the majority of officer or enlisted specialty positions, they were excluded from entering combat or training for combat positions due to the 1977 Combat Exclusion Policy.[1] With the 1978 disbandment of WAC and full integration of women into the military, women were allowed to train with men. However, a policy created ten years later, the Standard Risk Rule, established an assignment rating system to assess risk of "direct exposure to hostile fire or capture", which resulted in further restrictions on women from areas deemed too dangerous or risky.[2]

The stigma that women could not handle the physical or emotional stress of combat missions persisted into the 1980s. During this time, the WAC struggled with position equality while female war correspondents also attempted to reach battlefields. The presence of female reporters among soldiers, along with the challenges female reporters overcame from both the military and within their own profession helped to prove women's capability to survive wars, breaking down social barriers for women and further propelling the concept of women serving in the military forward. Although the WAC did not exist until WWII, female correspondents began their largest push for foreign assignments in WWI by applying for accreditation to reach the battlefield and report on the war firsthand. However, they were told to cover the "woman's angle", or stories behind the front lines about civilians.[6] Those limitations caused reporter Corra Harris to believe that "Being banned from the front because of sex provided to be the biggest obstacle for women journalists".[6] The restricted experience female reporters gained in WWI instilled the desire to cover all news—both foreign and domestic—which was carried forward to the next generation of reporters in WWII.

WWII brought the same hurdle of accreditation, which required a receipt of placement, passing security clearances and receiving approved travel documents before going overseas to report. Put in place to keep track of overseas reporters, accreditation also served as an easy way to approve male reporters for travel whilst keeping women out of Europe.[6] In WWII, women were refused based on the burden the military would face to provide food, clothing, housing, and protection. Once those logistics were resolved, the military and domestic government offices that handled accreditation expressed concerns over the need for "special facilities" or toilets and sleeping areas to be created for women, which further stalled accreditation efforts. Eventually, roughly 120 to 140 women reporters overcame the government obstacles to receive accreditation.[3, 6]

While successful in their efforts to achieve access to Europe, their stories were often restricted to "reporting on the activities of female military personnel", although this allowed "Americans to see that they were safe and leading normal lives" while in Europe.[6] The reports and photos of American women working within the military illustrated to the nation that women were capable of operating within the military. Toni Frissell, famous for her photographs in "Vogue" and "Harper's Bazaar," photographed women training for WAC and under review. Her photos "fit into [the] media campaign to counter negative public perception of women in uniform".[7] As reporters and those in military positions, women stepped in to fill the vacated positions which men would normally occupy. While the roles were never directly related in creation or duties, their coexistence helped to prove the importance of each role: female correspondents documented the WAC's achievements, and the WACs provided a platform for female correspondents to prove their reporting abilities. Female reporters often acted as stand-ins for WAC positions on the front lines, and they gave the military exposure to how women may act in a military setting.

Margaret Bourke-White, a photographer for Life Magazine, was the first female photographer accredited in WWII. Through her work in 1941 photographing the German bombing of the Russian Kremlin, she served as an example of how women acted beyond the base and how they could work with soldiers.[3] Bourke-White was allowed to attend "early dawn briefings [and] go on practice fights", and she also marched with General Patton's army into Buchenwald, one of the first liberated German concentration camps. However, she was not permitted to do "the one thing that really counted—go on an actual combat mission".[3] Her survival of bombing raids and her photographs of some of the war's worst tragedies gave her professional merits, but she was unable to photograph battles for personal safety reasons. The limitations placed upon her did not diminish the effect of her photos as they served as a testament to women's ability to work in a war zone and to continue to function in the face of war tragedies. Bourke-White's presence among soldiers and in active war zones aided women in the military who held positions across Europe and Northern Africa, but could not fully enter into battle areas themselves. Reporters in WWII served as the proxy for female soldiers by allowing male soldiers and commanders to experience women's abilities both on base and in dealing with the horrors of war.

Clare Boothe Luce served that role when she wrote on-location articles during WWII, including articles on the military effort. In 1941, she wrote a profile for Life Magazine on General Douglas MacArthur when he was promoted to Commanding General of all U.S. Armed Forces in the Far East. Luce's piece stepped outside of the common career profile to focus on Gen. MacArthur's choices during the war, and how she believed the war could progress. Within a short article, she was able to examine how the Allied Powers viewed the war and propose, "that in Tokyo this chapter head would cause many a fan-toothed naval jaw to drop and many a military bandy leg to buckle".[8] Through her specific analysis of military strategy, Luce stepped outside of the traditional female role and asserted her knowledge of the current events of the time and progression of the war. Her work provided valuable background on Gen. MacArthur's military career along with how he could contribute to a second front in the east if needed. Her knowledge of Gen. MacArthur and military strategy demonstrated within that time an ability for women to travel to combat zones, comprehend the war, and digest the information to make astute observations. While Luce's article may not have altered tactics, her presence and astute predictions of military strategy provide evidence for her and other women's capabilities within military operations.

Unlike women in the WAC, who were kept away from battle, female reporters in WWII were allowed deeper into Europe, and traveled with soldiers into Germany and Russia. Female reporters also continued to push for job equality in domestic newsrooms, while the WAC struggled with decreased volunteers due to the Army's original plan to dismantle the. While women reporters' progress in war reporting did not make large strides until Vietnam, their continued efforts in newsrooms around the country allowed them to make greater advancements in Vietnam and place themselves deeper in combat than in previous wars.

During the Vietnam War, the persistence of female reporters to enter battle zones and travel with soldiers continued to indicate to the military that women were interested in and capable of experiencing battle conditions, completing their assignments, and surviving. Their commitment began with getting to Vietnam: editors of papers and radio and television stations usually did not hire female foreign correspondents; thus, any interested female reporter had to convince an editor of both their credentials and their willingness to travel to Saigon. Some reporters even went to Vietnam without a job, hoping to write freelance and eventually be picked up by a paper or radio station. This included Denby Fawcett, who paid for her own plane ticket before being picked up by the Honolulu Advertiser's in 1966.[9]

The Honolulu Advertiser's editors restricted Fawcett to the cities and tasked her to write "color stories on Saigon and its environs".[9] Her movements were further limited by military officials who "did not like the idea of male reporters getting killed" and "were against female soldiers in combat".[9] One official told Fawcett she reminded him of his daughter and was "even more horrified at the thought of a woman reporter getting shot".[9] Fawcett reflected on this by asserting that the commander "would never say to

a male reporter, 'You remind me of my son"'.[9] Eventually, she was able to talk her way past officials and checkpoints to begin traveling with soldiers on helicopters and into firefights. Once she asked to walk point squad, "the most dangerous and exposed unit," which travels at the forefront of the action, open to booby traps, mines, and ambushes.[9] The experience Fawcett gained aided her in obtaining access to more battles, better interviews, and longer stays with units.[9] However, she still faced opposition from higher commanders, including General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. armed forces in Vietnam, who—after encountering Fawcett on a base tour—attempted to remove all female reporters from Vietnam. He was met with resistance from a group of female reporters who lobbied the Pentagon to continue their reporting work, but according to Fawcett, "the incident showed how tenuous our hard-earned privileges were".[9] In Vietnam, Fawcett was able to move away from the relative safety of Saigon and her editors, which demonstrated that she was able to march with soldiers while other female reporters, aid workers, and members of the WAC were kept behind battle lines. Other women in Vietnam were held back by government and military restrictions, but reporters who often reported to domestic publications, which could not directly control their moves in Vietnam, were able to move more freely throughout South Vietnam once they received clearance or found a unit willing to take them on. The ease of embedment allowed female reporters to undergo traditionally masculine experiences and write from the direct perspective of someone in the field. That placement also gave the military, both soldiers and leadership, an understanding of how women may operate while under the pressures of war. During the two decades of the Vietnam War, these efforts pushed public and private government opinion toward understanding how women could withstand war.

Another key figure in this push for more freedom was Edith Lederer. When she requested to travel outside of Saigon in 1972, her editors at Associated Press (AP) placed restrictions on her. The AP foreign editor did not think "women could stand up to the demands of the world's backwaters and battle zones", but AP's president called Lederer with an idea for a promotion to cover the extraction of U.S. troops.[10] Despite the company president allowing female reporters in Vietnam, he made it clear to Lederer she was not to report on fighting. With this direction, Lederer felt she had "to prove that [she] was as good as AP's male war correspondents."[10] Lederer's desire is illustrative of women's push for professional equality with their male counterparts, and the ability to report on and work within the same areas as male reporters. Just as women serving in the military received the "safe" assignments, female correspondents were often told to stay within city limits and not report on battles. While WAC officers and volunteers were restricted by placement, correspondents made progress throughout the war as they talked their way past security checks, proved their merit through their articles, and took the place of male reporters who had been reassigned to other domestic or foreign assignments. Lederer and Fawcett's repeated attempts—both failures and successes—to gain access to battles which put them in proximity with military commanders and front line soldiers. Fawcett and Lederer's expressed desire to "cover exactly the same kinds of stories as [their] male colleagues" helped build the mindset that female reporters did not want to be treated differently than male reporters. This mentality was translated onto battlefields where women were expected to care and protect themselves just as any soldier would.

One of Gen. Westmoreland's fears rested in his belief that female reporters "might inconvenience and endanger soldiers who would rush to protect us in firefights".[9] Fawcett believes Westmoreland also "worried that the women correspondents might collapse emotionally when faced with the horrors of combat",[9] an idea which Fawcett calls "unwarranted."[9] Fawcett recounts "in combat it was usually every man and woman for him—or herself". While remembering an attack on a village while traveling with a battalion of Marines, she recalls, "I was essentially alone when the shooting started".[9] Kate Webb, a reporter for *United Press International* in Vietnam, proved women's capability to withstand the worst of war when she survived capture by North Vietnamese soldiers for 23 days. Taken prisoner along a highway during a battle in 1971, Webb and five other reporters marched through the night with minimal food and water while suffering from sicknesses and violent interrogation by their captors. Webb described her time as a prisoner as "the gray limbo", and stated that she was "not among the living or the dead of the war, but trapped in a gray twilight with no links to the living world".[11] Webb reflected that the fact that she survived gave hope to other families with missing soldiers or aid workers. Other women, both reporters and aid workers, were also captured in Vietnam, but Webb's publicized story displayed how women could operate successfully during war even as a prisoner.

Those stories helped to fill in the gaps when the military limited women serving within their ranks. Through their action on the frontlines of WWI, WWII, and the Vietnam War, these women were not forgotten by the military or the public, especially when these women pushed their editors to publish their stories. Frissell's photographs in WWII of the WAC, along with the work of other photographers after her, provided an important glimpse into the WAC's contributions to the collective war effort. Each female journalist and photojournalist throughout these three wars contributed evidence—in both their work and their presence—that women are capable of entering a war zone and continuing their jobs while working alongside others. This contributed to a shift in how women in the military were viewed, as they were then seen as valuable assets—not only in supporting roles, but in the military as well. This led to continued growth in positions and opportunities throughout the 2000s. As historian Janie Blankenship noted, "it was [the] women stationed in war zones throughout U.S. military history that paved the way for those in Afghanistan and Iraq".[12] This refers to the WAC, but also extends to female reporters who, by the Vietnam War era, lived in war zones for months or years in order to photograph and report on the conflict for domestic news organizations. The uninterrupted presence and continual efforts to seed themselves further into combat areas demonstrated how female correspondents supported and aided the development of the military's acceptance of women in general and within the armed forces.

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