

## *African-American WACs: they changed segregationist military policy*

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AFRICAN-AMERICAN women who served in the Women's Army Corps during World War II played a role in bringing about changes in segregationist U.S. military policy, a new book by a UB sociologist has found.

"To Serve My Country, To Serve My Race" (1996, New York University Press), by Brenda L. Moore, UB assistant professor of sociology, tells the story of African-American women in the Women's Army Corps (WAC) by drawing on the experiences of members of a postal directory battalion. It is the first book to document the lives of the women in the 6888th-the first U.S. WAC unit composed of African-American women to serve overseas. Moore interviewed 51 of the 850 women who served in the unit and reviewed archival documents from the War Department and from the women's personal collections.

"African-American women were not just passive recipients of the structural laws and policies that excluded them from participation in U.S. institutions in general, and in the military in particular," Moore says. "They were activists."

She cites numerous examples of this activism in the book. In one example, Margaret Barnes Jones, public relations officer of the 6888th, tells of an act of resistance when she was stationed at Camp Breckenridge, Ky. Black WACs protested poor assignments and were subsequently reassigned to positions commensurate with their abilities.

Moore also relates an incident in which a member of the 6888th, Gladys Carter, refused to drink out of a drinking fountain marked "for colored only" when the unit was undergoing training at Fort Oglethorpe, Ga., before being shipped overseas. She drank from the fountain marked "white," and other members of the unit followed her lead.

These stands against racism by African American WACs illustrate how these women helped to influence changes in military policy, Moore says.

While the 6888th's stated mission was to redistribute mail, its underlying mission was to debunk the notion that African-American women were inferior, she says.

"They (the women of the 6888th) helped to dispel racial myths that had spread throughout England and France," she says. "The British and French were eager to see whether African Americans really had tails."

Moore cites from an article written about the 6888th in a British newspaper. "These WACs are very different from the coloured women portrayed on the films, where they are usually domestics of the old-retainer type, or sloe-eyed sirens given to gaudiness of costume and eccentricity in dress. The WACs have dignity and a proper reserve," the article concluded.

During interviews with the women, Moore found one consistent theme: Racial segregation did not exist in England and France as it had in the United States. Once the women were assigned overseas, they reported no discrimination within the 6888th-the self-supporting battalion had a certain amount of autonomy since its chain of command was composed entirely of African-American women.

Moreover, the local population treated them well. Many women were invited to the homes of the British and French. "These were the first black women that many of them had ever seen," Moore says.

The discrimination the women of the 6888th did experience, she says, was confined to the War Department's segregated facilities and activities.

Moore relates the experience of Virginia Frazier, a member of the 6888th who, along with two white WACs, was selected to attend Portsmen College of Art in England. Frazier received special orders to report to the American Red Cross in Bath. But once she arrived at the Red Cross, officials there refused her lodging because she was African American. The director of the art school found her lodging with an English family.

Moore notes that until the war, African-American women had been excluded from military service, except for a few who had served in the Army nurses corps during World War I. "But during World War II, African- American women were accepted into the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (later the WAC) as soon as it was founded. The Navy did not employ African American women until toward the end of the war, and the Marine Corps did not employ African American women at all during the war years."

However, she says, the War Department would not deploy African American women overseas because of a combination of racism and sexism. While many white WAC units supported white male units overseas, the War Department balked at having African American women perform the same tasks. There were few African American men on the front lines; since most of them were in support units themselves, there was no need for support from African American women. And racial barriers prevented them from performing those tasks for white males.

Finally in 1944-45, pressure from organizations outside the military, mainly the NAACP, the National Council of Negro Women, legislators such as Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and the black press, led to a compromise: African American women would run the postal directory battalion in Birmingham, England, and later in Rouen and Paris, France.

The 6888th was a specially chosen unit of WACs "from both Air Forces and Service Forces," Moore says. "These women came from all walks of life. Some did not have a high school education, while others were college graduates.

"They (the 6888th) had a mission to perform, and they performed it well. There is no evidence to lend support to the notion that African American women were less capable than men, or white women," she says.

In the book, Moore compares the effects of military service on the lives of the women in the 6888th. She found that, in general, the women were satisfied with their experiences, in particular citing the ability to travel and make long-lasting friendships, both with other military personnel and with people they had met in France and England.

"For women who weren't sure what they wanted to do with their lives, military service was a turning point: It gave them more direction and an opportunity to grow and mature," Moore says.

And the GI Bill for most of the women was "a significant tool" to attain higher education and job security. For many, it gave them the opportunity to attain a relatively high status position in the civilian labor market, she says.

"World War II marked a turning point in the status of racial minorities and women," says Moore in explaining her interest in the unit. "That era, the nature of the conflict, challenged the existing forms of

social stratification in the Army, as well as in other American institutions. Previous restrictions on race were lifted, and opportunities for women also were expanding."

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