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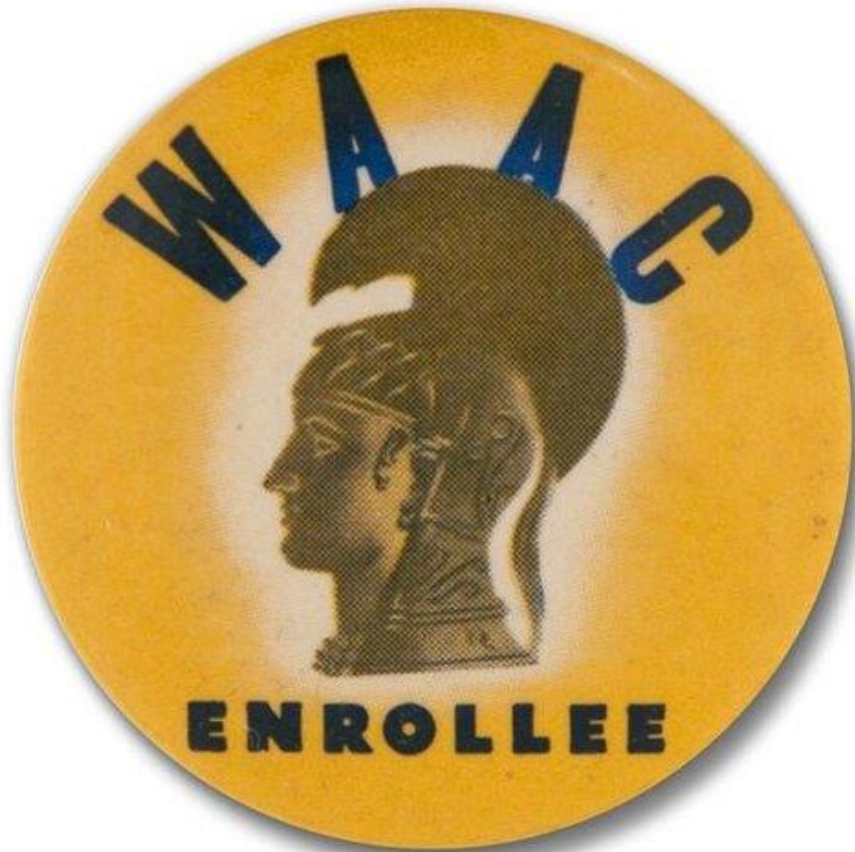
Women At War – The establishment of the Women’s Army Corps

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



In 1941, Massachusetts congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers approached US Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall with a proposal for a Congressional bill that would establish an Army Women’s Corps separate and distinct from the Army Nurse Corps. As American involvement in World War II appeared increasingly likely, Ms. Rogers was reminded of the civilian women during World War I who had worked as contractors under the Army without the benefit of military housing, medical care, or legal protection.

General Marshall supported Rogers’ bill, believing that the possibility of the United States fighting a two-front war in Europe and the Pacific would eventually lead to a shortage of manpower. He felt it was wasteful to expend time and money training men to do critical communications jobs such as typing and operating switchboards when there were already highly skilled women in the American workforce capable of doing such jobs. Rogers introduced her bill to Congress in May 1941, however the bill failed to garner serious attention until after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The bill passed Congress and President Roosevelt signed it into law on May 15, 1942 with an initial recruitment goal of 25,000 women for the first year.



American women, eager to contribute to the war effort, eagerly enrolled and by November 1942 the fledgling Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) had surpassed its recruitment goal. Applicants were required to be between 21 and 45 years of age, be at least five feet tall and weigh at least 100 lbs. Designers from the Heraldic Section of the Army Quartermaster General's Office selected the head of Pallas Athene as the collar insignia for WAAC personnel. Pallas Athene (Athena) was the Greek goddess of victory and womanly virtue, wise in peace and in the arts of war. When a woman enrolled, she was given a yellow button bearing the insignia to wear on her street clothes until she received a uniform.

Led by Oveta Culp Hobby, former chief of the Women's Interest Section of the War Department Public Relations Office, WAAC enrollees began training to fill non-combatant military roles, freeing men for combat duty. Enrollees were not eligible for regular military status or benefits and at first, there were only three positions available to women: baker, mechanic, and switchboard operator. Within a year, the WAAC expanded to more than 400 different jobs and in July 1943 was converted to the Women's Army Corps (WAC). This change afforded women military status, equal pay & benefits. They also became eligible to wear regular Army insignia and were subject to the same disciplinary code as men.

By the end of World War II, more than 150,000 women were serving all over the world in vital roles that spanned from switchboard operator to censor, mechanic to weather observer and many more. WAC radiographers and cryptographers were instrumental in providing information necessary for planning the D-Day invasion in 1944. WAC Quartermaster personnel ensured American forces in both the European and Pacific theatres received accurate and much-needed shipments of ammunition and supplies. In 1946, recognizing the vital role women had played securing Allied victory, the Army petitioned Congress to establish the Women's Army Corp as a permanent part of the regular army. Though it met with opposition, the bill passed in June 1948. The Women's Army Corps remained part of the U.S. Army until 1978, when women were fully assimilated into all but the combat branches of the Army.