

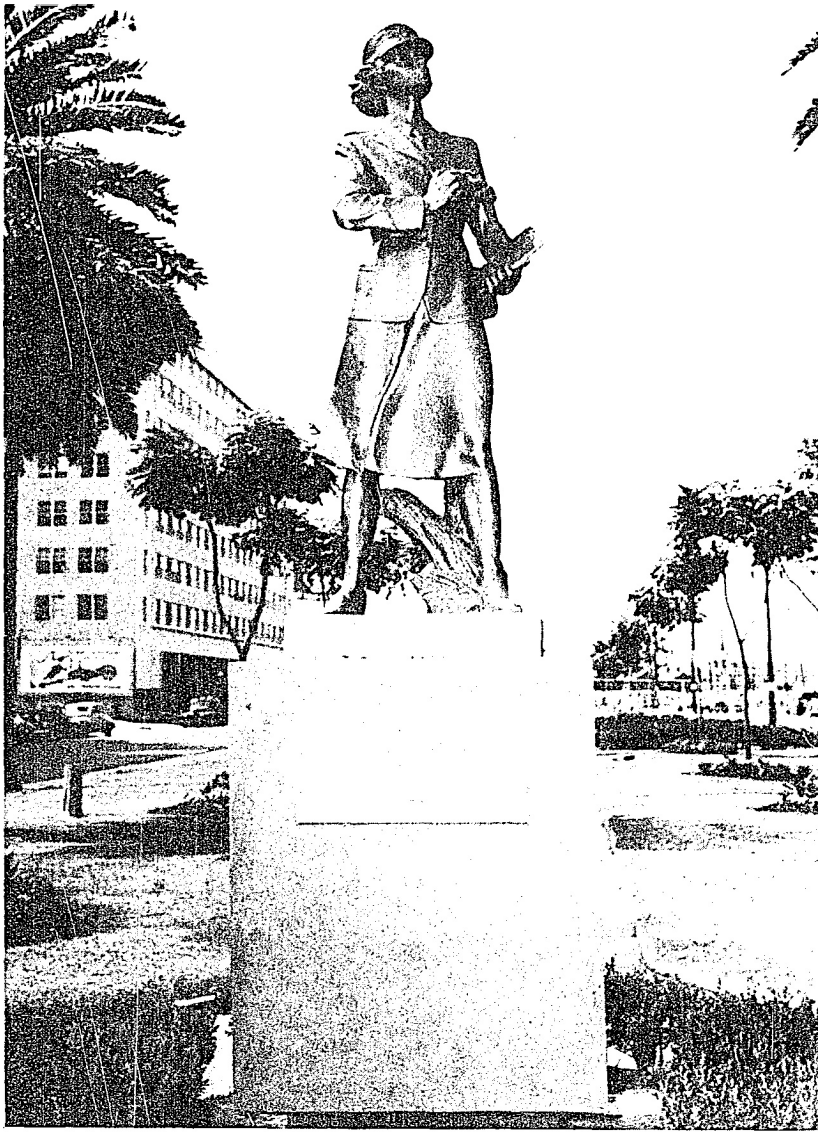
A Woman's Place Is In The Ranks!

Part II (Conclusion)

Times have changed. Women have thoroughly proven themselves alongside their male Marine counterparts. They are now women (with a small "w") and Marines (with a capital "M").

Story by Guy Anselmo

Photos courtesy of the
Marine Corps Historical Center



The "Molly Marine" statue in New Orleans.

It was Colonel Katherine A. Towle, serving as second Director of the wartime Marine Corps Women's Reserve, who shouldered responsibility, not only for phaseout of the women, but for constructing the fabric of a postwar WM organization. Some obstacles stood in the way: While the WAVE and WAC establishments were already authorized, the Commandant (Gen Alexander A. Vandegrift) ruled that the only WMs on peacetime active duty would be the Director, VMCWR ("V" for Volunteer); officers in charge for Personnel, Planning and Training, and Recruiting; and one officer assigned to each of the Recruiting divisions.

There appeared a distinct lack of enthusiasm for women in the post-war Corps (it had always been male-dominated, and the men weren't exactly pressing for permanent female status). In this new peacetime environment, even Col Ruth Cheney Streeter, the first Director, raised some questions about the quality of woman an MCWR group might attract, compared to the patriotism which was a primary wartime motivation.

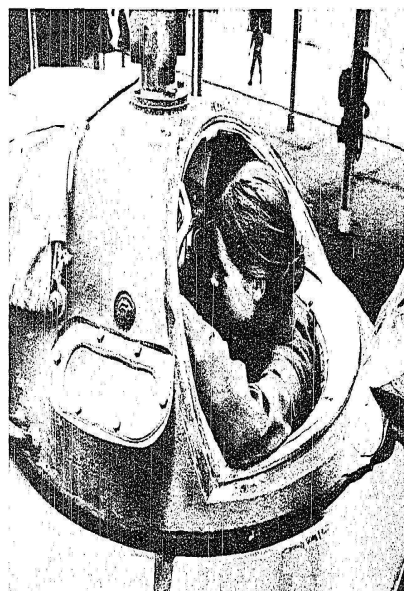
It was the Navy, through its principal spokesman, James V. Forrestal, which brought pressure to bear to offer peacetime military status to women—WAVES, SPARS, and Marines alike. Col Streeter felt that in a postwar Reserve, some wastage would occur as WRs, well trained, would marry and bear children. Yet she saw this as no impediment to the overriding benefits of a cadre of women, prepared if another national emergency arose. By December



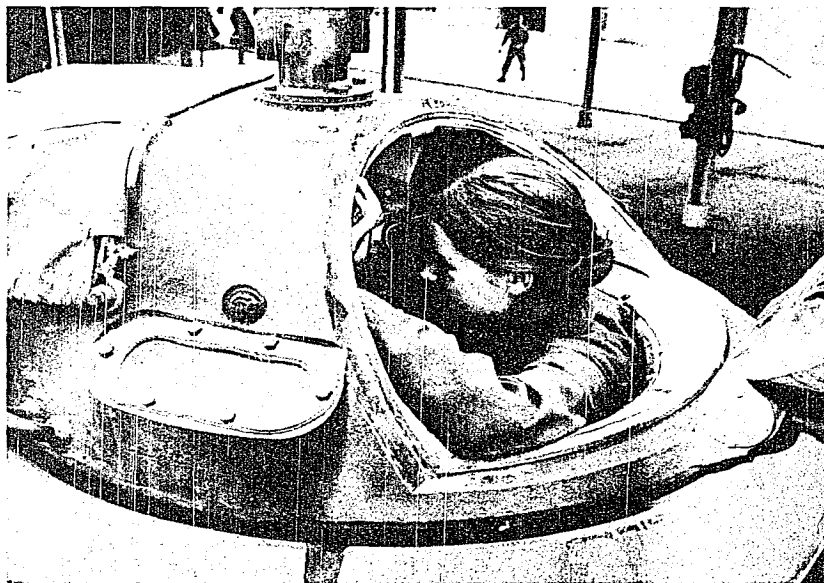
Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., 23rd Commandant congratulated LtCol Lily H. Gridley, USMCR, upon her retirement in 1965. Colonel Gridley, the Corps' first legal assistance officer, was also awarded the Navy Commendation Medal at the ceremony.



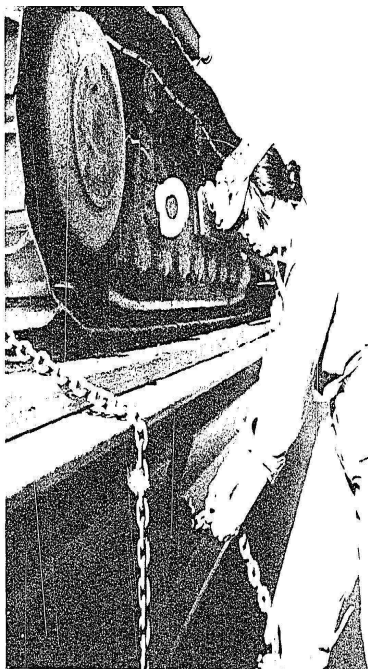
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Photographed while adjusting the chains on her rig, Sgt J. S. Burke was a tractor trailer driver at Camp Pendleton in 1977.



chains on her rig, Sgt J. S. Burke Pendleton in 1977.



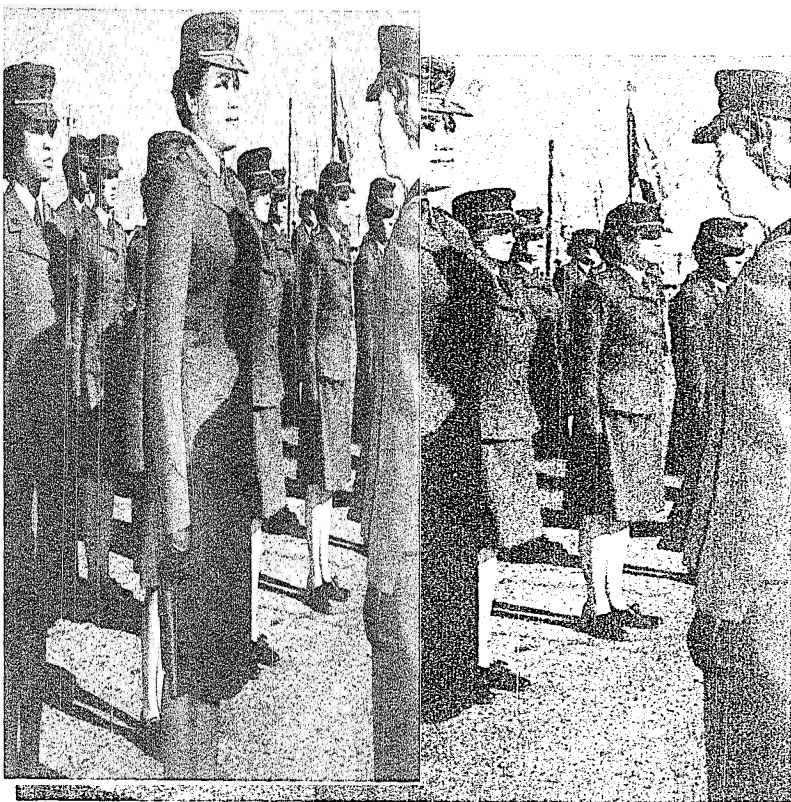
*Sgt. J. Blakeney & Bill
James
May 11, 1914*

Jane Van Edsingna Blakeney served as a Marine in World War I. She later headed the Decorations and Medals Branch at HQMC as a civil service employee.

The bugaboo of "designations and descriptions" again surfaced—this time via a Corps memorandum of November 16, 1948. No problem referring to the new "regulars" as "Women Marines"; but the fly in the ointment centered around "USMCR-W". It was that pesky "W" which galvanized Colonel Towle (only a month on the job) into action; as well as the issue of the word "women" vs. "female." The solution: The "W" would now appear *before* the serial number of each woman Marine. . . "women" would prevail, as in "women Marines"/ "women officers," etc.—that usage in line with Public Law 625, which used the terminology "Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948."

Of note, also, is the official position of the Marine Corps today—to use only lower case "w" (vs. capital "W"), when referring to women, thus avoiding the categorization of women as a "special" group within the Corps—instead, truly to emphasize the long-sought "unified" approach. Additionally, both women—and male—

(LEFT) Warrant Officer Annie Grimes reported her platoon to an inspecting officer at Barstow, Calif., in January 1968. Later a CWO, Grimes was the first black woman Marine officer.



Marines observe November 10 as their official *birthday*; but WMs also recognize February 13—not as their “birthday” but as the “*anniversary*” of their 1943 *founding*.

Those who excelled in WW II rode true to their colors in the post-conflict era; in fact, the strength of the *new* Women’s Reserve can trace many of its roots to “the predecessors.”

One notable example is Maj Edna Loftus Smith, a Yeomanette in WW II who married a naval aviator (later admiral) and made a second mark of excellence during the early 1940s as a WM (regs prohibited a naval officer’s wife from WAVES service). When the Marine Corps selected Robert Sherrod, noted combat correspondent who’d landed at Saipan, Iwo and Okinawa, to write his epic story “History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II,” it also turned to Major Smith, who had been the Corps’ specialist on the subject.

Through intensive efforts and long hours of painstaking research, she worked side by side with Sherrod as he produced one of the greatest books to come out of the war. Sherrod paid the ultimate compliment in his preface as he said: “Captain Edna Loftus Smith. . . has been the heart and soul of Marine Corps Aviation History since this book was first conceived (and before I got into it). . . .”

SgtMaj Phyllis McCuine went through the Hunter College program in 1943, then attended Radio Code School. She held important assignments—one with LtGen Homer L. Litzenberg, Legislative Assistant at Headquarters; still another on the staff of Robert Sylvester, Asst SecDef (Public Affairs) under Robert McNamara. And her most significant role, in the latter part of her career, was as Sergeant Major of the Woman Officers’ School, 1969-1971.

SgtMaj Bertha Peters Billeb was one of the first—in May 1943—completing enlisted training at Hunter College. As one of the elite “first ten regulars” in the postwar period, she chose administration—her forte—as a career path. Asked to draw some comparisons between the WM role and status—WW II vs. postwar, she saw positive changes in uniforms (no longer required to wear “men’s” gear—shirts, stripes, boots, etc.); and she applauded the move toward “wom-



A corporal on duty in the control tower at the airfield at New River, N. C., in 1944. Nearly one-third of the WMs in WW II served in aviation specialties.

en in command of women.” Excellence was the hallmark as she stepped up and up the career ladder; her tour as sergeant major at Woman Officers’ School, and two tours as sergeant major at the Recruit Training Battalion prepared her very well to become the first Sergeant Major of Women Marines!

The value of the integration of

women into the organized Reserve was quite evident as the 13 WR Platoons were mobilized, in June 1950 at the outset of the Korean War—the first involuntary recall of women alongside men. Such a move also represented four important “transitions” for Women Marines: First, it made possible the return of WMs to duty stations; it freed them from the



Photographed adjusting an audio-recording board at HQMC in 1970 was Cpl Margarete Chavez. She is currently a CWO-2 stationed at the Joint Public Affairs Office in New Orleans.



Jeep driver Pfc Marly A. Calkins at MCB, Twentynine Palms, Calif., in 1973.

A WOMAN'S PLACE (cont.)

strictly "administrative mold" which had prevailed after WW II; it marked positive steps for recruit training; and it witnessed a change of course, from an inactive duty Reserve force to a solid nucleus of well-trained women.

Representative of those who, early on, believed in the place, and the need for women in the Corps was the 23rd Commandant, Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., who graciously recalled the past and shared philosophies about future generations of WMs. "I first started thinking about women in the service while with British Commando units," he said. As an observer, he was struck by the breadth of utilization of women in WW II Britain—and their loyalty and enthusiasm. "As a result of my experience," he continued, "I came to the general concept that all areas should be open to women—including combat" (not the usual philosophy). "I feel very strongly," he added, "that in case of all-out war we will have to open all these areas to women. Why not anti-aircraft and guided missile jobs?"

Emphasizing that women have occupied important places in the Marine Corps, and noting their ability to handle key assignments, Gen Greene's basic philosophy is that "They should be employed in any field where they could compete with men."

From October 18, 1948 to June 30,

1977, the Office of the Director of Women Marines, administered by six very able leaders, could, perhaps, be characterized as the most significant "bridge" between a wartime "debut of women in force" and the sculpting of a unification mutually beneficial to Marines of both sexes and all specialties. It was these directors who had been motivating forces as a difficult forties-to-fifties era, beset with impediments, evolved; as women won "equality" as regulars; as a Korean involvement dramatized the value of the readiness of Reserves; and, overall, as the Marine Corps witnessed an even faster-moving world.

Leatherneck thanks the following individuals who contributed to this piece and accompanying features:

*Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr. *BGen Margaret A. Brewer *BGen William W. Buchanan *BGen E. Hunter Hurst *Col Ruth Cheney Streeter *Col Helen G. O'Neill *LtCol Lily H. Gridley *CWO Bertha P. Billel *SgtMaj Phyllis McCuine *SgtMaj Ethyl M. Wilcox and *Mrs. Jane Blakeney.*

Special thanks are added to Mrs. Laura Dennis, curator of WM matters at the Marine Corps Historical Center, and to specialists: Library/Oral History/Reference/Personal Papers, also at the Historical Center.

"A History of the Women Marines, 1946-1977," puts the Director of WMs, in precise perspective:

As women became more accepted in the Marine Corps; as policies, law, and tradition were changed; as discriminatory restrictions fell; the position of the Director... evolved from one of nearly complete control to one of an advisory nature. Although technically they were always considered advisors, the early Directors, with the exception of Colonel Streeter, were members of the Commandant's staff and were directly involved in recruiting, training, uniforming and assigning women Marines. . . .

As a result of a reorganization of Headquarters Marine Corps in October 1973, the Director was placed under the cognizance of the Manpower Department. . . .

General Louis H. Wilson, Jr., the 26th Commandant, reinforced the concept of an even more democratic Corps as he directed that women Marines were to be treated, recruited, trained and assigned as members of a single united service. At ceremonies in June 1977 dissolving the Director's position, he recalled the history and achievements of WMs since the second World War. And he repeated a tale about former CMC General Thomas Holcomb at the time the latter authorized the acceptance of women into the Corps: Former CMC Archibald Henderson's picture fell from the wall! Wilson "gallantly added that if sometime in the future, the announcement should be made that there would no longer be women Marines, he hoped that his portrait, too, would fall to the floor."

Now well into the 1980s and nearly half a century mature, today's Marine has a solid foundation as evidenced by benefits she now enjoys. True equality with men (save combat, or legal or physical differences) is practice—not preaching. That they now serve "side by side" is no hollow cliché. Women's opportunities should continue to grow.

