

# H-Net Reviews

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Carol Hossner Bessey. *The Battle of the WAC*. Ashton, Ida.: Carol Hossner Bessey, 1999. iii + 194 pp. \$11.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9670579-0-3.

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## A Memoir of the Women's Army Corps

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Carol Hossner Bessey's memoir recalls how a home-front, "hometown" young woman experienced World War II in the Army. She interweaves her recollections of her life in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps/Women's Army Corps (WAAC/WAC), including marriage to a fellow soldier, with some present day experiences with the VA system. In so doing, she creates an impressionistic story she calls the "Battle of the WAC"—one of a constant struggle to be taken as serious and legitimate in her chosen roles. Whether an auxiliary, a soldier, or a veteran, she was to encounter widely varying reactions from both military personnel and the general public.

Of the first, she recounts that "most of the men resented us—resented our intrusion into what they considered a 'man's world,' resented the ratings we earned, resented as much the same as, in later years, homosexuals were ostracized" (p. 5). The civilian world also struggled with the concept of women soldiers. Bessey encountered a spectrum of incomprehension, scorn, puzzlement and good will. The WAAC/WACs seemed to be held under a sort of moral microscope by the public, quickly criticized or ridiculed as "loose," ironically enough, since military women were subject to close supervision and bed checks.

What did the culture's notions of sexual probity, or honor, mean for women who had stepped so dramatically outside the structures and expectations of their peacetime world? If some of the public saw women in the military as either morally risky or at risk, Bessey's comrades evidently did not. In her account the circumstances

experienced and choices made by individuals do not seem to differ fundamentally from the pressures, limits, opportunities and choices facing women in civilian life. Most military women, however, were acutely aware of how their organization's collective reputation and honor were pegged on the "impeccable" behavior of its members.

The Army evidently expected propriety and sought to both regulate and protect its new female troops. When its provisions to guard them from the other members of the forces proved inadequate, the WAACs found effective means of taking "direct action." On the other hand, frequent organized dances gave uniformed men and women a chance to socialize in a structured way familiar from civilian life. Indeed, it was at one such event the author met her fellow sergeant and future husband, a man who had started out disapproving of the idea of military women.

The young Carol Hossner joined the WAAC in early 1943. American society was well settled into a kind of wartime existence alien to the experiences of postwar generations. Most of the able-bodied young men were already gone from her Idaho hometown and women were migrating, sometimes considerable distances, to defense work. She chose the Army for a variety of motives including patriotism and sense of adventure, but also because it promised a structure and supervision absent from civilian defense work. Her fellow WAACs shared these motives as well as others—money, authority, professional and educational advancement, the "glamour" of uniform, and yes, to meet members of the opposite sex. Some of

their goals were realistic, some not at all, but they do not seem greatly different from the many and mixed motives that usually animate male volunteers.

As exasperating and unfair as many episodes of discrimination or even harassment were, these were far from the whole story. Bessey conveys a strong sense of the women's comradeship and loyalty, their achievements, strengths and fun as well as their occasional foibles and failures. Her husband was not the only man who changed his mind about WACs.

She captures the flavor of everyday life on the homefront— isolation and quiet of small communities, extremes of heat and cold, endless train journeys, soot and smoke—but most of all the sheer pervasiveness of the war effort permeating all aspects of society and the economy. There were shortages and rationing with civilians scrabbling for space on trains after the military travelers boarded, but also generosity, unity and trust. Colorful too are her observations of army life: unit pride and exas-

perating regulations, prized furloughs, rockclimbing and watching horse cavalry at Ft. Riley, wartime romances and getting official permission to be out of uniform in order to wear a wedding dress.

Bessey's readable and charming memoir illustrates the garrison and homefront as well as the shock of the concentration camps—through her husband's letters—and how all of these were experienced by an American woman in uniform. Regardless of how these women were viewed by others, Hossner Bessey and other military women seemed to see themselves not as remarkable or radical, but simply as people and citizens doing their job.

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