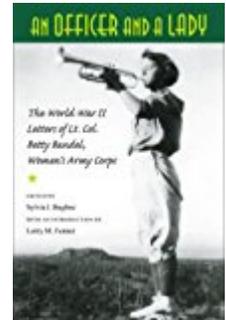


Sylvia Bugbee, ed. *An Officer and a Lady: The World War II Letters of Lt. Col. Betty Bandel, Women's Army Corps*. Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2004. xxiv + 222 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-58465-377-6.



Reviewed by Tarah Brookfield (Department of History, York University)

Published on H-War (October, 2005)

Rising to the Occasion: Betty Bandel and the Women's Army Corp

In over 140 letters, Betty Bandel charmingly recounts her experiences serving as a senior officer in the Women's Army Corp (WAC) during the Second World War. The Women's Army Auxiliary Corp (WAAC) was organized in 1942 as the first formal incorporation of women into the American military, which eventually was integrated into the regular army as the WAC in 1943. Bandel joined immediately, seeking adventure and wanting to serve her country in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. *An Officer and a Lady: The World War II Letters of Lt. Col. Betty Bandel, Women's Army Corps* chronicles her journey from basic training at age thirty, through her Pentagon work as an aide to the WAAC director, to her development of a School for WAC Personnel Administration in 1944. In her pre-WAC life, Bandel was a journalist, so her letters are every historian's ideal primary source, crafted with great awareness, detail, and wit. The collection of letters were selected and edited for length by Sylvia J. Bugbee, an archivist at the University of Vermont where Bandel was a professor of English after the war.

Bugbee provides some contextual information when introducing each chapter but allows the WAC story to rest on Bandel's reflections of her daily activities and impressions of army life.

In two ways, *An Officer and a Lady* provides an atypical perspective on World War II. For one, Bandel's military experience strays from the traditional focus on battlefields and war rooms. If it were not for her brief asides acknowledging what was going on in Europe and the Pacific, such as when fellow WACs survived a torpedoed boat, it would be easy to overlook that side of the war. Bandel's tour of duty was far from the frontlines and headlines but her letters reveal the stress and administrative risks taken behind the scenes, managing human resources through recruitment, training, employment, promotion, and demobilization. As one of the first WAC officers, Bandel was challenged with how to interest women in joining the Army, and once in the Corps, how to best integrate the almost 300,000 recruits into the appropriate fields and branches. She also spent considerable time traveling across the

United States, Britain, Europe, and North Africa educating herself and others about the WAC's contribution to winning the war.

The correspondence also offers a rare glimpse into the professional and personal lives of the handful of high-ranking military women who served during the war. Bandel appears modest about her own rapid climb in the services and influence on WAC policy, preferring to shower praise on WAC Director Lt. Col. Oveta Culp Hobby and Deputy Director Lt. Col. Jessie Rice. These women were admired by Bandel for their diligence in performing their duties amid family and health crises. Bandel recognizes that her wartime experience differed from other women in her generation, both those in and out of the service. At times she expresses longing for a foreign posting closer to the action, like her female counterparts serving overseas as nurses, cooks, and technicians, only to admit that her work is equally important, if less exciting. In one letter, she reflects on the privilege of serving her country by joining the WAC, especially when compared to other women "who stay at home, and have to do the same old job, and eight or ten extras because of the war.... Theirs the work, ours the glory, the uniforms, the change" (p. 7).

One highlight of the collection is Bandel's vivid descriptions of her colleagues, ranging from excited new recruits to haughty four-star generals. Bandel frequently interacts with Eleanor Roosevelt, given the nickname "Rover," whom she describes when visiting the British WAC together in 1942 as "very nice and exceptionally like most people, and so healthy she wore the press down to a nubbin" (p. 41). Bandel is often so candid in her letters about people and her work that she guiltily acknowledges breaking Army censorship rules. This causes her to conclude many letters with a warning that most of the content, including the colorful stories about VIPs, are for the recipient's eyes only. While some might be tempted to criticize her lackadaisical approach to censorship,

modern readers are lucky to be privy to her unselfconscious observations.

An Officer and a Lady features an introduction by Lorry M. Fenner, an active-duty Air Force Colonel and historian who places Bandel's story within the institutional memory of military women leading back to the American Revolution, and those who followed in the footsteps of the WAC. This allows for connections to be made between Bandel's service and contemporary female faces of the military: Jessica Lynch, Shoshana Johnson, and Lori Piestewa, women whose tragic combat experiences in Iraq re-opened the controversial debates over women's place and role in the military. Although Bandel's letters do not often deal explicitly with gender concerns, the topic reoccurs throughout her correspondence. It is brought out most openly during the Army's public relations battle to uphold the moral character of the WAC after a smear campaign spread rumors of their sexual impropriety. More often, however, Bandel's anecdotes emphasize the camaraderie she experienced with her male counterparts and superiors, and the successes she had at gaining their cooperation and assistance.

The collection provides little analysis of Bandel's correspondence. Bugbee appears to accept all of Bandel's letters at face value, as if the writer's journalistic integrity applied equally to private correspondence. Most of the letters were written to Bandel's mother in Tucson, Arizona. One wonders how much of their content was consciously constructed by an absent daughter whose main goal was to reassure and entertain her worried mother. This might have been clearer if the collection included more postwar insight from Bandel. We know she left the army at the end of the war, explaining to her mother, "I would NEVER want it for a peacetime career. It does not represent, by and large, the best thinkers of the land--it cannot, as I see it since the whole peacetime job is to make ready for an eventuality which it hopes never will happen and which always represents a

return to a less advanced era in the progress of mankind" (p. 160). Did she ever write or speak publicly about her WAC experience afterwards or keep in touch with former WACs? It would have been helpful if Bugbee used other sources, such as Bandel's 1994 oral history, to scrutinize the objectives of the 1942-1945 letters.

An Officer and a Lady represents a welcome contribution to the history of World War II that students and historians of military and women's history will enjoy equally. Bandel's letters provide an insightful window into the organizational demands involved when preparing for war, and the women who rose to the occasion to serve their country. The WAC experiment during World War II proved the usefulness of women's presence in the American armed forces and their leadership skills as officers, but did not end the debate on whether ladies belonged in the military in the first place.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Tarah Brookfield. Review of Bugbee, Sylvia, ed. *An Officer and a Lady: The World War II Letters of Lt. Col. Betty Bandel, Women's Army Corps*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10918>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.