

A WOMAN MARINE IN WWII

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Why did I join the Marines? Over the many years since I was mustered out of the Marine Corps in October 1945, at the end of World War II, there have been occasions when I was asked that question. My standard answer has been: “I had a number of reasons, logical and good, but two weeks into boot camp I could not remember any of them.”

World War II developed as millions of young Americans made the transition from teenagers to young adults, graduating from high school and entering college, or entering the workforce. Lives and careers were changed in ways they never before could have imagined.

That was the environment in which I found myself in March 1943. The Battle of Britain was raging, North Africa saw blood spilled over the desert, and then there was “the day that would in infamy” – Pearl Harbor.

For many personal reasons, even as a young girl, I have been devoutly patriotic, and the work I was doing then did not satisfy my need to do the most I could do in response to all that was taking place. I must have felt that actually joining one of the military services and being in uniform would be the best possible way for me to serve and as things turned out that is probably true.

One fact the general public was unaware of—during that period, the government was considering plans to draft women into military service. England already was drafting women. The U.S. military knew it could not draft enough men to fill the need for the European and Pacific theaters, as well as the hundreds of other areas where our forces would have to serve. The thing that prevented such a draft was that the American women volunteered in such numbers that it became unnecessary.

Everyone I knew in my age range was in military service. Without hesitation, I began investigating the possibility of “joining up.” All over town was posters saying “Uncle Sam Wants You.” Perhaps it was the motto or the Marine Hymn” or John Wayne in “Halls of Montezuma” that swayed me to the corps. Without doubt, however, the most persuasive point was that the commandment of the Marine Corps proclaimed that the women inducted in the Marine Corps would be Marines, the same as the men. They would not be an auxiliary, as

were the other services at the time. The women would have no special name such as WACS, WAVES, or SPARS—they would be called Marines. I liked that.

I liked the history of the Marine Corps. At the beginning of World War II, the Marine Corps had perceived what was taking place in the Pacific Theater and had increased troops, trained them, but not in the numbers the corps knew would be necessary. It was a thin line of defense, but it was there.

All of those things got my attention. Given those facts, choosing the Marine Corps was not a big decision at all, and I was sworn in.

The next six weeks were spent at Hunter College in the Bronx, N. Y., where the first four classes of female Marine recruits took boot camp along with the Navy WAVES. We lived in apartment houses adjacent to the college. They were nice, small, but stripped of everything except double bunk beds, two or three to a room, a table and two straight chairs, and one bathroom for eight to ten girls. The buildings were eight and ten stories tall, and we were not allowed to use the elevators.

Each morning we had to “fall out” on the street, march to the chow hall, and then back to the apartment. Then we’d fall out again and march to classes, back again after lunch, and then back again and out to evening chow. Each time it was up and down all those stairs.

During World War II, the Women Marines, for the most part, worked at the many base headquarters—the units that maintained and ran the bases where the men took training of various kinds.

I was assigned to Marine Aviation and my particular work was as a control tower operator. First, I worked at a base where Marine pilots were trained to fly twin-engine planes; later, at a base where night-righter pilot training took place.

“Was the Marine Corps fun?” I have been asked that question several times by some young person, and every time I hear it, it literally blows my mind. How could they know so little of recent history and be so

insensitive to the reality of history? It is like being asked, “Was World War fun?”

No, the Marine Corps was not fun. That does not mean we did not have fun—of course we did. People of that age will find or create entertainment and will have fun. But just beneath the surface we were always conscious of why we were there.



There were many funny stories to tell about being in military service. When I was just out of Non-Commissioned Officers School at Camp Lejeune, N. C., I was transferred with a number of other Women Marines to Marine Air Station at Edenton, N. C. When we arrived—the first women at the base—we found our barracks had been cleaned like we had never seen.

The base was new, and the few men already there were excited that women were coming aboard and did their best to make things look good. Word soon spread that Women Marines were at the base and in just a few days we noticed blimps from the nearby Weeksville Coast Guard base floating low over our barracks. Those boys did not know that we were as excited to see blimps at that close range as they were to see the clothesline at a Marine barracks hung with women’s underwear.

We hated the war, we hated being away from home and family, we hated the strict discipline and lack of freedom to come and go as we pleased, and we hated receiving word we had lost another relative or friend.

One thought was always on our minds; get the war over with; get out, get home, and get on with our lives. We were sorrowfully aware that there were many men who would never go home again.

Once a Marine, always a Marine.