Active Servicewomen in World War II: Helping to Create a New American Culture

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Senior Capstone Project for Kristin Lynch

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ABSTRACT

The lives of several active servicewomen during World War II were forever changed, culturally, psychologically, and socially, as a result of their experiences during the War; however, this modification of lives did not stop at individual women. Through examining three separate letter collections of three wartime women serving in very diverse situations, this project aims to focus on the changes through which these women progress, as gleaned from their writing, concerning the overall effect of the war in their lives, particularly relating to personal growth, cultural ramifications, and the overall impact each woman’s experience had in her life. More important, however, is how each individual’s experience resulted in a compilation of experiences, eventually helping to define a new, diverse, American society in the post World War II era.
INTRODUCTION

The military, “defined traditionally as a masculine institution,…may be the most prototypically masculine of all social institutions,” implying that women, comprising approximately half of the United States population, should be summarily excluded from involvement in direct wartime service. Margaret Chase Smith, a chief proponent of a woman’s right to actively participate in protecting the United States during World War II, emphasized that “half the population cannot be left out if the defense effort is to be effective.” Due to an overwhelming lack of manpower, women were ultimately offered the opportunity to join one of the women’s branches of the Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and Marines, as well as the Army Nurse Corps and Navy Nurse Corps.

The role of servicewomen during World War II was a crucial one, particularly in the eventual Allied victory, but history has disregarded women’s roles, so that careful steps must be taken now to ensure this “herstory” is not completely erased from what we know as history. Of the approximately four hundred thousand women who served, either stateside—Zone of the Interior— or in the various international Theaters of War, each one experienced something quite unique and profound, the result of which had a “dramatic and far-reaching effect on the lives of American women.” These effects transformed women’s outlooks on life and notions of independence trickled down through their children, who fueled many of the social reform movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Three separate letter collections, comprising over two thousand pages, written by three women who were active in armed forces services during World War II, truly demonstrate the cycles of
change through which each of them journeyed, consequently resulting in an entirely different woman at the end of her wartime trials and tribulations. One particularly common feeling that developed throughout the course of these women’s’ letters was a sense of independence or empowerment, which was “articulated by some as a ‘greater sense of themselves’” that they had been previously unable to experience or enjoy. One particular WAC, Martha Ward, explains this feeling:

I liked the new experience, new friends, new places, and Pride in something…and mostly I liked myself…I was the one who made myself.5

Former WAC Laura Frank, reacting similarly, explains her regret at the completion of the war and, thus, her time in the WAC:

Reconciling the end of their “great adventure” with the more mundane routine of daily life [was difficult]. She characterized her military experience as “wonderful” and as offering her the opportunity to “find myself, be independent. I liked it because it was my choice.”6

The experiences of Martha Ward and Laura Frank are representative of thousands of other World War II women in the military, including the three women who are the subjects of this paper.

Martha Alice Wayman, a member of the Women’s Army Corp (WAC), Eunice McConnell, a member of the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), and Marjorie LaPalme, a member of the Army Nurse Corps (ANC), all served valiantly during the Second World War, and each of their experiences alters their outlook on life, culturally, psychologically, and socially. Through examining three separate letter collections of three wartime women serving in very diverse situations, this project aims to focus on the changes through which these women progress, as gleaned from their writing, concerning the overall effect of the war in their lives, particularly relating to personal growth, cultural ramifications, and the overall impact each woman’s experience had in her life. More important, however, is how each individual’s
experience resulted in a compilation of experiences, eventually helping to define a new, diverse, American society in the post World War II era.
THE WOMEN’S ARMY CORPS

History

The Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), one of the first of the women’s branches of the military to be established, did not give women full military status until 1944. Bill H.R. 4906, introduced to the House of Representatives by Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts on 28 May 1941, called for the establishment of “a Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps [WAAC] for Service with the Army of the United States.” Congresswoman Rogers, a prominent advocate for the military involvement of women, “accepted the auxiliary status for the corps, saying:”

In the beginning, I wanted very much to have these women taken in as part of the Army…. I wanted them to have the same rate of pension and disability allowance. I…realized that I could not secure that. The War Department was very unwilling to have these women as a part of the Army.

Thus, the military involvement of the WAAC was to be “‘for the purpose of making available to the national defense the knowledge, skill, and special training of the women of the nation.” Instead of operating under the Army chain of command, the WAAC would have an appointed Director, who would “‘operate and administer the Corps in accordance with the normal military procedure of command.’” The WAAC would receive medical services from the Army, the benefits of the Soldiers and Sailors Relief Act, and were subject to the Articles of war when applicable, but these women would not receive nearly the same pay or grades when compared to those of the United States Army. These discrepancies would serve as catalysts for the eventual integration of the WAAC into the Army.

In the summer of 1941, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, a strong supporter of the WAAC bill, wrote to Congress:
I regard the passage of this bill at an early date as of considerable importance…. However, we lack Congressional authority for the establishment of a Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, and as a result I can make no definite plans [for the future]….Women certainly must be employed in the overall effort of this nation….We consider it essential that their status, their relationship to the military authority, should be clearly established.\textsuperscript{13}

General Marshall’s clear encouragement for the establishment of a women’s corps greatly aided the bill in its passing.

Technically, before the bill was passed, Mrs. Oveta Culp Hobby was selected as the WAAC’s first Director. Mrs. Hobby’s duties, at that point, extended from organizing a recruiting strategy to finding a suitable post for the premier women’s camp. Although faced with several dilemmas in the acquisition of land, “at last, in late April, the mechanization of the U.S. Cavalry made possible the use for Waacs of an old mounted Cavalry post, Fort Des Moines in Iowa.”\textsuperscript{14} Subsequently, Mrs. Hobby was required to face the daunting task of working with designers to create a uniform for the WAAC, a task which caused great dispute with the Army and some internal disagreement on the part of Mrs. Hobby. It would not be long, however, until the WAAC bill was formally passed, and Mrs. Hobby would have more important items on her agenda than the creation of uniforms.

On 14 May 1942 the WAAC bill was finally passed by the Senate and, “when signed the next day by the President became Public Law 554, An Act to Establish a Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps for Service with the Army of the United States.”\textsuperscript{15} The WAAC’s first summer, that of 1942, was indeed tumultuous and busy. Thousands of women applied for admittance to the WAAC, “and requisitions for over 80,000 of them had by this time been received from Army commands, of which at least 63,000 seemed suitable for employment;”\textsuperscript{16} this was a number staggeringly higher than the originally “modest prewar plan for about 12,000 women in the first
year.” To provide additional insight to this problem, “the Army initially planned to increase WAAC strength from 12,000 in the first year to 25,000 by 1943 and to 63,000 by 1944.” “By the end of June 1943, [however,] the WAAC already had over 60,000 women.” The WAAC administration felt that “within two years, or by April of 1944, the entire 63,000 would be trained and at work,” where “the enlisted women worked primarily as clerks, drivers, telephone operators, cooks, and bakers.” WAAC officers, on the other hand, “were exclusively assigned as administrators or training officers at the WAAC training centers and schools, as WAAC recruiters, or as officers leading WAAC units.”

The Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps did not officially shed its Auxiliary status until 1 September 1943, at which point “eligible WAAC officers were sworn into the WAC, in their grades equivalents to their WAAC grade and with date of rank the same as in the WAAC.” A 10 February 1943 article in the *New York Times*, revealed the “Waac…has come ‘of age’ and deserves to now be known as the Wac, minus one ‘a’ for ‘auxiliary,’ the War Department indicated today.” WAAC members who chose to remain with the Army and join the WAC after the transfer would be required to “complete a certain application form, pass a stricter Army medical examination, and be recommended by their commanders.” Additionally, “although the bill enacting the Wac allowed it to serve overseas, it was learned that the stationing of Waacs in North Africa had made ‘some difference’ in the War Department’s support of the Wac bill.” Women in the military were still, however, restricted from combat situations; these restrictions were “primarily political decisions made in response to the public opinion of the day, and the climate of opinions in Congress.” Martha Alice Wayman, who served in both the WAAC and the WAC, is the first collection of letters examined in this paper, and her proximity to battle served as a driving force for change in her life.
MARTHA ALICE WAYMAN

Context

Martha Alice Wayman served as a member of the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) from December 1942 until September 1943, and of the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) from September 1943 until September 1946 (see Appendix A). One of approximately 140,000 women to serve as a WAAC/WAC during the Second World War, Wayman grew up in the small town of Fairmont, West Virginia, where she resided at 700 Morgantown Avenue with her mother, father, and sister, Ruth. During her service in the WAAC/WAC, she regularly corresponds with her family regarding the numerous novel and challenging experiences she encounters. Her correspondence collection, totaling 323 letters comprised of 768 pages, is predominantly addressed to Martha Alice’s mother, Amelia. While Wayman’s stateside travels are significant, including posts at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, Camp Polk, Louisiana, and Fort Oglethrope, Georgia, this paper focuses on her overseas assignments and how her formerly limited horizons, centered on Fairmont, West Virginia, are significantly enhanced by her travels abroad.28

Wayman begins her letter writing on 7 December 1942 and consistently writes through 9 May 1946, when she is finally dismissed from duty and returned home, at which point she is Captain Martha Alice Wayman. Wayman often writes while at work when she is unengaged in her professional military duties. She does not have any trouble finding time to write; more important, she writes letters to her mother almost every three days, unless she is traveling, preparing for a holiday such as Christmas or Easter, or completing the extensive and exhausting training at Officer Candidate School. Wayman writes to request packages, mail, and news, as well as to keep her family, friends, and loved ones informed about her well-being and general whereabouts. Due to the relative ease with which she is able to write, Wayman’s letters are often lengthy; on
average her letters are six to nine handwritten pages and two or more typed pages (see Appendices B-E).

Interestingly, in her 12 April 1944 letter, Wayman specifically says “don’t destroy my letters— I’ve already destroyed all of yours,” requesting her Mother save the correspondence despite the fact Wayman destroyed her Mother’s letters of out necessity, due to lack of storage space. Fortunately, this collection of letters is very intact and cohesive. From it, we can clearly determine Wayman’s many different, including overseas, post locations. In chronological order Wayman is stationed at the following locations: Fort Des Moines, Iowa; Boomtown, Iowa; Fort Des Moines, Iowa; Norfolk, Virginia; Saint Louis, Missouri; Camp Polk, Louisiana; Fort Des Moines, Iowa; Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia; Buckley Field, Denver, Colorado; Fort Logan, Colorado; Buckley Field, Denver, Colorado; Wichita Falls, Texas; Georgia; Brisbane, Australia; Moresby, New Guinea; Hollandia, Dutch New Guinea; Tacloban, Philippine Islands; Manila, Philippine Islands; the “Escolta,” Philippine Islands; Tokyo, Japan; Osaka, Japan; Fukuoka, Japan; Tokyo, Japan; and Seattle, Washington (see Appendices G-I). Included in this list are a small number of locations which Wayman visits briefly, but at which she is not formally stationed.

From Wayman’s letters emanate several broad themes, which are representative of the experiences of a broader cross-section of wartime women, including her job experience, augmented independence, broadened horizons, and the importance of letter-writing during the Second World War. Each of these themes, when analyzed, provides indispensable facts, details, and information representing not only Wayman’s war-time experiences, but those of the 140,000 American women who served in the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) during World War II. First,
however, the examination of the culture from which Wayman left upon her entrance into the WAAC is crucial in order to understand the multitudinous changes through which she progresses as a direct result of her experiences in the WAAC and WAC.

**Culture**

The cultural background from which Martha Alice Wayman comes plays a crucial role in determining how her experiences in the WAAC and WAC refine, and even outright change, her cultural, psychological, and social beliefs and outlooks. In order to fully comprehend the cycle of changes through which Wayman progresses, this examination of her cultural norms is necessary, from the way she notes it is too much trouble to go out often to her eventual suggestion that her parents could benefit from moving overseas and taking a job within an armed forces line of service.

In comparison to the two other collections of letters examined in this paper, Wayman is easily the most independent individual at the outset of her WAC experiences and discusses how she does not feel the need to constantly go out and be part of the social scene, but rather considers everything entailed in a night out which, in New Guinea, is more than just dressing in her basic uniform.

Dear Mother, etc,

…They have a movie on tonite and it sounds pretty good from what I can hear of it. We have to wear our complete uniform including leggings and they are too much trouble to put on….

Furthermore, Wayman’s station location, particularly in the Philippine Islands, affords her the ability to live in a house with other servicewomen, and allows her the opportunity to entertain at the house, rather than always socializing at the local clubs and movies.
Dear Mother,

…I didn’t tell you we had moved, did I? Some of us have moved into a house right up the street from where we were….I’m settled now and I’d hate to move. The house is one of the best ones in town and was formerly occupied by war correspondents, then by some generals. It has a big downstairs, a bathroom, kitchen, showers (out-doors) and a nice winding staircase….\(^{32}\)

Wayman also discusses her disdain for service men who write practically identical letters to both wives and then to girlfriends, when she reads these as a mail censor.

Dear Mother, etc,

…What gets me is to read a letter from one guy to his wife and then almost the very same letter to a girlfriend—maybe two or three!...\(^{33}\)

Finally, in contrast to social norms, Wayman outright suggests to her mother that getting a job is a positive thing, from which her mother could benefit.

Dear Mother,

…Did you decide to get a job? I think it would be a good idea. But you’d better practice sentence structure—I never know when you begin and end a sentence! We’d probably hire you as a typist over here since they are so hard to get. We pay only P 60 a month, however, which isn’t enough to live on….\(^{34}\)

Wayman’s ingrained cultural norms shine through her letters, but these are gradually transformed by the novel experiences in which she engages as a member of the WAC. Such experiences include her extreme proximity to battle, in addition to a “sing sing,” a traditional Japanese dining experience, and her attendance at a geisha party.
Experiences

On 24 April 1944, Wayman departs from San Francisco aboard the *U.S.S. West Point* for Brisbane, Australia, where she is among the first detachment of WACs to arrive in Australia on 12 May 1944. In late June, Wayman’s assignment to Port Moresby, New Guinea, affords her the opportunity to work as a mail censor (see Appendix F). Although the New Guinea campaign is still transpiring in the northwestern sector of the island, Port Moresby, the southeastern coast of New Guinea, is home to a large Allied base and thousands of troops. In the letters to her mother, Wayman often elaborates on the visible indications of war.

[Port Moresby,] New Guinea
18 August [1944]

Dear Mother,

…I never thought I’d be there—but here I am. The Japs[anese] never got to this place but they certainly got close to it, from the stories they all tell around here. I’ve seen craters where the bombs dropped near here….  

Because of her work in the censorship department, Wayman is able to read many letters detailing horrific battles in the Pacific Theater of War. In the next two letter excerpts, she reports the Allied efforts to regain control of the Philippine Islands.

[Port Moresby,] New Guinea—still
13 November [1944]

Dear Mother,

…We are reading mail from the Philippines now and things certainly aren’t going too good. There are still plenty of Japs[anese] around there, I guess. The letters are very interesting and we have read some from war correspondents who were with the first landing party….  

[Port Moresby,] New Guinea
18 November [1944]

Dear Mother,

…I don’t think the war is going quite as well up there, from the tone of the letters and reports from the people coming down from the north. The letters we get from up there are very interesting. We are also having orientation lectures on the Philippines, just in case…. 
These letter excerpts serve to exemplify the ways in which Wayman experiences, albeit limitedly, the combat aspect of the war while stationed in Port Moresby. Yet, this was only the first encounter Wayman has with combat and destruction. On 16 December 1944 she is transferred to Hollandia, Dutch New Guinea, in preparation for her eventual transfer to the Philippine Islands.

During her flight from Port Moresby to Hollandia, Wayman flies over Japanese occupied territory, remarking, “I can’t imagine the Japs[anese] fighting over that territory.”39 She further notes, however, “that the Japs[anese] are clear over on the western end of the islands (I can’t say just which island, but you can probably guess).”40 Other letters consider the proximity of Japanese troops through the visible remains of their camps.

Dutch New Guinea—still 27 December [1944]

Dear Mother,

…I never thought I’d be walking in the jungles on Christmas day. But it was really fun. We passed by where some Jap[anese] camps had been set up…. …I’d like to get to the PI and get started in our work. I may go in a few days, and I’m almost all packed now. The Leyte-Samar campaign is closed now, so the news reports go, so the only place there would be any trouble would be Mindoro and Luzon….41

This excerpt illustrates Wayman’s close proximity to the combat zones of the war in the Southwest Pacific. She flies over combat zones, walks though recently Japanese occupied territory, and, in early January 1945, is assigned to recently liberated Tacloban on Leyte Island in the Philippines.

Upon Wayman’s arrival in Tacloban on 4 January 1945, war rages in the northern portions of the Philippines, and Japanese bombing raids are occasionally directed at the Tacloban airstrip.
Manila, however, is not officially liberated until March 3. Wayman is immediately struck by the destruction caused by the bombings and fierce fighting, which takes place in Leyte during the latter months of 1944.

[Tacloban,] Philippine Islands
January 5, [1945]

Dear Mother,

…The streets are awfully muddy—mud and water four and five inches deep and even deeper in places.…It’s funny, seeing civilization again—such as it is. The town doesn’t seem to have been damaged much by bombs. Most of the bombs are directed on the airstrip and other vital places—when the Japs[anese] manage to come here, which isn’t often….

…Our trip up was nice—we didn’t even see any Jap[anese] planes.…

[Tacloban,] Philippine Islands
8 January [1945]

Dear Mother,

…They have several fox-holes in the yard and some bomb shelters which I haven’t investigated yet. In a couple of fox-holes in the front yard there are two side-cars from an old Jap[anese] motorcycle….A couple of houses were damaged by bombs and the streets are torn up in several places.…

Although these are graphic descriptions of the destruction in Leyte, they do not compare to Wayman’s subsequent experiences in Manila. Arriving in Manila on 10 March 1945, only seven “days after organized resistance ended,” Wayman elaborates on the destruction, stenches, crumbled buildings, and other atrocities.

[Manila,] Philippines
25 April [1945]

Dear Mother,

…You should see the remarkable job they are doing of cleaning up the city. Of course, it isn’t cleaned up by any means but they’re progressing. Someone said that the other day when they moved a piece of tin from a building right across the street from the office they found a dead Jap[anese]. Looks like they’ll be digging them out for quite some time yet…. I didn’t know anything about the Jap[anese] until a couple of days later, though. There used to be a funny odor around, especially in places, but it’s not noticeable any more….
In the following letters, Wayman emphasizes just how close she is to front lines of battle when she first arrives in Manila on March 10:

Manila, PI
14 May [1945]

Dear Mother,
…Of course, when we did get here, we could hear artillery in the distance but that has all moved on. As for the Japs[anese]—all we ever did was to smell them for the first few days after we got here….  

Manila
18 August [1945]

Dear Mother,
…And this is the nearest we will ever be to combat, I’m sure. When we landed at the airfield in March, we could hear machine guns not far off. We were told that about two miles away the Japs[anese] were trying to re-take a bridge from the Americans. It sounded much closer than that, however. Then on the other side, not five miles away we could hear the artillery firing away. We could see the dust caused by the shells dropping—that’s how close we were. We could hear the artillery and see the reflection at nights for about a month after we got here. Then gradually it kept moving farther and farther away….  

The experience of observing, first-hand, the sights and sounds of war shape Wayman uniquely and appreciably as is evident in the subsequent letter, written in early September 1945, after she is informed of her possible relocation to Japan.

Manila
6 September [1945]

Dear Mother,
…As for going to Japan, they won’t be sending us for quite some time yet, if at all. I’d just as soon wait until things are more settled and organized there. I don’t particularly like going into a place as early as we did Manila—more than once, that is. It was quite an experience to come here so early but I think once will do for the duration. Tokyo wouldn’t be as bad as Manila, though. They say the city wasn’t as badly destroyed as this one and I know it would smell a lot better….and the reason we didn’t have water for so long was because the Japs[anese] still held the main reservoir just outside of town….  

Although the war against Japan ends in mid-August of 1945, Wayman’s above description depicts her discomfort with relocating to Japan before United States Armed Forces have complete control over the region. Despite her misgivings, on 21 October 1945, Wayman is
“one of the first [seven] WACs to be transferred to Tokyo, Japan to serve with the occupation forces,” where she remains until 9 May 1946. Her remarks concerning Tokyo, however, are positive in nature, and demonstrate the ease with which she acclimates to her new assignment.

[Tokyo]
21 October [1945]

Dear Mother,

…I really like it here. The city is much nicer than Manila altho it is destroyed almost as much. For some unknown reason, the destruction seems a little less messy. Even the piles of rubble seem neater than they were in Manila, and they look like someone has got busy and straightened them out a little….

…I flew over Tokyo and could see the destruction caused by the Allied bombing. It didn’t look much worse than Manila but it was a different type of destruction. Whole areas would be destroyed but with a few large buildings left standing amid the ruins. Since most of it was done with incendiaries, the fireproof buildings escaped quite a bit of the damage. The city itself is quite flat both in terrain and most of the buildings. The streets are less torn up than Manila and street cars are still running. There is also a subway which I am going to try out some day….  

Tokyo, Japan
Tuesday, 6 November [1945]

Dear Mother,

…I drove around the city awhile, around the palace walls—outside, of course. The B—29’s certainly did a good job of burning this city. Miles and miles of destruction, much worse than Manila because the city is spread over so many miles more. The Jap[anese] don’t like to hear the words B—29 mentioned. I saw one flying over the city the other day—they are very pretty….  

These stunning descriptions of the Tokyo destruction serve to demonstrate the vivid aftermath Wayman witnesses. While she is not directly involved in combat in the South Pacific Theatre, her propinquity to battle certainly elicits worry from her Mother, who constantly questions if Wayman is in danger. Wayman’s varied experiences can be considered the product of her ability to travel overseas as a WAC officer, an opportunity which, in essence, proffers her a unique experience.
Although a large portion of Wayman’s broadened horizons stem from her close proximity to war, she also experiences a profound cultural diversification, which is evident though several of her letters. Her enjoyment of a native “sing sing,” a traditional Japanese dinner, and a geisha party all serve to exemplify an expansion of her previous cultural awareness.

Wayman writes descriptively regarding the native “sing sing,” including commentary on the dancing and singing; furthermore, she describes the Japanese dinner and geisha party she attended.

Tokyo
18 November [1945]

Dear Mother,

…[The ‘sing sing’] was lots of fun to watch. They had several groups who danced—some wearing GI undershirts, tennis shoes, and various colored lap-laps, tied or fastened with a GI belt….For drums they used big square tin cans, the Army ships flour in. One group had a real native drum however. They all danced and sang. One group sat on the ground on a little bank and sang, and whoever felt the desire, got up and did a little interpretive dance of his own….52

Tokyo
3 December [1945]

Dear Mother,

…Last week I went to a Japanese home to dinner and it was quite nice. There are two couples of us who were invited by this family….The dinner was quite strange. The menu consisted of sweet potatoes, pickled lotus, lobster, rice with seaweed, some sort of pickle, and then some hot saki. The lotus is quite good and so was the lobster. We ate all with chopsticks. The seaweed is very funny looking and tastes terrible….Then, out of curiosity, I took a sip of saki—and it was the worst yet. I guess it tastes like any other wine and smells as bad. So that was all for me. The others seemed to like it, but I certainly didn’t.

The house was typically Japanese with sliding doors, and mats on the floor. We had to take off our shoes before we went in and they didn’t have any slippers to fit us, so our feet were quite cold. The dinner was served in one of the rooms, on a very low table with cushions….All the heat in the room was furnished by two little charcoal burners which consist of a big earthen bowl, with sand and in the center, a little mount of burnings coals….53
Finally, Wayman “provided an account of attending a ‘high type’ geisha party where three
geisha girls who wore ‘very lovely kimonos and obis’ attended her.”54 Each of these separate and
irreplaceable experiences drastically broadens Wayman’s limited West Virginian cultural
background. While adding to her overall geopolitical consciousness, these experiences also
simultaneously expand her cultural consciousness.

Martha Alice Wayman’s four years in the Women’s Army Corps genuinely and profoundly
impacted her life. Her military experiences propelled her closer to destruction, despair, and war
than she could have dreamed possible during her childhood in Fairmont, West Virginia.
Wayman’s ability to see the world in an increasingly new light expands through her
multitudinous travels both domestically and internationally. Due to Wayman’s meticulously
detailed letters we, nearly six decades later, are able to glean priceless information regarding a
WAC’s astounding proximity to battle and her personal cultural experiences, and how the
mélange of these two deeply affect her view of the world.

Although a large portion of Wayman’s broadened horizons stem from this close proximity to war,
she also experiences a profound cultural diversification, which is evident though several of her
letters, such as those discussing the different and difficult living conditions or the cultural
encounters, which exemplify an expansion of her previous cultural awareness. Wayman,
furthermore, specifically mentions changes she sees herself, and other female comrades,
undergoing as they spend more time away from home and its comforts.
Changes

Wayman, although autonomous before her WAC experience, observes how she and the other WACs around her progress through changes as a direct result of their situation overseas, which calls for increased independence. The following letter selections demonstrate Wayman’s self-acknowledgement that the women in the WAC have changed, that her own family might not even recognize her upon her return, and that the women are able to more fully exert their independence.

New Guinea
7 July 1944

Dear Mother, etc,

…We sleep under this kind of netting—only I don’t think we will have to worry about anything like that coming through the roof. One of the girls woke up one night and saw three big rats on the top of her net. She just looked at them and said, “They’re making so much noise I can’t sleep” and turned over and went back to sleep….

New Guinea
17 October [1944]

Dear Mother,

…You should see it rain right now—one of the real tropical downpours….The girls are coming out of the shower without anything on because they know they will get another good one before they can get to their quarters.

…The sun was shining and I got a good bit of tan, and some sunburn. I got my face sunburned somewhat and I’ve been keeping it well greased. My back is really brown and so are my arms. You won’t recognize me at all when you see me, I bet….

Dutch New Guinea
16 December [1944]

Dear Mother,

…The beauty shop has no supplies just now, so I took the permanent wave set Helen Lipkin sent me and the operator used that. It really came in quite handy. She put my hair up, fixed a scarf for a turban and I went out on a date. It’s funny what we do over here that we wouldn’t think of doing back in the states!...
Dear Mother,

…I don’t think I’d know how to behave if I had a whole room to myself now. And I probably wouldn’t be able to sleep on an innerspring mattress. I slept without any at all for so long that it seems strange to have one even now….  

Manila, Philippine Islands
29 April [1945]

Dear Mother,

…Now that the officers have our own jeep—the only trouble with that is that I can’t drive, so I’ll have to depend upon the others to do the driving and go and come with them. It makes it nice to have our own vehicle, though and not have to depend on anyone else….  

It is not surprising, after all of these positive experiences and changes, that Wayman expresses a desire to remain in the WAC, even after the war, and outright says she does not want to return home to the United States just yet.

New Guinea
8 September 1944

Dear Mother,

…Is there anything going on around there? I guess school has started and everyone is hard at work studying every night or grading papers. Seems nice not to have that to do any more. Maybe I’ll stay in the Army after the war is over. How would that be?...  

[Manila]
4 October [1945]

Dear Mother,

…Col. Boyce seems to be very nice. She is rather small and slightly plump and has a southern accent. As we went through the line, she asked me how long I had been here and I told her I was with the original group. She said I looked as if I had stood it very well—that I looked quite healthy!...  

Tokyo
13 March [1946]

Dear Mother,

…As for coming home, I’m not sure just when I want to leave here. I like my job very much and it keeps me quite busy most of the time….Then, too, there is no one here trained now for my job—I’ve been handling it ever since I got here. Besides, all the reports I hear from the States aren’t good. I just had another letter in which the fellow said he wonders now why all the rush to get home….Anyhow,
I guess I’m better off over here for the time being. I’ll see how things are by the last of May and then decide something—maybe…. 62

These selections reveal Wayman’s true beliefs about her experience in the WAC: namely, that she does not want it to end because of the fantastic benefits it affords her to which she would simply not be privy when she returns home. Although the WAC was to be disbanded six months after the end of the war, early in 1946 “the Army asked Congress for the authority to establish the Women’s Army Corps as a permanent part of the Regular Army”63 and, although the bill was delayed in Congress, it finally became law on 12 June 1948.64

Results

Wayman’s experiences, both cultural and her proximity to wartime battle, surely impact her postwar outlook on life, as they do many other members of the WAC who have the opportunity to serve in the Southwest Pacific Theater. The following letter excerpt was “written from New Guinea by an anonymous Camp Show trouper,”65 who also experiences, first hand, the lifestyle of servicewomen in the Southwest Pacific:

…To those of you who are interested, I have never had less sleep, never felt healthier, certainly never happier, and certainly never so full of respect, admiration, and pride in my fellow Americans, that walk this part of the Earth. For that jaded faith in humankind, the best thing I could wish anyone is a trip to the Southwest Pacific theater of war…. 66

This selection concisely, yet beautifully, describes the experiences of one particular woman in the Southwest Pacific Theater of War, and also alludes to the fact that a trip to this Theater can adeptly change one’s outlook, especially what is ultimately important in life.

Wayman, an “enforced tourist” of World War II, experiences firsthand the “massive expansion of travel opportunities for American women, both civilian and military, that form an essential
ingredient of their wartime experience."\(^67\) The letter excerpts chosen here demonstrate her expanded horizon through her new cultural encounters, proximity to war time battle, travels, and those instances where she is offered a new independence. Because the “geographic horizons of women in the United Stated were significantly altered and expanded by the events of World War II,"\(^68\) the far reaching consequences and results of this wartime movement and experience by women are still being felt in the United States.

With some certainty, it is clear that Wayman experiences profound changes in the realms of her independence and cultural diversification which, undoubtedly, have some major affect on her outlook on life. While she does not explicitly write in her letters, to the extent other female servicewomen do, of the change she feels and the change the world would naturally undergo as a result of the war, it is hard to imagine her experiences do not have an overwhelming impact on her.
WOMEN ACCEPTED FOR VOLUNTEER EMERGENCY SERVICE

History

The voluminous history behind the eventual integration of women into the Navy, as Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), began with the struggle for women to be included in any military line of service during World War I. After the Pearl Harbor bombings, the Navy struggled to “accept an unwelcome reality—it needed women in uniform” and proceeded to identify “more than 1,000 enlisted and 150 officer billets…that could be filled by women.” Mildred McAfee, President of Wellesley, “a highly respected and prestigious women’s college,” was chosen to head the Women’s Reserve, as “she had an impeccable personal and professional reputation and was a proven leader…admired for her quick wit.”

One major difference regarding the legislation behind the origination of the WAVES, when compared to the legislation creating the WAAC, was that “the legislation signed into law on 30 July 1942 specified that Navy women were to be in the Naval Reserve, not serving with it.” Accompanying this extreme difference was the factor of “equal pay for equal rank, something the WAAC members did not have” until the WAAC became the WAC in September of 1943. Although the WAVES, at the end of the war, only constituted “roughly 2 percent of the Navy” in certain critical areas they were majorities, including “WAVES [who] did about 80 percent of the administrative and supervisory work of the Navy’s mail service for the entire Navy,”

“WAVES [who] filled 75 percent of the jobs in Radio Washington, the nerve-center of the Navy’s entire communications system,” and “1,000 WAVES [who] taught instrument flying in Link trainers to 4,000 men a day,” in addition to many other crucial jobs.
Congresswoman Margaret Chase Smith, an influential proponent of women’s involvement in the wartime effort, campaigned for regular status for women in the military, and, more importantly, permission for women in the naval services to serve overseas where and when appropriate. Smith’s adamancy eventually proved victorious, and she finally “succeeded in 1944, although she did have to settle for a compromise bill which allowed women only in the ‘American area’ (North and South America, Hawaii, Alaska, the Canal Zone, and the Caribbean).” This legislation, passed late in the war, was an integral step in the continual struggle to attain equal rights, privileges, and status for women in the armed forces.

This brief history demonstrates the importance and necessity of women as WAVES during World War II because, without them, the Navy would have experienced a severe disadvantage. Although Eunice McConnell, a member of the WAVES, did not serve overseas, but remained in the Zone of the Interior, her experiences nonetheless increased her feelings of autonomy and her ability to accomplish things independently.
EUNICE McCONNELL

Context

Eunice McConnell, originally from Brooklyn, New York and residing at 2926 Avenue K, with her mother, father, and two sisters, Evelyn and Eileen, served stateside—Zone of the Interior—for the duration of her time in the WAVES. McConnell’s letters are predominantly written to her parents, with occasional letters to her sisters, and the collection is comprised of 285 letters. Written between 3 February 1943 and 23 May 1945, these letters are generally between three and four pages long; some, however, are only a short paragraph, while others are as long as nine pages, particularly when she had an important event to relay to her parents (see Appendices J-K). McConnell’s Naval career commences at Jersey City, New Jersey, where she departs by train for basic training, and travels through New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, and Ohio, finally arriving in Mitchell, Indiana, where she briefly stops. She then continues on to the WAVES Naval training station at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, where she remains from 8 March 1943 until 8 June 1943, and attends basic training classes. Finally, she is relocated to her most permanent station, in Alameda, California, on June 8, 1943, where she serves for the duration of her time in the Navy (see Appendix L).

McConnell frequently writes about her love for the Navy and her experience in it. She is particularly adamant about her WAVES experiences in the following excerpts.

[Bloomington, IN]
February 25, 1943

Dear Mom and Dad,

…First of all I loved it. I thought I loved it here before I got here, I knew it when I got here, and I’m more sure of it every minute I stay! The University of Indiana is a beautiful place, and our Ship is a wonderful part of it.…

— Eunice McConnell
Active Servicewomen during World War II: Helping to Create a New American Culture  
Senior Capstone Project for Kristin Lynch

Alameda, California  
June 20, 1943

Dear Mom and Dad,

…Oh, mom and Dad, I’m so happy. I’d be happy no matter where the Navy would send me. I’m happy because I know I’m doing my share to help our side win and at the same time making such unusual acquaintances and having such wonderful experiences. I suppose you can’t understand how I can be happy and be so far from home and those I love. I miss you all—and I think of you every minute of each day. But, on the other hand, I know you don’t want me to be happy, so I’m taking advantage of all the opportunities that present themselves….  

McConnell, very concerned with her social status, often writes about her evening events, dates, friends, and the frequent shopping she does. At the beginning of her time in the Navy, while engaged in classes to become a Storekeeper Third Class (SK 3/c), she also details her classes, grades, and how she feels she is performing in comparison to the other “girls” in her battalion.  

Upon her successful completion of the SK 3/c rank, McConnell is transferred to the U.S. Naval Air Station in Alameda, CA, where she is “chosen for a very special job,” which she describes:

[Alameda, CA]  
June 11, 1943

Hello Everybody—

…Somehow or other (for reasons unknown to us) we were chosen to observe, for about 8 or 9 days, the different activities in all the administration offices connected with Disbursing and Supplies. Then we will in some capacity correlate all these jobs at an office called the Air Center. It’s something very new….  

McConnell thoroughly enjoys her days in the WAVES and, in late June 1943, is transferred to another job, where she “still can’t tell [her family] much about this job—what I do know about it is that its full of military secret information such as dates of Squadron movements, and transport missions, etc.” Ultimately, McConnell studies for and attains her SK 2/c and SK 1/c ratings and continues working at the Naval Air Station in various offices, including Disbursement and Supplies, Insurance and War Bonds, and Supply Building offices. McConnell’s horizons are
considerably broadened through her involvement in the WAVES, which is evident through the
analysis of her original cultural norms and the changes through which she goes during her time
in service.

Culture

McConnell, from Brooklyn, New York, begins her time in the WAVES as a very
feminine and proper girl of only twenty one years. Examining her preconceived notions
regarding social norms and class distinctions provides a benchmark for determining how
or if these defined notions are transformed over the course of her Naval service.

McConnell demonstrates her submission to popular choice, particularly regarding
makeup, when she discusses her makeup selections in her letters to her mother and sister,
Eileen.

[Bloomington, IN]
April 6, 1943

Dear Mom + Dad and Eileen,

...And Eileen, I’ve bought Max Factor’s pancake makeup ‘cause all the
girls here wear it. So far it’s all right but I think I could do just as well with
powder!87

Similarly, her concept of sociability is formed predominantly around being popular and well-
liked by the “boys” in the area. This is demonstrated in her letters to her mother by her constant
discussion of her dates and letter correspondences with a multitude of servicemen and civilians.

[Alameda, CA]
Tuesday 7/27/43

Hello Everybody—

...There is an abundance of fellows here, but I choose my companions
very carefully. I wouldn’t go out with a fellow unless I felt certain of his type of
behavior, etc., and each one is a “swell fellow....” ...I don’t want to disobey you
but I am going to continue to write Billy—and Joe Keenan, and Joe Pastorino, and
a few others I have met while in service but whom you do not know....88
Upon attending a dance at St. Mary’s Naval Pre-Flight School, McConnell writes her mother about the horrible time she and all the WAVES have.

Dear Mom + Dad—

...You are probably wondering about the dance I mentioned. The Waves, about 75 in all (25 from our Station) all had a miserable time. The ride from Alameda to the School was very scenic and gave us our really first glimpse of beautiful California. But at the dance we were stared at as if we were freaks. A very few were invited to dance (I was one of the few) but we were really out of place and our Senior Wave Officer shouldn’t have primed us to go. Oh well such things will happen....

McConnell also writes home discussing the lack of conservatism in both a book she reads and a movie she sees, suggesting she maintains conservative ideals.

Dear Mom and Dad,

...I recently finished the new popular book “Shore Leave” by Fredrick Wakeman, but it’s a piece of TRASH in my estimation. I only finished the book to know how it ended. Yea, being in the Navy, and understanding some of the lingo, I did get a few laughs out of it – but for the most part it was very filthy! I guess the more immorale the story these days, the bigger the book circulation becomes....

Dear Mom and Dad,

...Yes I have seen “Going My Way.” I thought I wrote you about it but I guess not. Oh yes I thought it was really wonderful! + I too would like to see it again. I was amazed the Catholic Church permitted some of the scenes in the church! And in “Christmas Holiday” they portrayed the consecration of the Mass, that amazed me too!...

In comparison to Wayman’s more liberal consideration of women working, and even her suggestions to her mother that working has benefits, McConnell expresses concern and the sentiment that she wishes her mother did not have to work at all.
[Alamed, CA]  
May 30, 1944

Dear Mom + Dad—

…Mom, where are you working now? Is it really necessary? How many
day or hours? Wish you didn’t have to…."92

Similarly, while Wayman dines with the black members of the engineer corps overseas without a
second thought of any racial distinction, McConnell does not feel comfortable enjoying the pool
because there is no segregation between whites and African Americans.

[Alameda, CA]  
July 8th 1944

Dear Eileen,

…I haven’t been exposed to the sun at all this year. I had gone over to the
pool at least a few times a month last year, but not this year. You see we have one
pool for all enlisted personnel and that means there is no restrictions against
keeping the colored sailors out of it. I don’t care that much for sun and water that
I would care to swim in the same small body of water with coloreds!...93

Although these conservative sentiments are scattered throughout McConnell’s letters, one
particular instance, where she mentions her discomfort concerning a pelvic exam, also includes a
direct suggestion that she is changing and adapting to her new lifestyle.

[Bloomington, IN]  
February 24, 1943

Dear Mom and Dad,

…We haven’t received any more shots as yet—but today we had a pelvic
exam. Of course, it was embarrassing but we’re learning to take a lot and this is
just another one of those things. See even my philosophy (hope the spelling is
correct) is changing—you may not know me when I get home!...94

Although these letter excerpts demonstrate a very conservative, socially concerned, young
woman, it is impossible to believe McConnell’s experiences in the WAVES do not affect her in a
way that ultimately changes her outlook on life in at least some modicum.

Experiences

Eunice McConnell, stationed stateside during the entirety of her service period in the WAVES,
still experiences many unique things to which she otherwise would not have been exposed.
These experiences included some firsts, such as plane and horseback rides, and the opportunity to increase and maintain her independence in an office setting.

[Alameda, CA]  
Sept 28th 1943

Hello Everybody,

…Today I got my first hop! (That’s a plane ride) I went in a huge twin-motored Navy transport made by Lockheed from Alameda to Arcata—that’s about 300 air miles North of here on the coast. We cruised at 6,000 ft and 210 miles per hour!...It was wonderful. I don’t know why anyone would say they ever got scared or sick in a plane! It’s a very smooth ride except for a few air pockets—but that’s not bad either. We were in the air about 1 ½ hrs both coming and going....

[Alameda, CA]  
July 12th, 1944

Hello Folks,

…Among other things I danced and hiked and rode horseback! The latter was the most fun considering I never had been on a horse before. I almost went swimming but there weren’t enough suits available for hire in my size....

McConnell’s jobs, primarily situated in office settings at the Naval Air Station, affords her the opportunity to feel a sense of accomplishment, assert herself, and showcase her intelligence, as well as comprehend how stressful a full time job can truly be.

[Alameda, CA]  
8/4/43 Wednesday

Dear Mom + Dad,

…I’m so glad to be in the service to think I’m actually a part of all this pomp and ceremony—as well as part of the backbone on which the boys at the front rely....

[Alameda, CA]  
Sunday Aug 5, 1943

Dear Mom and Dad,

…Well anyway all day long I was running errands in the jeep. Over to the Public Works machine shop—pick up this or that—down to packing—then to delivery—“Be sure it goes out with the truck leaving today” and then back to the office. I was all alone. Funny how all the sailors + civilians looked at me—holding my hat on sometimes, and also being sure my shirt wasn’t being blown up by the wind and driving with the other hand. A Wave in a jeep—a blonde wave in a jeep! What fun!!!...
[Alameda, CA]
Tuesday, 26 Sept ‘44

Dear Mom and Dad,

…I’m in charge at the office and its quite a responsibility. In fact too much sometimes. And when I say a job is too much—it’s really so.

If it doesn’t improve soon I’m going to fake hysteria or a nervous breakdown. I’ll get a rest somehow—+ in sick bay I could really relax and take life easy a few days…. 99

McConnell also receives a commendation from her boss concerning the new filing system she implements in her office, which she includes in one of her letters home. It reads:

[Alameda, CA]
Feb 21, 1944

FROM: The Boss
To: Storekeeper 2nd class Eunice McConnell
Subj: New filing system, Commendation for Work in Establishing.

WELL DONE REPEAT WELL DONE

[signed] L.P. May

McConnell’s experience of D-Day, even stateside, is a markedly exciting and integral part of her service in the Navy, which she describes in the below excerpt.

Alameda, California
June 6, 1944

Dear Mom and Dad,

…Well, it seems as tho THAT day—“D-Day” has arrived! Great, isn’t it? Dad, I sat practically all night by the radio in the Lounge with my ear glued to the speaker. And the best part of it was I just knew you were listening too!...I took Eisenhower’s communiqué No. 1 in shorthand (thinking it would be longer, of course—than one sentence!) Then I heard him speak—the King of Norway, as well as Prime Minister of Belgium and the Netherlands. By 2:30 San Francisco time I went to bed….I wasn’t at all tired this morning. I guess I’m still excited about it…. 100

Finally, there is one major event on the station McConnell mentions, the deaths of two boys from the station, that demonstrates her viewpoint of war and the nature of her unique experiences in the WAVES.
Dear Mom and Dad,

...We had a tragic thing happen to two boys from this station. Two Yeomen (both 1st class) who were here when I arrived and who were usually the planners of all the parties I used to speak of going to with the Personnel Department, at the Alameda Hotel, were finally stationed aboard and aircraft carrier. (I wont tell you the name because it hasn’t been published as yet). They were only at sea 2 ½ months when two Jap[anese] suicide dive bombers, dove their planed right into the ship. They went thru the flight deck, the hangar deck, and down to there the magazines are-so it was really a terrific explosion. Both of our boys were killed....It’s really awful when you’ve known the ill fated one personally & just how they XXXX met their end. This war certainly is H E L L !!!!...

Each of these experiences reveals portions of McConnell’s everyday encounters during her time in the WAVES. For her, in comparison to Wayman, the experiences are considerably blander, but nonetheless significantly different than what McConnell would have experienced should she have stayed in New York during the Second World War.

Changes

McConnell, although stateside for the duration of her service in the WAVES, specifically mentions in several of her letters instances of change and independence, which develop more fully as her letter writing progresses. The following excerpts of McConnell’s self-acknowledged change serve to demonstrate her shifting cultural and social beliefs as she continues through her service days in the WAVES.

Dear Mom + Dad + Eileen,

...Your little girl is going to be a very changed person when you see her next time. The small changes have probably been taking place every day but I didn’t notice it at all until today. Hold your hats ‘cause you’ll never believe this one! Today I went to the Navy dentist. Got there about 10:20 am. By 11:15 am he had pulled a wisdom tooth and filled four others. I got up—walked out and returned to class. You know the old saying “business as usual.”...
Dear Mom and Dad,
…Also remember I may have changed in many ways Mom, but I’d say only for the better. I still maintain my good common sense and proper judgment and high ideals!...¹⁰³

Dear Mom + Dad,
…I know I’m doing a lot of things that I wouldn’t do at home—like going out with sailors after just meeting them in a restaurant and such—but, honest, everything is OK, Mom, and I’m still your little girl. I wouldn’t do anything radically wrong….¹⁰⁴

Dear Mom and Dad,
…Honestly living here at the barracks with all these girls is really the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. You’ll probably find I’ve changed. It certainly teaches a person tolerance, and consideration for others, and so many worth-while things….¹⁰⁵

Dear Eileen,
…I think I myself have changed a lot in a year – so surely the children who are still in the growing stage must have changed a great deal….¹⁰⁶

Each of these references to change provides insight into McConnell’s personal development and suggests an increased independence on the part of a formerly dependent and proper young lady. The following excerpts demonstrate McConnell’s growing independence, and the pride she feels as a result of this independence, which she gains as a member of the WAVES.

Dear Mom + Dad + Eileen,
…I can do alright by myself anyhow. But on the other hand it seems a little unusual to be escorted about….¹⁰⁷
Dear Mom and Dad,

…I had never been to the pool before, and had no idea what to expect. When I arrived I saw about 60 fellows having a wonderful time BUT no girls were there at all. Well after walking all the way over I decided I’d brave the crowd and go in anyhow!...I certainly felt strange because I didn’t know a single one of them and had to swim around by myself....

Dear Mom and Dad,

…Tomorrow I shall go on my first big shopping tour without you. The times we went for uniforms—there really wasn’t anything for me to make decisions about—but tomorrow there will be. I want all new lingerie ‘cause I need it! Also a hat + some other incidentals....

Dear Mom and Dad and Eileen,

…You know Mom, I feel as tho the Navy has made a woman out of me! You know, like they say it makes a Man out of boys. I was terribly dependant upon you for absolutely everything and now I have to depend on myself. That really is good training. Now I just know each night I have to put up my hair, there won’t be anyone to curl it with an iron in the morning. I just have to wash and iron my own things, there’s no one here to do it for me while I’m at work; and just a million little things like that....

Dear Mom and Dad,

…Have been getting along just fine at work. The Wave Lt. in charge, for some unknown reason, likes me and Ruth Conwell (SK 2/c) and boy that makes everything OK! The work is still steady + heavy – but I feel as tho I’ve accomplished a lot at the end of a day!...

Eunice McConnell, one of the “more than 8,000 female officers and more than 75,000 enlisted WAVES [who] had served their country well,” during World War II, enters this line of service as a typical female Brooklyinite of her time; as indicated by her letters, however, she emerges a changed and more independent woman. Forced, during her time in service, to care for herself and
embrace a sense of personal responsibility, McConnell’s time in the WAVES surely impacts her as a woman and United States citizen. Upon reminiscing about whether joining the WAVES was a good decision or not, McConnell affirms her choice in writing to her mother, extolling the numerous benefits she has thus far enjoyed, in the below excerpt.

[Alameda, CA]
October 9, 1943

Dear Mom and Dad, & Eileen,

…You were reminiscing about it being one year since I enlisted. Yes, little did I know then how full my next year of life was to be! Why the experience of seeing how “the other half” live is reason enough alone to warrant that I did the right thing when I signed the dotted line. But I could go on and enumerate about a hundred-fold good reasons. I know all the rest of my life I shall never look back on this with any regret….There is great kin-ship between all persons in the service….113

It would be difficult to believe the experiences and changes McConnell discusses in her letters, do not have a profound effect on her life and the way in which she lives her life after her service.

On February 6, 1945 McConnell marries William McDermott, with the permission of her commanding officer, which is necessary for women who want to marry while in the service. This decision is a typical choice for a woman of McConnell’s age in the 1940s to make, as marriage is central social and cultural norm. However, once McConnell becomes pregnant with her first child in June of 1945, she is discharged from the WAVES, as pregnancy excludes women from active service in the armed forces. She then returns to Brooklyn, awaiting her husband and, upon his discharge in early 1946, the couple moves to Long Island.114 Certainly, in this instance, as well as many others, women’s service during World War II serves as a driving force for change in the lives of American women, facilitating the formation of then radical ideals concerning women’s independence and freedom, which are subsequently passed down to future generations.
THE ARMY NURSE CORPS

History

Considering American social and cultural norms concerning women as nurturers and healers, The Army Nurse Corps (ANC) is understandably “the oldest female branch of all the military services in the United States,”\(^{115}\) having been established in 1901. More than 59,000 American Army nurses served during World War II,\(^ {116}\) which was an expansion from the considerably smaller number of 1,000 Army nurses in active service immediately before the bombing of Pearl Harbor.\(^ {117}\) Immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, this number exploded to 12,000 Army nurses in active service.\(^ {118}\)

Due to the momentous impact of World War II on the American economy and culture, “both society as a whole and the United States military found an increasing number of roles for women,”\(^ {119}\) particularly within the ANC. As cultural norms began to shift concerning women and their roles as members of society, “the Army reflected this change in attitude in June 1944 when it granted its nurses officers’ commissions and full retirement privileges, dependents’ allowances and equal pay…[and] free education to nursing students between 1943 and 1948.”\(^ {120}\) These changes were comparable to the WAAC/WAC change, where the Army granted WAAC officers increased benefits and integrated these servicewomen into the Army, instead of considering them auxiliaries to it.\(^ {121}\) The impact of both the Army Nurse Corps and the Navy Nurse Corp, the Navy’s equivalent to the ANC, is obvious after considering the fact that the total involvement, by the end of World War II, between these two groups comprised of nearly one-third of the entire nursing force.\(^ {122}\)
Army nurses were stationed throughout the world during the Second World War in the Philippines, the Pacific, China, Burma, India, the Atlantic, Germany, North Africa, Italy, Iran, the USSR, at Normandy in France, and England. In her particular case, Marjorie LaPalme spent a large portion of her service time in England, France, Holland, and Germany. By January 1944 there were approximately 4,644 nurses in the European Theater of Operations (ETO), including LaPalme, who was stationed in England at that time. The experiences of ANC servicewomen who were stationed in the ETO were extremely diverse, including participation in “the buildup for the Allied invasion of the Continent on 6 June 1944,” caring for battle casualties and performing surgeries, following troops through France, and various other activities that were necessary for their and their patients’ survivals.

Although many women enlisted voluntarily in the ANC, there was serious discussion of a draft of Army nurses in order to maintain the necessary levels of support to care for the sick and wounded American soldiers fighting on the front lines. In his 1945 State of the Union Address, President Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed “the critical shortage of Army nurses and that medical units in the European theater were being strained to the breaking point,” and suggested that nurses be drafted. A nurse draft bill was subsequently passed in the House of Representatives, but fell one vote short in Senate before the surrender of Germany in 1945.

One Army nurse, Lieutenant Marjorie Peto, who was stationed in Litchfield, England, one of the same locations at which Marjorie LaPalme was stationed, with the 2nd General Hospital, remembers:

Women were not expected…the tin huts hastily assigned to them were cold, disgustingly dirty, dismal, a prison-like set-up….the sudden change from comfort,
tasty food, lights at night, plenty of soap and hot water, central heating, private baths and familiar surroundings to one of bombed out buildings, scant food, no soap or hot water, black paint on windows, coal stoves, community baths with old-fashioned plumbing, ... -- this was the sharpest adjustment the group ever had to make. ¹²⁹

Given this brief introduction to the conditions under which LaPalme, and thousands of other ANC lived, we, again, see the notion of the “enforced tourist,” in addition to an ephemeral glimpse into the profound impact these conditions surely must have had on the lives of ANC women.
MARJORIE LaPALME

Context

Marjorie LaPalme, a member of the Army Nurse Corps during her World War II service, served primarily overseas in the European Theater of Operations. Originally from Greenfield, Massachusetts, LaPalme lived at 94 Phillips Street with her Mother, Father, four brothers, older Norman, younger Raymond, Kenneth, and Ronnie, and younger sister Joan until she leaves for the ANC. The letters in this collection are primarily between Marjorie and her mother, Ethel. There are also auxiliary letters of correspondence between Marjorie and her brothers Norman and Raymond, and her Uncle Norman. The letters LaPalme’s mother writes to her daughter total fifty nine letters, comprised of 210 pages, all of which are handwritten and run between four and five pages in length (see Appendix M). The letters written by LaPalme to her mother are slightly more extensive, totaling approximately seventy nine, only the first seven of which are written from the United States. These letters comprise of three hundred pages, and are also all handwritten, ranging between two to nine pages in length, depending entirely on the amount of free time LaPalme has or the recent events about which she has to write (see Appendix N).

LaPalme’s travels are extensive, particularly because she is a member of a unit that is deployed to Europe in the summer of 1942. The following is a list of the locations at which LaPalme is stationed or stops briefly during her tour of duty: Fort Devens, Massachusetts; Fort Dix, New Jersey; Litchfield, England; Cheltenham, England; Shrivenham, England; Warrington, England; Wreyham, England; Omaha Beach, France; Paris, France; Liege, Belgium; Heer, Holland; Maastricht, Holland; Iserlohn, Germany; and Bad Nauheim, Germany (see Appendices O-Q). The majority of her letters describe her frequent and exhaustive travels, the new tourist sites
LaPalme has the opportunity to visit, the conditions under which she is required to live, and her meeting and visits with her British maternal grandmother, whom she meets for the first time.

Each of these experiences enlightens LaPalme, forcing her to consider the diverse and vast world beyond her knowledge, particularly the small town of Greenfield, Massachusetts. LaPalme’s self acknowledged change, and her consideration of the ultimate and decisive changes under which the entire world will go as a result of the Second World War, clearly impact her postwar outlook on life.

Culture

In order to assess LaPalme’s change as a woman who serves during World War II, a careful look at her prewar cultural norms is necessary to develop a starting point against which the changes can be judged. LaPalme, a native of the small town of Greenfield, MA, comes from a familial culture centered on femininity, properness, and the careful preservation of female and associated cultural norms.

The majority of the insinuations concerning LaPalme’s prewar cultural norms occur in her Mother’s letters to her, as her mother describes the members of the ANC she knows at home, as well as changes in the cultural norms on the part of certain female individuals. LaPalme’s mother, concerned her daughter will emerge a changed woman, for the worse, alludes to another woman from Greenfield who changed as a result of being a member of the ANC.

[Greenfield, MA]
17 September 1943

Dear Marjorie,

…No! Margie you mustn’t let them make a G.I. out of our little girl cause we don’t like G.I. nurses, do we? That is if they become like our friend.…

131
Dear Marge,

…Are you going to come out of that place a G.I. nurse? I certainly hope not. Lord knows one is more than we can stand around here now. Not that you could ever be that ornery, it must take years to work up a disposition like that female has….132

LaPalme’s mother continues discussing the changes and atypical behavior of one of her friends, Malvina, in the town of Greenfield, hoping her daughter does not exhibit the same behavior upon her return from the ANC.

My Dear Marjorie,

…We went to a café called The Silver Star with Malvina + her husband where we had a chicken + spaghetti dinner. We hadn’t yet got through eating, when out comes his watch + he says we had better be going home now. Malvina, said to him oh shut up you’re a pain in the neck she tells him. I guess she’s not afraid of anyone that one….133

The stigma LaPalme’s mother associates with the ANC, as a result of her direct experience with one local ANC member, is interesting, as many of the traits she holds in contempt are those associated with female independence.

LaPalme, also, makes comments in her letters to her mother suggesting the conservative nature of her prewar values.

Dear Mom, Dad and Kids

…We nurses wore our beige uniforms and looked real sharp—we were the center of attention. You must remember there aren’t that many American nurses here as yet. It was lovely to feel like a woman again….134
[Cheltenham, England]
April 22, 1943

Dear Mom and Dad
...We had a very nice party here Saturday night. I have already mentioned it in my letters I believe. All the nurses wore evening dresses. I bought one here—a black one rather form fitting at the top—and red (2) carnations in my hair. Everyone said I looked lovely—they were all calling me senorita—said I looked Spanish. It seemed wonderful to get into a dress again that wasn’t a uniform...¹³⁵

[Somewhere in Holland]
February 10, 1945

Dearest Mom, Dad and Kids,
...We went out to the perfume factory and show room and bought some great perfume—nothing like a whiff of glamorous perfume to make me feel like a female again and pampered even if I wear it with my GI boots and pants! Ah well Mom—someday eh?...¹³⁶

Finally, LaPalme remarks on the cultural difference in public displays of affection between France and the United States when she comments “lots of smooching going on in Gay Paree anytime and anyplace is good enough here!”¹³⁷ suggesting such behavior is contrary to her ingrained cultural norms.

Experiences

LaPalme’s varied encounters during World War II include meeting new people, dangerous situations, and horrific experiences that help to shape her in a multitude of ways. Regarding her opportunities to meet people, LaPalme extols the benefits of the ANC to her mother.

June 24, 1942
Dix [NJ]

Dear Mom
...We are so excited—what a great chance to do our nursing help our boys and our country and travel. We are meeting people from all over the country....¹³⁸

LaPalme’s mother, Ethel M. Pendlebury LaPalme, was a native of Derbyshire, England who had come to North America as a World War I bride. Shortly after arriving in England, LaPalme has to opportunity to meet her maternal grandmother for the first time. She describes this experience in the excerpt below.
July 22, 1942
Somewhere in England

Dear Family,

...Finally the minister came along and he said “Oh, you finally arrived they have been expecting you” so he took us right to the house. I rang the bell at the front door, no answer so we hastened around to the back door and knocked. I was so worried for fear no one was home after our day of travel but finally the door opened and—there stood Grandma. She said Hello—Marjorie? Then she hugged and kissed me....

Other letters describe her first plane ride and her demanding schedule.

Shrivenham
Army Nurse School
Sept. 12 1943

Dear Mom, Dad and Kids

...Our ride in the air evacuation plane was thrilling—my first plane ride—no seats in it only litters. And we were all ordered to take a ride in a tank. What an experience....

[Cheltenham, England]
August 30, 1943

Dear Mom, Dad and Kids

...Our schedule starts at 5 a.m. – everything in our room must be ready for inspection very GI we get so many demerits if something is amiss. A taut bed—everything in its place in the locker—shoes polished to a high shine and the brass bright and shiny. Breakfast is at 6:30 am....Ten hours are allotted to defense against chemical warfare...general subjects take up 120, medical 22 hrs and nursing subjects 39 hrs....I’m telling you it is a strenuous day!...

LaPalme also frequently discusses her proximity to war and the accompanying experiences; the following excerpts relate specifically to her days in England between June 1942 and August 1944.

Aug 8, 1942
Somewhere in England

Dear Mom, Dad and Kids

...Everynight we have an air raid—especially the moonlit nights—the sirens go off and we hear a dreadful roaring of hundreds of planes. We stop everything and look at each other—fear in our eyes—waiting. We should go to the air raid shelter, but it is way up the hill in the main part of the garrison.
Fortunately we have only heard a few bombs drop, and it certainly puts the fear of God in one!

August 10, 1942

...We rode the underground where hundreds of people sleep each night and have done so for 2 yrs. London is badly bombed—buildings are a mess of rubble and all blocked off. Piles of sandbags litter the old buildings hopefully protecting them to an extent. The blackout at night is absolute and we had difficulty getting around....Antiaircraft guns are all over the city and when the German planes come over huge searchlights come on and flash up in the heavens crisscrossing each other to pin the enemy plans in the light. We couldn’t see our hands in front of our faces it was such a perfect blackout....

Despite the dangerous conditions in England during the time LaPalme is stationed there, these wartime conditions do not preclude LaPalme and her friends from frequenting the local pubs and enjoying themselves, at night, when they are not on duty.

[England]
October 2, 1943

Dear Mom, Dad + Kids

...In London we spent some fun-times “pub crawling” as we called it. We left the safety of the hotel at night and ventured forth into the blackout, with searchlights crisscrossing in the dark sky probing here and there among the barrage balloons which floated overhead. After a slow and careful crawl through the black streets we at last made our way to a pub....At ten o’clock, the closing time of most pubs, the landlord would raise his voice and say “Time Gentlemen, Time!” and we would regretfully leave the warmth and friendly atmosphere of the “Pig and Poke,” “The Swan,” “The Headless Woman,” “Dog and Fox,” “Boar’s Head.” The names are on signs swinging in the breeze....

LaPalme’s transfer out of England and move to Holland on 15 November 1944 proves dangerous, as she relocates even closer in proximity to the front lines of war with the 41st Evacuation Hospital in Maastricht, Holland. While in Holland she describes her harrowing experiences, as well as the prelude to the Battle of the Bulge, in detail.

[Somewhere in Belgium]
Dec. 7, 1944

Dearest Mom, Dad and Kids

...The buzz bombs have stopped for awhile but enemy planes come over and then the ack ack guns start—we see flashes and explosions all along the horizon—we are very close to the fighting.
Everywhere through all these countries we see the havoc of war—piles of bricks and rubble streets of it once homes and public buildings bridges bombed—our engineers replace them with pontoon bridges. Not just a few homes but the entire city is gone. Unbelievable….It seems to me it will take them ages and ages to build up these cities and towns again….

…We went into Valkenburg with a group last night—I was so scared—there were enemy planes overhead, strafing antiaircraft guns—mortar shells all around us—the sky was lit up. Our M.P.s stopped us dozens of time to look at our dog tags and identifications looking for German paratroopers who were infiltrating behind our lines—I was so glad to get back….144

Later, December 18, [1944]

…It was a terribly exciting night last night—so much activity all over the place. Many enemy planes overhead. We could hear them strafing, explosive and mortar fire continuously all the night long. Reports are that the Germans have broken through our lines. No one can go out but what they are stopped by out M.P.s, and asked questions about American ball players, states, presidents, etc. They have caught many Germans in American uniforms. It is frightening. The weather is frigid cold and the snow is deep. My heart goes out to our poor boys out there in the dark and cold….145

[Somewhere in Holland]
February 20, 1945

Dear Mom, Dad and Kids,

…Speaking of how frightened I am or was of thunder storms. I still am and when these buzz bombs go over I am petrified—it is something you don’t get used to in a hurry. Awhile back these bombs would go over 14-15 an hr—not so many now—one night the motor shut off on one and the whistle started—my wardman, Doctor, and I just stood there frozen in time waiting for the explosion. It was the longest moment of my life—finally a terrific explosion which shook our building—thank god it was a ¼ miles away. I shudder when I think of it!...146

Furthermore, LaPalme’s experiences pertaining specifically to her role as an Army Nurse, such as treating her patients and travelling frequently,147 showcase her position as a member of the ANC in the ETO during World War II. These excerpts suggest this role must have prompted changes within LaPalme as an individual.148
[Somewhere in England]
Aug. 10 [1943]

Dear Mom, Dad, Ken, Ron + Joan,

...I am fairly busy, however. We have a pt [patient] to-night who tried to hang himself—he says he is no good there are so many better people than he in this world. Now, how do you like that? We sure do get some cases in here alright—he is very disturbed, poor kid....

Heer Holland
Jan 1, 1945

Dear Mom Dad and Kids

...One of my pts [patients] celebrated the New Year by going over to have his leg amputated—when he was told he said “Okay Doc whatever you say[“] but his lips trembled when he said his Mother would be upset—the number of amputations is appalling we get some terrible cases in. I can honestly say one lad with a horrible chest wound turned (his hair) white over night he was in such horrible pain....

[Somewhere in France]
February 10, 1945

Dearest Mom, Dad and Kids,

...We left Maastricht at 8AM and 12 hrs later 8PM we arrived in Paris we had plenty of blankets with us and it wasn’t too cold—through Belgium into France we made 2 stops—not bad for a bunch of gals—the first outdoor bathroom was so filthy we simply could not go in, so the next field we grabbed a blanket and held it up—no fun trying to take down 3 pr pants in a hurry—it was so cold and raining....We started laughing so hard we could hardly hold the blanket up....

[Enroute to Germany]
February 28, 1945

Dearest Mom, Dad and Kids

...It is appalling and so demoralizing. Our poor kids come in on litters exhausted, filthy all shot to hell—blind kids, terrible head injuries, chest injuries you can see their heart beating or no arms or legs. It is horrible!...

Finally, LaPalme experiences the segregation of the ANC through her assignment with the 168th Station Hospital in Warrington, England. In August 1944 the white nurses of the 168th are disbanded and sent to other hospitals in England in order to make way for the arrival of sixty-
three African American Army nurses, the first to be assigned in the ETO. The 168th had recently been transformed into a German POW hospital and the assignment of black nurses to the 168th was considered a “social” experiment. LaPalme comments on this situation in her letters:

[Warrington, England]
August 4 1944
168 Station Hosp

Dearest Mom, Dad and Kids
All our G.I. pts [patients] have been shipped out and we got about 300 German prisoners of war—honestly we couldn’t believe it although we had heard many rumors to this effect! Prisoners of war—what a shocker!!...

We have also received our transfer orders. Twelve of us are going to the 129th Gen. Hosp in Wrexham. It is way out in the stick—I was very disappointed!

Sunday noon 63 black nurses are coming in. We have to be out of here that afternoon. I am all packed.

…I have 35 Nazis on my ward—very disdainful—never smile badly shot up—a few can speak English. It is quote—a political racial and social experiment—get that! With the black nurses I mean. You know how the Germans feel about the Jews and black and infirm—they got rid of them!...^{153}

LaPalme, as a result of these varied and extraordinary experiences, develops a changed mindset concerning herself, the world, and, most importantly, her role as a woman in the world.

LaPalme’s direct discussion of change, in her letters, is the most profound of the three women examined in this paper.

Changes

LaPalme’s encounters during her service in the ANC certainly demonstrate her frequent movements, nursing duties, and the horrific war time death and destruction she is required to endure, as one of the many individuals close to the front lines of war. However, LaPalme’s own personal consideration of how the war changes not only herself, but the world in its entirety, shines through her letters. LaPalme’s allusions to her own personal change begin with her increased appreciation for the little things, such as her former life at home or the packages her mother sends her.
Dearest Mother, Dad and Kids,  
…It will do Ken good to get away from home—it will certainly make us appreciate it a great deal more. We took everything for granted at home and you waited on us hand and foot…. 154

Dearest Mom, Dad + Kids  
…We have to leave home to fully appreciate all that we had—our loving, caring, parents I often wondered how you managed. Cheer up Mom we will all soon be home—of course it will be different Norm and Ray will go home with their wives but it will never be the same when I think how innocent and naive we were when we left home—no things will never be the same…. 155

Dearest Mom, Dad and Kids  
…Thanks for the pkgs [packages] which I rec’d just before I left Heer. You shouldn’t bother to send anything more, although I appreciate it. I think we tend to forget how hard it is to get things at home—the long lines for cigarettes and stocking certain foods, gasoline. You do your share Mom just by writing your lovely letters…. 156

LaPalme continues writing about her own personal change, suggesting particular things to which she will have to acclimate upon her return to the United States, and the mood swings she experiences.

Dearest Mom, Dad + Kids  
…I remember we had some boys as patients from the Ozarks who had never had shoes on their feet before and kids 157 from the Midwest who has never seen the ocean those from the South who had never seen snow. No, no one participating in this far-flung war will ever feel the same or think the same and I venture to say the same applies to these ancient countries also…. 158
can really get on with so little. Just a cot with a bedding roll on it (all my clothes are in the roll too) a box for a table a rope for a clothes line and of course our faithful helmet which serves as a basin to wash in—a clothes washer—a seat sometimes and several other things….

[Dorsten, Germany]
April 28, 1945

Dearest Mom, Dad and Kids,

…Right now I am sitting on a box near the stove eating (again) sardines with fingers—I think we shall have to be reeducated in the manners and niceties of life in a civilized society. I shall probably call for my helmet to wash in. We talk a great lengths about how we will act when we get home—its lots of fun….

Bad Nauheim
June 20, 1945

Dear Mom Dad and Kids,

…I am getting so bitchy lately—don’t mind me Mom we are just sick if we don’t gripe in the army. It releases tension…

Each of these excerpts, independently, reveals the changes through which LaPalme progresses, in addition to the changes she understands and predicts the world with go through before the end of the war. Her intuitive insight is, ultimately, correct and the world is transformed in various and important ways upon the culmination of the Second World War.

Results

Marjorie LaPalme, from the small town of Greenfield, Massachusetts, endures a harsh, yet exciting, lifestyle during her service in the ANC. Her multitudinous and diverse experiences change her personality and her outlook on life in a profound manner. LaPalme’s most powerful and moving letter excerpts are below. The first is written while she is stationed at the 168th Station Hospital in Warrington, England, and the second during her sea voyage home in August 1945. Both concern the ways in which she herself, as well as the world, have changed.
[Warrington, England]  
[April 21, 1944]  
Dear Mom, Dad and Kids  
…It is a different world now and it will be so when we get home. People have been all over the world who before the war never went farther than 100-200 miles from home….\textsuperscript{161}

[Aug. 25, 1945]  
At Sea aboard JM Huddleston  
My dear Mom, Dad and Kids  
…One thing is sure—we will never be the naïve innocents we were at home—none of us….  
…What an exciting tumultuous, chaotic time we have lived through Norm in the S. Africa + Italy, Ray on the USS Arkansas...Uncle Ray in the British merchant Marine ferrying men and supplies through submarine infested waters—torpedoed in 2 different ships. No, Mom our family life will never be the same. When I think how innocent we were.  
It was a wonderful experience—no doubt, the greatest of my entire life I am sure nothing can surpass the comradeship and friendship we shared with so many wonderful men and women from all over our country—the good and the bad, suffering death and destruction falling from the skies but perhaps most of all I will remember the quiet courage of common ordinary people….  
I am of two minds today—elated…I shall see my loved ones and saddened to think that perhaps I shall never see my comrades again—all the experiences we shared under such trying conditions made us very close. I guess even if we keep in touch it will truly never be the same again—nothing in our lives will ever surpass this time in our lives, and history….\textsuperscript{162}

These stunning excerpts clearly demonstrate LaPalme’s acknowledgement that she herself, as well as the world as a whole, have both undergone serious changes resulting from the Second World War, and neither will ever be the same.
POST WORLD WAR II EXPECTATIONS

Cultural Expectations

With the influx of returning soldiers to the United States, women were expected to cease working and allow the returning soldiers to reacquire their prewar jobs in order to maintain an economy in which males were predominant in the working force. Margaret A. Hickey, chair of the Women’s Advisory Committee of the War Manpower Commission, expressed the very practical concern that “‘the flow of women out of industry’ at the end of the war would result in ‘a return to [the] popularity of the theory that the only place for a woman is within the four walls she calls home.’”163 Hickey’s fear, clearly, was a valid one because this cultural expectation was exactly that occurred at the conclusion of the war.

Men’s purported deploring of women’s loss of femininity164 also raised considerable issues in post-World War II America; if, during the war women had been more than able to maintain a smooth economy and society at home without a male presence, what did this suggest about the necessity of the male, particularly as “protector?”165 Charlotte Perkins Gilman “once proposed to go for an evening walk,” upon which her male companion announced “‘I shall go with you—I am your natural protector’” to which Gilman replied “‘as a matter of fact, the one thing a woman is most afraid to meet on a dark street is her natural protector.’”166 Women’s ability to successfully survive without their male counterparts implies a transformation on the part of females, a gradual increase in their independence and abilities, suggesting a “loss” of femininity; this change was expected, by society, to be immediately reversed upon the completion of the war.
Additionally, for those women who served as members of one of the women’s branches of the armed services, an increased feeling of independence and personal accomplishment generally accompanied their war time service. Unfortunately, sometimes the personality changes associated with these feelings, most often attributed to women who were considered bolder after their service, resulted in the sentiment that “military women are whores or lesbians.” We see allusions to this boldness in LaPalme’s mother’s letters when she writes about one woman in Greenfield, MA who is more independent as a result of her service in the ANC. LaPalme’s mother hopes Marjorie does not come out of the service a “G.I. Nurse,” like this woman. As a result of these stereotypes, “great attention was paid to teaching women recruits ladylike behavior, including how to wear makeup, how to enter a car, and how to conduct a social conversation” for post World War II recruits. This notion further perpetuated society’s need to revert to prewar norms and prevent any changes associated with female service in the armed forces. The consequence of this cultural need to maintain the prewar status quo resulted in competing ideologies and messages received by women of this generation, ultimately leading to confusion as to whether they could assert their newfound independence, or not.

The complexity of the postwar era for women whose husbands, fathers, or sons returned from war caused tribulation for these women. Many of them were left in a difficult dilemma as to the exertion of their independence or the repression of it based on societal expectations, expectations which were confused due to competing ideologies. Linda Eisenmann’s four predominant competing ideologies concerning the postwar societal makeup of the United States address this problem; “women…found themselves caught between competing patriotic, economic, cultural, and psychological ideologies dictating their proper behavior.” Most importantly, the
Active Servicewomen during World War II: Helping to Create a New American Culture  
**Senior Capstone Project for Kristin Lynch**

psychological ideology “favored a Freudian…interpretation which suggested that women’s fulfillment came through the acceptance of their reproductive role,”¹⁷⁰ a role many women were now replacing with their work life or other, non-familial, activities in order to garner increased satisfaction. Female expectations, thus, were complex and far-ranging, depending on the woman, her war time experience, and perhaps the experiences of her friends and family.

**Female Expectations**

Women’s postwar involvement in the peace keeping and transitional aspects of society were, as expected, minimal due to the fact “the male-dominated political establishment did not view the war as an opportunity to bring about significant reforms both at home and abroad with the same seriousness and urgency as did women.”¹⁷¹ Eleanor Roosevelt, an instrumental supporter of women’s and civil rights, maintained that “women would bring distinct viewpoints to the peace table that would enable them to broaden and enhance the postwar agenda as they worked in equal partnership with men.”¹⁷² Mary Anderson, director of the Federal Women’s Bureau, opined that the appointment of women to postwar peace planning councils would “ensure that the wartime gains of working women would be safeguarded during times of peace.”¹⁷³ These peace time rights included equal rights among all races, class, and genders, as well as full time employment for both genders, and “the opportunity for women to assume their rightful places in the halls of government and public life at the local, national, and international levels.”¹⁷⁴ Unfortunately, although women strived and dreamed for these opportunities, partially afforded to them during times of war, their desire to “have a share in shaping the new world” was not readily allowed, as is evident by the fact women and men still stand on unequal grounds. Despite this inequality then, and now, the transformation of the United States economy, from one of “necessity” of production during WWII to one of “freedom” of production in the postwar era, propelled the
U.S. into the next stage of capital production, which ultimately required women to work in order to support this increased production.

**Production Realities**

The new social realities of post-World War II America, combined with an “extensive and highly complex division of labor[,] unleashed immense productive powers far beyond anything in prior human experience.” Due to of this new age of abundance, women were employed out of necessity because increased production requires increased labor. Ralph E. Flanders, president of the Jones and Lamson Machine Company of Vermont, put it this way:

> The world we are working toward is one of greater production, but with a satisfactory amount of leisure. While this greater production will be obtained in part by improved machinery processes and organization, we would also plan that it be obtained by having a much higher percentage of the total population engaged in productive work…This in itself means that opportunities for women would be better than they have been in the past, even in those lines of work in which women are used as second choices and principally in emergencies. This is perhaps the fundamental consideration leading to a hope for better peacetime employment opportunities for women.

Finally, on the economic conditions during and after the war, one American girl remarked:

> I do not remember any deprivation during the war—or at any time in my life—or any inconvenience….What I do remember clearly is the burst of consumption at the war’s end. It seems to me the very moment we were banging the pots and pans…there was an explosion of fresh cream and strawberries.

After fully considering the implications of this increased postwar production, the conclusion that “for some girls, postwar expansiveness, the comfortable homes and consumer goods, media glamour, and the anticipation of happy futures counteracted and even transformed that discontent [of high expectations for the postwar generation] into the urge to explore.” This expansion of postwar production resulted in women opting out of the normalcy of their prewar lives and choosing to liberate themselves from the mundanity they once knew.
POST WORLD WAR II ACTUALITY

Women’s True Feelings

Resulting from women’s enlightening experiences as war workers and servicewomen during the Second World War, women’s actual expressions of postwar desired norms were extremely different from what was culturally and socially expected. One of the driving forces behind this change, *The Feminine Mystique*, by Betty Friedan, argued “American women, especially suburban women, suffered from deep discontent” resulting from the notion that “women could ‘find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love,’” all cultural norms that excluded careers, or any other form of activity outside the home, that might lend to women’s increased satisfaction. A poll conducted by *Women’s Home Companion* in 1947 and 1949 that questioned readers as to the women they most admired, garnered the following results:

In both years the top four women were Eleanor Roosevelt, Helen Keller, Sister Elizabeth Kenny (who worked with polio victims), and Clare Boothe Luce (author and congresswoman), all distinctly non-domestic women. Why did readers select these particular women? They seemed to offer the same answers as the success stories: “courage, spirit, and conviction,” “devotion to the public good,” and “success in overcoming obstacles.” While a feminine version of selfless sacrifice seems to have won kudos, individual striving and public service superseded devotion to home and family.

The results of this poll demonstrate a clear shift in the minds of women as to what they deemed important feminine qualities immediately following World War II. Simply put, the importance of devotion to family and home was surpassed by the notion of public service and individual achievement.

Although women were expected to simply revert to their prewar selves, upon the return of husbands and fathers, many were unable to do so because they loved their new jobs, activities,
and personalities. Two war wives tell of their marriages, and how they changed or failed, after they refused to revert to their prewar domesticity and subservience. The first, Shirley Hackett, tells of her husband’s return from war and his inability to comprehend his wife’s unmistakable increased independence.

The moment her husband returned, she was expected to revert to the role of housewife. When her husband found her writing checks to pay the bills, he asked, “Why do you want to do that? I’m back!” When he saw her changing a tire on a car, he treated her as if she were “insane” to think that she could do such a thing. Troubles developed in the marriage.181

Similarly, war wife Dellie Hahne experienced problems with her marriage, upon her husband’s return from war, which ultimately ended in divorce a few short years later.

“My husband did not care for my independence,” she recalled. “He had left a shrinking violet and came home to a very strong oak tree.”…“I think the seeds of my liberation and many other women’s started with the war,” she observed. The first intimation Hahne had of the changes that were taking place came when she was invited to a friend’s house for Sunday dinner and heard the mother and grandmother talk about which drill would bite into a piece of metal at the factory. “My god, this was Sunday dinner in Middle America and to hear, instead of a discussion of the church service, a conversation about how to sharpen tools—it was a marvelous thing. I remember thinking that these women would never again be the same.”182

For servicewomen who travelled abroad, such as Martha Alice Wayman and Marjorie LaPalme, the significant expansion of their horizons and geopolitical consciousnesses, fostered through the events of World War II, greatly enhanced their view of the world.183 This travel was a central event in the lives of these women, an event and opportunity that forever changed their view of the world and themselves, as well as their individual roles in the world.

Results

The changes women underwent as a direct result of the war most likely trickled down to subsequent generations through a change in values and cultural norms exerted by mothers. Eleanor Roosevelt, a major proponent for women’s rights, “could not have seen the myriad ways
in which the experiences of women war workers would affect the lives and prospects of their daughters.”184 This war had proven to women that “they could do things they’d thought they couldn’t, and now they were telling their daughters: ‘You can do anything you want to. You can be anybody you want to. Any you can go anywhere you want to.’”185 More evidentiary proof of this change comes in the form of a *Senior Scholastic* poll of “thirty-three thousand girl students taken in 1946, 88 percent [of whom] wanted a career in addition to homemaking, and only 4 percent choosing homemaking exclusively.”186

Furthermore, “the extended horizon that has so rapidly appeared for women during the war has opened new areas which of necessity brought rich experiences,”187 giving them “an unparalleled opportunity to develop new skills and habits of thought and behavior—a new kind of mental attitude and stamina, essential in tomorrow’s world.”188 Concerning those women given the opportunity to travel abroad, “the unanticipated and far-reaching consequences of enforced wartime travel played an important role in transforming the way American women thought about themselves and their world.”189 Using this knowledge to their advantage, “women were better prepared to confront the challenges presented by the postwar world,”190 which would include the ongoing fight for women’s equality in a man’s world. The incredible military experiences of women, such as Wayman, McConnell, and LaPalme, “would provide a foundation for the rejuvenation of the women’s movement in the United States,”191 as the cultural and social changes experienced by these women undoubtedly impacted their thoughts and actions in the postwar world. For many women, both those who worked stateside to maintain a wartime economy, and those engaged in military service to the United States armed forces, “World War II was the defining moment in their lives.”192
THE NEXT GENERATION

The unmistakable cultural and social norm changes exhibited by the generation after the one comprised of women who served in World War II, is unequivocal proof that war time service certainly affected a portion of this next generation. One resultant group from this change in norms was the Beats, a group that provided “parameters for understanding young white middle-class feminine dissidence”\(^\text{193}\) of the 1950s. Women of this generation who were “drawn to difference”\(^\text{194}\) were the primary members of this group, suggesting this draw to difference resulted partially from the postwar shift in cultural norms concerning females.

Additionally, white middle-class girls of the 1950s generation grew up with preconceived notions, primarily based off of their mother’s current lives, concerning what their life would entail as a female in this generation; many of these girls, however, were scared of these expectations. One girl comments:

That was worst of all, I thought, a life where nothing ever happened. I looked around me and saw women ironing dresses and hanging out clothes and shopping for food and playing mah-jong on hot summer days, and I knew I couldn’t bear to spend my life that way, day after drab day, with nothing ever happening. The world of women seemed to me like a huge, airless, prison where things didn’t change. Inside it, I thought, I’d turn gray and small and shrivel up to nothing.\(^\text{195}\)

Ultimately, these young, white, middle-class women, curious about a world external to the expected domesticity, “became Beats and Beatniks,”\(^\text{196}\) and “their explorations were the opening salvos in what came to be known as the women’s movement.”\(^\text{197}\)
APPENDICES
Appendix A -- Martha Alice Wayman

Picture of Martha Alice Wayman.
Appendix B -- Wayman Typewritten Letter

Example of typewritten letter by Martha Alice Wayman.
Example handwritten letter by Martha Alice Wayman.
Example of Air Mail stationery used by Martha Alice Wayman.
Appendix E -- Wayman V-Mail Stationery

Example of V-Mail stationery used by Martha Alice Wayman.
Appendix F -- Wayman Censor Example

This is what we read every day:

New guinnie
October 21 1944

to Mrs. Amelia Wayman my dear mother I take great pleasure in riting you these few lines to let you no I am find and hopping you r the same I hope that when these few lines reech you re loveing hands they fine you well and happy as they leave my hands the same ha ha so teddy bear is getting fate thats shure nice smile so paw is in good health thats find how is the crops this year fine I hop so John has went to the army I hope he dont come here nohow it shure is hot hear ha ha ha to meny buggs and aunts hear well sence I dont no nothing to right about I will stop hoping you are all rite I hop this letter give you much pleasure becoze it give me such a lot of pleshure to rite you so I will close now much luve from youre dotter

Private Ma Wayman ASN 0000123
apo 929

rite soon

Of course the typing is much better than we ever have -- most of the handwriting is so bad we can hardly read it but we know just what they all say.

Example of the daily letters Martha Alice Wayman read and censored at her job.
Appendix G -- Wayman United States Travels

The United States: A Military Map

This map shows the different locations in which Martha Alice Wayman was stationed during her tour of duty. For the chronological order please refer to the below key.

**KEY**

1. Fort Des Moines, Iowa
2. Boomtown, Iowa
3. Fort Des Moines, Iowa
4. Norfolk, Virginia
5. Saint Louis, Missouri
6. Camp Polk, Louisiana
7. Fort Des Moines, Iowa
8. Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia
9. Buckley Field, Denver, Colorado
10. Fort Logan, Colorado
11. Buckley Field, Denver, Colorado
12. Sheppard Field, Wichita Falls, Texas
13. Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia
Appendix H -- Wayman South Pacific Travels

The South Pacific: Australia, New Guinea, and the Philippines
This map shows the different locations in which Martha Alice Wayman was stationed during her tour of duty. For the chronological order please refer to the below key.

**KEY**

1. Sydney, Australia
2. Brisbane, Australia
3. Moresby, New Guinea
4. Hollandia, Dutch New Guinea
5. Tacloban, Philippine Islands
6. Manila, Philippine Islands
7. The Escolta, Philippine Islands
Appendix I -- Wayman Japan Travels

Japan and its Islands
This map shows the different locations in which Martha Alice Wayman was stationed during her tour of duty. For the chronological order please refer to the below key.

**KEY**
- 1. Okinawa, Japan
- 2. Tokyo, Japan
- 3. Osaka, Japan
- 4. Fukuoka, Japan
- 5. Tokyo, Japan
Appendix J -- McConnell Typewritten Letter

SUNDAY - On Duty
October 30, 1943

UNITED STATES NAVY

Dear Mom and Dad and Eileen,

Well here it is Sunday again — by golly the weeks just fly by somehow! Why before you know it — it will be Thanksgiving, then on top of that we'll have Christmas and Easter and then Summer again. That's about when I guess I'll be able to come back East again, on a leave if I can get one.

There is some talk of all the compliment getting five days leave gratis at either one of three holidays — Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's. But they have been talking about it for about two months and still no definite word. Well anyway Numa and I are contemplating asking for some time — we don't know if we'll ask for five or ten days — and going to Reno, Nevada, for just a day and then to L.A. for about four days, and then maybe back to Sacramento for a day or two. Sounds good, doesn't it? I have a little money saved and I think I'll squander it on that. Then I'll begin saving once again for coming home. I hope we can carry out our plans. Of course, I'll tell you all about it whenever we have something definite to work on. I've told Jeannes about this (just a day or two ago) and so she be able to be on the lookout for us. We hope to do this in the month of November.

I know you think I shouldn't send Christmas gifts — but I'll just feel like an outsider if I don't so I'm going to make every effort to do so. Even if the gifts are small and inexpensive at least I'll feel as though the true Christmas spirit is there. It sounded funny to hear that Christmas trees will not be available this year — after all the years you threatened not to have a tree, now it may not be for you to decide! I really won't miss the same as you will — after all it will probably look out of place in this climate. It will be fairly cold (so I'm told) but there is no possibility of there being any snow.

By now of course you know I did receive the pumpkin and we did use it at the barracks party and it really gave it that added touch. You certainly know the right things to send. But then you always do know the right things to say and to do at to send, Mom. Our party was lots of fun. It began with each girl (there were no fellows permitted) going thru a blacked-out head, and tripping over G.I. cans, and their covers, and walking under wet mops, and having someone rub a rubber-gloved hand over your face and all that silly stuff — you know the things I mean. Then on the way out you had to go thru the Mill. Even the Senior Wave Officer went thru it — and I was glad I was on the "Mill Brigade" when she came thru — I'll voucher I did my share!! But of course it was all in fun. We had funny relay games and the team I was Captain of was — although that's no special credit to me. After all we hadn't practiced for the game or anything. Then in the Marching Off To Jerusalem game (some call it musical chairs) I was the next to last left in the game, but I didn't finally win. For refreshments we had doughnuts and grapefruit punch.

Saturday I went to the Dental Clinic. I had gone a few days ago to have a routine check up and then they gave me an appointment to have some fillings on Saturday. Well so far one back tooth has been filled — and I have two more to go. The dental clinic here is about the size of Vallasan and Beems...

Example of typewritten letter by Eunice Genevieve McConnell.
Appendix K -- McConnell Handwritten Letter

Example of handwritten letter by Eunice Genevieve McConnell.
Appendix L -- McConnell United States Travels

The United States: A Military Map
This map shows the different locations in which Eunice Genevieve McConnell was stationed during her tour of duty.
For the chronological order please refer to the below key.

KEY
1.  Fort Dix, New Jersey
2.  Indianapolis, Indiana
3.  University of Indiana, Bloomington, Indiana
4.  Alameda, California
Appendix M -- Mrs. Ethel M. LaPalme Handwritten Letter

Example of handwritten letter by Mrs. Ethel M. LaPalme.
Appendix N -- Marjorie LaPalme Handwritten Letter

Aug 8, 1942
Some where in England

Dear Mom, Dad and Kids,

Still at the barracks unsigned as yet. We take long waits during the day through the English countryside. It is just beautiful here. Lovely flowers and little thatched cottages with roses climbing over the front doors. Our only transportation is “thanks well” - if a bus is full it passes us by. However we have ridden in every mode of transportation from jeeps, lorries, ambulances, motorbikes. The old fellows always stop and ask if we want a ride - very nice. The English are very friendly and the English people all just marvelous to us. They are very few passenger cars - of course. Every night we have an air raid - especially on moonlit nights - the planes go off and we hear a dreadful noise, and see a dreadful sight. We stay very close and look at each other's fear in our eyes, waiting. We should go to the air raid shelter. But it is easy up the
Appendix O -- LaPalme United States Travels

The United States: A Military Map
This map shows the different locations in which Marjorie LaPalme was stationed during her tour of duty.
For the chronological order please refer to the below key.

KEY
1. Fort Devens, Massachusetts
2. Fort Dix, New Jersey
Appendix P -- LaPalme United Kingdom Travels

The United Kingdom: Ireland and England
This map shows the different locations in which Marjorie LaPalme was stationed during her tour of duty. For the chronological order please refer to the below key.

KEY

- 1. Litchfield, England
- 2. Cheltenham, England
- 3. Shrivenham, England
- 4. Warrington, England
Appendix Q -- LaPalme Europe Travels

Europe: France, Belgium, Holland, Germany
This map shows the different locations in which Marjorie LaPalme was stationed during her tour of duty. For the chronological order please refer to the below key.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Omaha Beach, France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Paris, France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Liege, Belgium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Heer, Holland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Maastricht, Holland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Iserlohn, Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bad Nauheim, Germany</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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43 Wayman, 8 January 1945.
45 Wayman, 25 April 1945.
46 Wayman, 14 May 1945.
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48 Wayman, 6 September 1945.
50 Wayman, 21 October 1945.
51 Wayman, 6 November 1945.
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84 McConnell, 7 August 1944.
85 McConnell, 15 August 1944.
86 McConnell, 30 May 1944.
87 McConnell, 8 July 1944.
88 McConnell, 24 February 1943.
89 McConnell, 28 September 1943.
90 McConnell, 12 July 1944.
91 McConnell, 4 August 1943.
92 McConnell, 5 August 1943.
93 McConnell, 26 September 1944.
94 McConnell, 6 June 1944.
95 McConnell, 18 April 1945.
96 McConnell, 27 April 1943.
97 McConnell, 24 June 1943.
98 McConnell, 31 July 1943.
99 McConnell, 1 September 1943.
100 McConnell, 5 March 1944.
101 McConnell, 20 March 1943.
102 McConnell, 24 June 1943.
103 McConnell, 2 July 1943.
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143 M. LaPalme, 2 October 1943.
144 M. LaPalme, 7 December 1944.
145 M. LaPalme, 8 December 1944.
146 M. LaPalme, 20 February 1945.
149 M. LaPalme, 10 August 1943.
150 M. LaPalme, 1 January 1945.
151 M. LaPalme, 10 February 1945.
152 M. LaPalme, 28 February 1945.
153 M. LaPalme, 4 August 1944.
154 M. LaPalme, 28 March 1944.
155 M. LaPalme, 30 January 1945.
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