

Discovering the Contributions of Women Veterans: The Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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The Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project (WVHP) was established in 1998 as both a research collection and a project that honors the contributions women have made to U.S. military service. Housed at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), the overall collection grows each year with new oral histories, and the addition of letters and scrapbooks, recruiting posters and brochures, uniforms and artifacts. The Project locates women veterans to interview from news stories, veterans and their families who stumble upon the Project's Web site, and by word of mouth. The Project acquires materials as gifts from veterans or their survivors and by purchases of collections from vendors such as those found on eBay.

A major focus of the Project is to maintain a strong Web presence to promote and provide access to the collections. The Web site (<http://library.uncg.edu/dp/wv/>) contains more than 250 oral history transcripts; more than 1000 photographs; and more than 2,000 pages of scanned letters, recruiting brochures, and military documents. Additionally, the project is promoted through undergraduate class presentations, an annual luncheon, and



Inez Stroud, a member of the WAC ASF Band, poses with her saxophone at Ft. Des Moines, Iowa in 1943.

public exhibits. A central goal of the Project is to preserve this aspect of history and make it available for all types of research.

The archival research collections of the WVHP are used by a diverse group of patrons, including academic researchers, genealogists, and authors seeking illustrations for publications. The collections are used for "typical" academic historical research, as well as many other purposes. As curator of these collections, I respond to the research requests and I am constantly surprised at the variety of ways in which people use the collections.

Academic and Non-Academic Research

Academic researchers, especially historians, are the customary users of archives. At the WVHP, these researchers examine primary source materials such as correspondence, diaries, and oral history transcripts for their articles and books. For example, one doctoral researcher was searching for information concerning Korean War veterans' adjustment after their return to the home front and was having trouble finding information about women who had served during that period. Since relevant transcripts are available on the WVHP Web site, she was able to use these oral histories to gain the insight she needed for her research.

Some academicians have learned about the WVHP collections through collaboration with other academic departments. In May 2009, UNCG hosted the Feminist Theory and Music Symposium. Dr. Jill Sullivan, one of the presenters at the conference, visited the archives and was thrilled to find materials that supported her research on women's military bands. She reviewed the collection of Inez Stroud, a WWII Women's Army Corps (WAC) saxophonist, and requested copies of the manuscript materials and her oral history transcript.¹

The WVHP collections also serve research for non-academic writing. Emily Yellin researched our oral history transcripts and incorporated many of the women's stories into her 2004 book, *Our Mother's War: American Women at Home and at the Front during World War II*.²

The WVHP oral histories were also the basis of the play, *Star Spangled Girls*. In 2005, the WVHP commissioned Brenda Schleunes of the Touring Theater of North Carolina to create a theater piece in which five women veterans of WWII gather to share memories of their military experiences. The script is an amalgamation of the stories in thirty-one of the oral history interviews. The company still tours with the production around the Southeastern United States.

The Project receives questions from researchers around the world who discover the collections via the Internet. For example, the English National Trust was writing a book about the 74th General Hospital that had been based on the Tyntesfield estate near Bristol, England, during WWII. One of the veterans archived in the collection, U.S. Army nurse Alice Boehret, had been stationed there. The researchers asked for permission to quote from Boehret's oral history transcript and requested copies of her memoir and military materials.³

Undergraduate Instruction

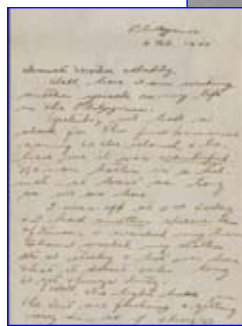
The WVHP is based at a university and consequently it is within the charge of the Project to integrate its collections into the curriculum. As curator, I find it very rewarding to educate students about this aspect of U.S. history and I love to watch their excitement at working with the materials. We conduct class sessions in conjunction with the University's Women and Gender Studies program, but because the collections contain such a variety of materials, they are also relevant to other academic curricula. For example, since there are over three hundred military uniform pieces in the collections, I also teach a session for an

undergraduate “History of Costume” class during which I set out uniforms for students to examine. Dr. Anna Gove’s WWI-era cape, which was custom-made by Abercrombie and Fitch, is always very popular with the students.

Genealogy & Family Research

It is not unusual for people who are trying to find information about the military experiences of their relatives to seek their answers in the WVHP collection. If they can no longer ask their mothers and grandmothers for their stories, they try to piece the stories together by interpreting their relative’s mementos. I have worked with these family members to decipher acronyms in official military documents, identify uniform patches and insignia, and decode signage visible in the background of photographs. Researchers have also been able to glean insights about their relatives’ military experiences from collections of veterans who had served in similar situations. One man wrote that reading the digitized letters of Annie Pozzyck⁴, an army nurse stationed at the same Philippines hospital as his father, gave him a better understanding of his father’s WWII experiences.

Portrait of Army Nurse Annie Sherrill Pozzyck, ca. 1943.



Letter from Annie Pozzyck from the Philippines to her parents, 6 February 1945.

Another patron spotted her aunt in a digitized photograph of a WAC Officer’s Candidate School Company group from the collection of Ethel Palma.⁵ She had been conducting research on her aunt but had been not been able to find out anything about her time in the military. I contacted Ms. Palma and put her in direct contact with the researcher.

In one particularly poignant interaction, a woman whose mother was on her deathbed contacted me. The dying woman had served in

the Navy Nurse Corps in WWII and had been the model for a recruiting poster illustrated by John Whitcomb. The daughter had found the image of the poster on the Project’s Web site.⁶ I immediately had a copy of the poster printed from our high-resolution scan of the original and sent it to the family so that the veteran could see it again before she passed away.

In addition to images of posters and photographs, families are also interested in obtaining copies of the recordings of oral histories so that they can hear the voice of a relative. Often these are the only recordings of these women’s voices that exist.



Recruiting poster for the Navy Nurse Corps, 1940s-1950s. Illustration by Jon Whitcomb.

Commemorative Events

Materials are also used for recognition and commemoration purposes. Recently, for example, the University of Minnesota requested usage of an image of General Clara Adams-Ender standing with Desmond Tutu⁷ for a feature article.

General Adams-Ender was scheduled to be their School of Nursing commencement speaker and to be awarded an honorary degree. The Project has also helped to honor women in granite form. An image of army nurses in a jeep from the Dorothy Baker collection⁸ was chosen by the Cold Spring Granite Company of Dubuque, Iowa, as part of a collage engraved on a pedestal for the Dubuque Veterans Memorial.

Non-traditional Usages

Patrons are also interested in the WVHP collections as an aid for creative pursuits. For example, a woman writing a screenplay about women in WWII purchased copies

of recruiting posters from the collections to hang in her office for creative inspiration. The Project has received inquiries from WWII re-enactors about women’s period uniforms and hairstyles as well as from people trying to identify patches on uniforms they own. There were even queries from a costume designer at the San Francisco Opera about WAC pants enclosures and from a Canadian museum curator who needed information about WAC uniforms to dress a 20-inch doll the museum planned to use in a display.

Institutional Collaborations

Another way the WVHP promotes its collections is through collaboration with other cultural and academic institutions. For example, it provided two images for the North Carolina State University Libraries “The GI Bill Experience at N.C. State” digital exhibit.⁹ Additionally, The Greensboro Historical Museum is incorporating information from the collection about local women veterans for an exhibit gallery entitled “Service and Sacrifice.”

Internet archival repositories can link to the Web sites of other archives so that information efforts are not duplicated. For example, the library of The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, highlights the WVHP Web site as an academic resource for their library’s users.

Outreach & Publicity

The WVHP is continually working to find creative ways to publicize itself. Because the posters, uniforms, and other artifacts in the collections are so visually striking, they have become excellent outreach tools. When local television stations plan a piece on Veterans Day or about the roles of women nurses for a D-Day anniversary piece, the Project staff will set up a display of materials for them to film. The WVHP is always ready to be interviewed by the media to promote its collections to the general public.

The WVHP has been invited to participate in public events throughout the state. Every year I design a small exhibit of artifacts, uniforms, publications and poster reproductions and travel to local events such as Fort Bragg’s Women’s History Month Celebrations in Fayetteville and the Chapel Hill VFW Memorial Day Event. The veterans and active duty soldiers at such events are very appreciative that the Project is preserving their history.

The WVHP Web site is our best outreach tool. The high quality image files on the site generate a great deal of interest, which translates into many usage requests, especially for the U.S. recruiting posters. Even though these posters and other recruiting materials are U.S. government documents, and as such are in the public domain, they are not easily available elsewhere, even to government and military agencies! For example, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs used the Project's scans of recruiting posters to make reproductions for VA hospitals around the country to commemorate Women's History Month.¹⁰

The WVHP has received requests for copies of images for a wide variety of purposes. For example, the Project has granted permission to use scans of a WAC recruiting poster for an Inter-press Service article on Sexual Harassment in the Military,¹¹ a Marine recruiting poster for an A&E Network tribute to the late actress and Marines veteran Bea Arthur,¹² a WWII WAC application to an author writing a children's book about the war,¹³ and a photograph to add to a display on WWII WAC parachute riggers at the Airborne and Special Operations museum in Fayetteville for their "Airborne Day" celebration.¹⁴

The WVHP has even become a part of popular culture. An image from the WAVES Frances Barringer Bailey Collection was used in the second season DVD collection of the television show, *Mad Men*, for the "John Glenn Time Capsule" special feature. The photograph is an aerial shot of a review parade at U.S. Naval Air Station, Corpus Christi, Texas, on April 13, 1946.¹⁵

The WVHP is dedicated to spreading the word about its collections, especially for educational purposes, and for that reason will generally grant permission for use of its collection with the understanding that the WVHP will be properly cited.

Conclusion

While the contributions of women have generally been overlooked in histories of the military, The Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project is making significant strides toward ensuring that the brave and dedicated women of the Armed Forces are included. Moreover, the Project's collections offer new insights into the evolution of views

on the roles of women in American society. As the custodian of the evidence of women veterans' lives and contributions, I am keenly aware of the importance of the materials with which I am entrusted, so I take seriously the responsibility to preserve, as well as to make these materials as accessible as possible. The WVHP will continue its dedicated work in finding ways to ensure that the lives and contributions of women veterans will not be forgotten.

References

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