



W U.S. ARMY WOMEN'S MUSEUM:

WAC symbols in the chapel window inside the Women's Museum at Fort Lee, Va.

*Telling the story
of those who
refused to sit idle*

By Sgt. Samuel J. Phillips

This statue was commissioned in 1992 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of women serving in the Army. It stood in the garden at the WAC Museum at Fort McClellan, Ala., until it was transported to the U.S. Army Women's Museum at Fort Lee.



While still prevented from serving in combat roles, women have been an integral part of the U.S. Army since its inception. From Margaret Corbin to Deborah Samson, from the 6888th Postal Battalion to Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester, all of their stories are told at the U.S. Army Women's Museum.

The museum first opened as the Women's Army Corps Museum on May 14, 1955, at Fort McClellan, Ala., said Françoise B. Bonnell, the museum's education curator. When the Base Realignment and Closure Commission decided to close Fort McClellan by the end of September 1999, the decision was made to move the museum to Fort Lee, Va.

As the home of the first regular Army WAC Training Center and School from 1948 to 1954, Fort Lee already had significant historical ties to the WAC, making it an excellent home for the museum. The current museum opened in October 2001.

It is the history contained within the museum, not the history of the museum itself, that makes it a place that everyone should visit, Bonnell said. There is no other place that paints a clearer picture of how vital the service of women was throughout the history of the Army.

"In fact, this museum is the only museum in the world dedicated to retelling the story and contributions of women to the Army," Bonnell said. "And we are the only branch of the military



to have an entire museum dedicated to telling that story.”

One of the women portrayed in the museum’s exhibits is Margaret Corbin, who accompanied her husband, John, when he joined the Continental Army at the start of the American Revolution. As many Soldiers’ wives did, Corbin provided assistance by cooking, cleaning, doing laundry and nursing the wounded.

On Nov. 16, 1776, when Fort Washington, N.Y., was attacked by British and Hessian troops, Margaret found herself forced to take action in the face of the enemy. After the gunner John was assisting was killed, he took charge of the cannon and Margaret assisted him. Later, John was killed and Margaret, without any time to grieve the loss of her husband, continued to load and fire the cannon until she herself was severely wounded by grapeshot.

Margaret never fully recovered from her wounds and was left without the use of her left arm. In 1779, she became the first woman to receive a pension from the U.S. government as a disabled Soldier. Margaret continued to be included on regimental muster lists until the end of the war in 1783.

Another exhibit portrays Deborah Samson, who disguised herself as a man to join the Continental Army as “Robert Shurtliff” in May 1782. Chosen for the Light Infantry Company of the 4th Massachusetts Regiment, Samson fought in several skirmishes. On July 3, 1782, Samson received two musket balls in her thigh and an enormous

The WAC adopted Pallas Athene, Greek goddess of victory and womanly virtue, wise in peace and in the arts of war, as its symbol. Pallas Athene and the traditional “U.S.” were worn as lapel insignia.



“Have Stethoscope will travel”, painted by Stewart Wavell-Smith, hangs in the U.S. Army Women’s Museum and depicts a female medic providing aid.

cut on her forehead during a battle outside Tarrytown, N.Y.

Fearing that her secret would be revealed, Samson unsuccessfully begged her fellow Soldiers to not take her to the hospital. After the doctor treated her head wound, Samson left the hospital before he could attend to the musket balls. She then removed one of the balls herself with a penknife and sewing needle, but could not remove the second because it was too deep.

During the summer of 1783, Samson came down with malignant fever and her secret was discovered by Barnabas Binney, the doctor who treated her. However, instead of betraying her secret, Binney had Samson moved to his house, where his wife and daughters further treated her. After she fully recovered, Samson returned to the Army and was honorably discharged on Oct. 25, 1783, after a year and a half of service.

This scenario is more common than you would think, Bonnell said. “One of our most popular programs is about the 400 or so women who disguised themselves as men in order to join both the Confederate and Union Armies.”

It wasn’t until the early 1900s that the door was cracked open for women to officially serve in the military with the establishment of the Army Nurse Corps. On April 6, 1917, the United States entered World War I, at which time there were 403 nurses on active duty, including 170 Reserve nurses who had been ordered to duty

in 12 Army hospitals in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. One year later, that number grew to 12,186 nurses serving at 198 stations worldwide.

After the Army Nurse Corps came the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in 1917, then the Women's Army Corps in 1943. "When you go through our gallery you can see our history is very rich and the roles of women have drastically changed throughout the years," Bonnell said.

An exhibit that exemplifies Bonnell's words is the one of the 6888th Postal Battalion. The 6888th was a unit comprised entirely of black females that played a significant role in maintaining troop morale during World War II. The unit also made history as the only battalion of African-American women to go overseas.

"We try to look at things from an interesting perspective in the terms of the role of women, and also try to look for stories that are unique," Bonnell said. However, throughout the years, this task has grown harder and harder, she said.

"History is a business that runs about 30 years behind," said Robynne Dexter, an archivist at the museum. "It takes time for you as a Soldier to process all of the things that you did, get through your career, retire and then start looking back as anniversaries start to occur."

"Another issue is the fact that women in the military don't really see themselves as women; they see themselves as Soldiers," Bonnell said. "They don't think that what they are doing needs to be highlighted or documented for history."

One of the key factors to this problem is the ever narrowing gap between the jobs men and women perform on the battlefield, said Ronald Bingham, a technician at the museum. "The roles of women in the military are changing daily," he said. "They have changed ten-fold since the start of the Iraq War. Today, [women] man gun trucks. ... During the Vietnam War, in the 1967 timeframe, women were not issued fatigues; they worked in skirts and heels, basically the Class B uniform. Today, they can't go outside the forward operating base without their Kevlar and individual body armor."

One of the best examples of this change is portrayed in the Raven 42 exhibit on Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester, the first woman to receive a Silver Star since World War II.

On March 20, 2005, the supply convoy that Hester's military police team was guarding was ambushed near Salman Pak, Iraq.



The Raven 42 exhibit depicts Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester, the first woman to receive a Silver Star since World War II, taking action after the convoy her Military Police team was escorting was ambushed.



This display shows various uniforms and equipment that have been used by women in the Army.

According to the Army citation accompanying her Silver Star, Hester "maneuvered her team through the kill zone into a flanking position, where she assaulted a trench line with grenades and M203 rounds," after insurgents hit the convoy with a barrage of fire from machine guns, AK-47 assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades.

"She then cleared two trenches with her squad leader where she engaged and eliminated three [anti-Iraqi forces] with her M4 rifle. Her actions saved the lives of numerous convoy members," the citation said.

The museum at first was just going to display a mannequin. They then decided that they wanted to do something a little bigger, Bingham said. "We started developing it, and it got bigger and bigger," he said. "When we started talking to her, she said she really didn't want it to be just about her ... because she didn't get her Silver Star without her squad. She wanted the exhibit to tell the entire story."

"I love the Raven 42 exhibit that tells the story of Leigh Ann Hester because it represents the future," Bonnell said. "I would have to say that, out of all the exhibits, that one is sort of the quintessential launching pad for what the museum will look like 30 years from now, because Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom have and continue to change the roles of women on the battlefield, policies and the attitudes of society."

And, it is the future that the museum is really focusing on, Bonnell said. "We are hoping that through our exhibits and education programs that we can intrigue people," she said. "Right now our greatest challenge is convincing young ladies and men that are out there right now serving, that small objects they think are unimportant are actually going to be very important and need to be kept and preserved."

Bonnell said many women in the Army don't realize that one day someone is going to be looking at those items that they used every day and think, "Wow, this is really special." Without those artifacts, there wouldn't be a museum and a huge piece of

American history would go untold, she said. 🇺🇸

For more information on the U.S. Army Women's Museum, or to discuss donating artifacts, visit www.awm.lee.army.mil or call (804) 734-4327.

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