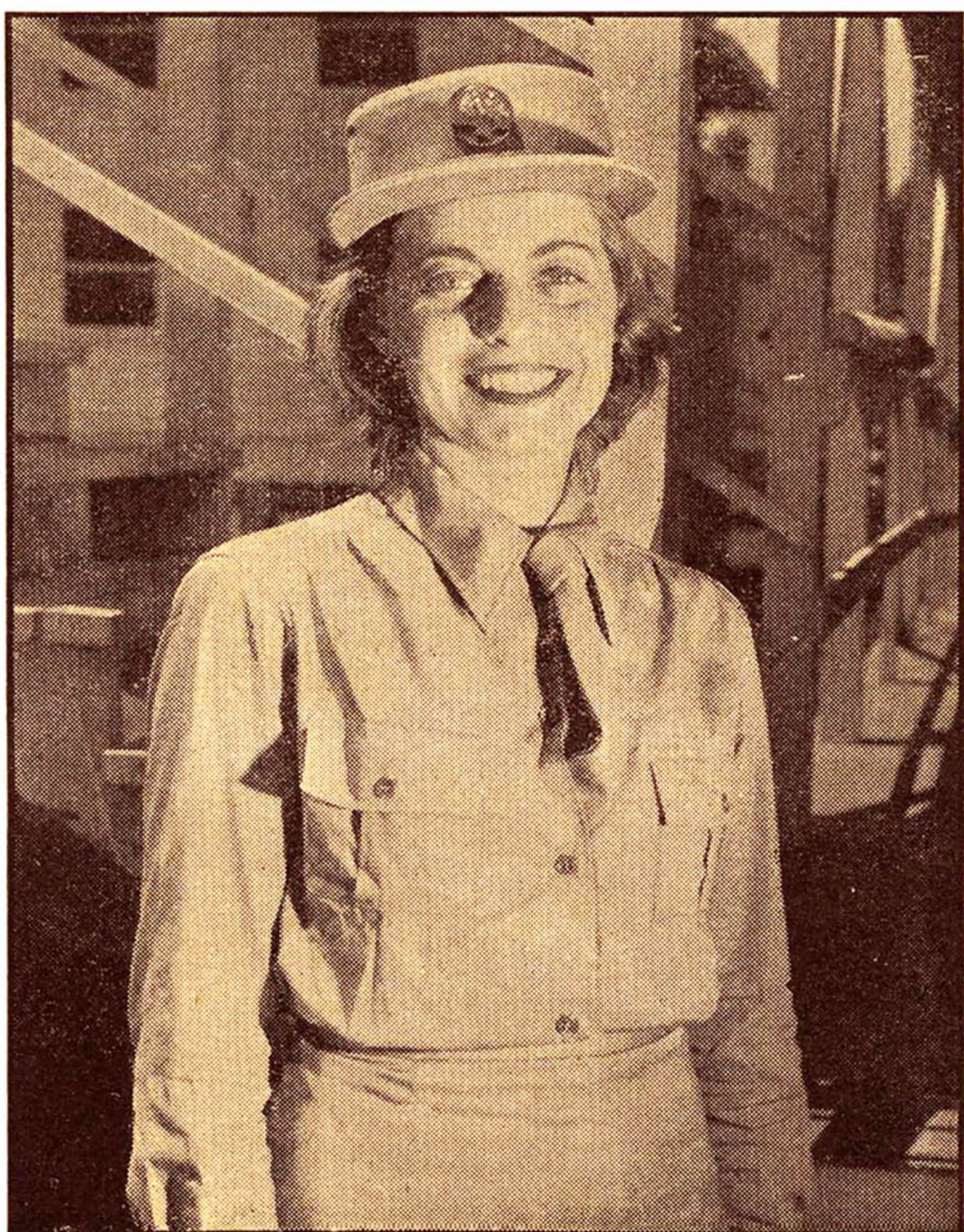


Newsweek

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Newsweek Synthetic Waac Sample Six-Day Slice of Training Routine



Waac for a week: Vera Clay

When the Army invited NEWSWEEK to assign a woman writer to take a six-day tour of duty with the Waacs, going through the entire beginning routine except for taking the oath and shots in the arm from the medicos, we assigned Vera Clay of our Washington Bureau to do the job. The story which follows carries Miss Clay's random impressions of life among the lady soldiers who are releasing men for combat duty.

Along with fourteen other magazine, radio, and newspaper women, I learned firsthand what it means to become a Waac. With us on the train from Washington to Fort Oglethorpe, Ga., were seventeen awe-struck and tired regular Waac recruits. These regulars had taken the oath of allegiance. We were just synthetic Waacs on a six-day junket. The Army saw to it, though, that we received a concentrated version of training. They put us through the paces at double time.

En Route: The first thing I learned about the Army was its traveling regulations: two in a lower and one in an upper berth. I was assigned to a lower but adjusted myself quickly to the rigors of war. Our regular Waac recruits were model Pullman travelers. They gazed into space and were very quiet—probably from fatigue.

My second lesson was a lecture from the Waac lieutenant in charge. She stood at the head of the aisle and intoned these rules: "There is a bar car. You may go there, but please drink soft drinks or one beer. Be careful of the strangers you talk to, and always remember that you are a Waac." I went to the bar with another representative of the free press. We played

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a chaste game of rummy, drank two lemonades (with cherries), and talked to one stranger — an Army public-relations man assigned to accompany us on the trip. Before 11 p.m. (bed time for the Waacs) we started to undress all over the place only to discover a very surprised colonel and a somewhat shocked general in the vicinity—the only male fringe on the petticoat contingent.

At 10:30 a.m. we pulled into Chattanooga, hot, disheveled, and dusty. We were broken in gently and escorted with pomp and ceremony to an Army truck. The truck had all the maneuverability of a jeep with the same back-breaking results. When we stopped at Fort Oglethorpe, a soldier helped us down. He said that in five months he had held 3,000 Waacs in his arms and judged the average weight to be an unofficial 135 pounds. He looked happy in his job.

Arrival: We were dumped at the Checking Station for our first “at camp lesson in the military. We lined up at attention in a shifting, zigzagging line. We learned then that if a fly settles on a Waac’s nose, it stays. Checking Station routine is snappy and to the point. Here we signed our names for the umpteenth time, received a United States Army comb, a toothbrush scientifically sealed in cellophane, three man-sized turkish towels, and name cards. We had the essentials—we were in. Then: “Get your bags, girls. You’re going to your Reception Battalion Company.”

¶ Early stages of becoming a Waac are done to the rhythmic cadence of COMPANEEE, (pause throw ¶ weight slightly forward, but don’t topple over FORWARD MARCH—TWO, THREE FOUR. DON’T RUSH THE CADENCE, GIRLS. KEEP I-T D-O-W-N, TWO, THREE, FOUR. IN——CLINE TOWARD THE LEFT, TWO, THREE, FOUR. It’s a sing-song drone but soon you fail to navigate on your own power unless you are propelled by this beat. Someone told me later that I was expected to cover 120 steps to the minute and lift my tired feet 2 inches from the ground when I marked time.

We waited in a queue to have chow dished up. It was good, solid chow (beef stew, succotash, mixed-green salad, bread, rich butter, marble cake, water, topped off with a salt tablet to keep us from caving in from heat exhaustion). Each of us ate from a large aluminum tray, conveniently divided into compartments. After mess I elbowed my way to the door where three oversized garbage cans stood. Carefully, I dumped the liquids into one can, the solids into another, and stray papers into a third; stacked all the silverware (imitation), deposited the tray, and was happily exiting when one of the KP (Kitchen Patrol) detail called me back. I had thrown some of the solids into the liquids. Penalty: I had to fish it out by hand.

¶ At the clothing warehouse we were measured for fit. In one hand we clutched

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“civvies.” With the other we contorted our perspiring bodies into skirts, shirts, bilious cotton stockings, and olive-drab underwear. I insisted I wore a size 10; the Army insisted I wore a size 12. In less than an hour we were tightly sealed and delivered Waacs, checked out of the warehouse in shirt, skirt, and tie harness, with regimental headgear firmly planted half way between the hairline and brow, legs swathed in cotton, and feet in brown, low-heeled boots (mine were 1/2 size too large, 1 size too wide). Though I felt strait-jacketed in my uniform I discovered that the regular Waacs love them. They gripe loudly about the fit but gallantly sing: “And her favorite dress was red—oh me, oh my, that ain’t G.I.” In general, the regular trainees seem straightforward, cooperative, and cheerful. Their spirit of camaraderie is a cross between Girl Scout loyalty and feverish faith in the Waac.

¶ At an orientation lecture we learned about saluting. There are 29 do’s and don’ts in saluting. For instance, it’s G.I. (OK) to peer into an automobile and salute if an officer is in it. It isn’t G.I. to stop dead in your tracks. Salute officers, the colors, etc., etc. But don’t salute if your arms are full. It’s undignified.

¶ Waacs have learned the Army technique for discarding cigarettes. Split them down the center, scatter the tobacco to the winds, roll up the white paper, and toss them away like spitballs. This complicated maneuver saves “police duty” later—a polite term for hand collection of trash.

¶ At five-thirty of the first day we “fell out” for retreat—one of the most impressive and beautiful sights at Waac camp. Headed by an eighteen-piece band, company after company of Waacs, more than 5,000 strong marched smartly in step. Waacs march with precision, take pride in their company guidons.

¶ After supper Waacs write letters, go to the Post movies, the Service Club (where there are many Waacs and few soldiers), attend language classes, or just sit. We just sat exhausted outside the latrine—the all-important meeting place in Army life. The little leisure Waacs have is spent in and around the latrine where they wash, iron, do their hair, etc. All grapevine rumors originate there. We watched them hang their clothes and listened to them talk. When a button hung loosely from



The synthetic Waacs weren't so chipper when they started out. Here Vera Clay (second from left, seated) typifies the rather woebegone mood

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my shirt next day I found out the all-importance of attending to uniforms and other tidy details. Fingering the limp button, a lieutenant said: "Do you want this?" I said yes. She tore it off and handed it to me. If I'd said no the same thing would have happened.

¶ Before bedtime we had to learn how to make Army beds. They can be made three ways: the white way, the brown way, the pie-bed way. Brown is for weekdays—square corners, a 6-inch space from top of bed to blanket—the blanket covers the pillow. White is for Saturday inspection—square corners, a 6-inch space, meticulously measured with the G.I. toothbrush (exactly 6 inches), and a great deal of hocus-pocus with the pillow and the top sheet. Pie bed is the bed your companions playfully make for you. It is a mess.

¶ I disintegrated into bed feeling sorry for my aching legs and tortured feet and promptly fell asleep. An hour later I heard voices shouting: "FALL OUT FOR FIRE DRILL, FALL OUT FOR FIRE DRILL!" With nothing but what God gave me on my back, I stumbled out of bed, wrapped myself Hiawatha-fashion in a blanket and really "fell out." Outside were those few who are always on time. The rest of the girls looked like startled fawns. Because I was two minutes late, we had to repeat the drill.

In the Army: The second day and days thereafter were routine. The tempo was faster than a six-day bicycle race:

- 6 a.m.—Cannon shot to wake you
- 6:17—Lights glare on in barracks
- 6:30—After a masterful struggle you are dressed and at attention
- 7—March to mess
- 7:30—Make beds, wash latrines, dust, police grounds
- 8-12—Classes and close-order drill
- 12—More chow
- 1-4:30—Classes and physical education
- 5-5:30—Mess
- 9—Lights out in barracks
- 11—Bed check (and you had better be there)

¶ Stage No. 2 of processing: We said "ah" to the doctor and taxed our minds for three hours taking the AGCT (Army General Classification Test) and radio and mechanical aptitude tests. The dot-dash-dot, dash-dash-dot coming from the phonograph sounded like a whippoorwill to me and if you have aptitude you are supposed to be able to distinguish the difference in sounds. I have no aptitude. On the mechanical aptitude I recognized an egg beater and a hammer but wasn't sure. By this time I had developed an inferiority complex. The Army, knowing this, rushed me IN CADENCE for a background personality interview. In hushed tones, the interviewer and I discussed my hobbies, occupation, background, etc., which were all scrupulously entered on the record.

¶ We went to several classes: defense against chemical warfare, current events, and social hygiene. In social hygiene we learned with a shock that civilians are more concerned about Waac morals than are the Waacs themselves. Waacs get a series of straightforward lectures on social diseases. Any woman who has pride or decency, we were told, will avoid promiscuity. For every Waac we saw at a hotel, in a bar, or strolling in the woods, we saw

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50 who were spending Saturday evening in their barracks busily engaged ironing their shirts.

After a week at Fort Oglethorpe I came back to Washington and brought with me a new and profound respect for the Waac. Personally, I can smartly salute the colors at six paces, march in formation without tripping, make a snappy bed, and iron a shirt. To be a Waac requires plenty of stamina and courage. The process is tough, the work hard, the discipline stern. That doesn't bother the Waacs—they love it.

