

**Fashions For A Woman With A Future:
Women, World War II and the Language of Uniforms**

Alexandra Elias

Arizona and Algiers

“Fashion Horizons” is a 1940 TWA-sponsored fashion reel featuring several up-and-coming Paramount “starlets” travelling around the southwest United States. While the film is intended to highlight TWA commercial air travel it focuses on the clothes, particularly a “patriotic dress complete with chevrons, evidencing the military influence in 1941 fashions.” The model in the dress, which features red chevrons against navy blue fabric, primly sips her martini, leans back, and smiles at the camera.¹ She is suave, sophisticated, and assertive—we can tell from her wardrobe. The year before *Life Magazine* had published a fashion shoot inspired by an accompanying article on the growing Navy. Middy collars were predicted to make a comeback and military mottos marked the visors of stylish hats produced by Lilly Daché.² Military build-up and fashion trends intersected.

Oveta Culp Hobby was no starlet, but knew a thing or two about marketing. This knowledge landed her a job in the Army Bureau of Public Relations Women’s Interest Section.³ In 1942 Hobby was promoted directly to Colonel of the new Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps.⁴ One tour of inspection took her to Algiers in January 1944—where women slept in full gear and used their steel helmets for bathtubs as well as protection.⁵ These conditions were unprecedented for female servicemembers. The trip to Algiers was newsworthy enough that Hobby fielded an interview with the *New York Times*. The reporter was interested only in the important issues:

Alexandra Elias

“Hobby. . . denied today that recent Wac recruiting had been a “flop”. . . When it was mentioned to her that an unidentified Republican Senator had blamed the Wac uniform for keeping down enlistment and she was asked if a change was contemplated, she said: “I would doubt it. We have quite a supply on hand.”⁶

Male G.I.s needed rifles made, planes delivered, scarves knit, war bonds bought and reinforcements at the front. What the WAC needed was a more flattering jacket.

Why Uniforms?

Military history is important, if unfashionable. Uniforms are arguably the *least* important aspect of military history. Yet there is nothing frivolous about such frivolousness. Institutional clothing is a deliberate symbol of identity. To study uniforms is to study how the military wishes to symbolically construct its members. By dressing its members uniformly, a given military hierarchy is making its expectations of its members known—in their very appearance, they represent the organization to their community. It is also important to involve civilian fashion when reading uniforms. Just as it is ill-conceived to separate a military from the culture that created it, it is pointless to examine a uniform outside of its fashion context.⁷

The recruitment of women into regular military service represented a dramatic shift in American practices. It is important to examine both institutional decisions and public reactions as a means of understanding this transition through dress. Women’s uniforms became an obsession among Americans during World War II because they provided a safe vocabulary for larger issues; that is, what society expected of and feared from its female soldiers. While several military organizations recruited women, I will focus upon the Army and Navy.⁸ I will also emphasize women working in a nonmedical capacity.⁹

WACs, WAVES, and SPARS

World War II was the first time the United States military recruited women on a large scale. Women were accepted into the WACs (Women's Army Corps),¹⁰ the Navy as WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service), the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, and the Coast Guard as SPARS (Semper Paratus, Always Ready). Recruits were assigned to a variety of traditionally male non-combat positions as well as more conventional office work.¹¹

While the new female forces were created not to empower women but rather to utilize this last untapped source of personnel, pure utility did not lead to the catchiest recruiting slogans. Materials to recruit women emphasized service itself as much as reinforcement. "Share the Deeds of Victory," suggested a WAVES poster.¹² "This Is My War Too!" echoed the WAAC.¹³ The archetypal Wac or Wave is a full-fledged member of the organization, with her own individual career and adventure in mind. An Army promotional booklet advertised seven specialist schools.¹⁴ Each of the Wacs depicted within is engaged in a technical rather than clerical activity. Recruitment materials thus emphasized comparative expertise with male servicemen.

Equality and new occupations are exactly what popular media tended *not* to emphasize. Reporters could seemingly not help but be more interested in aesthetics. Ruth Cowan of the *Evening Independent* praised the bravery and technical expertise of war workers while insisting that "Madame, your uniform! That's the feminine history of 1942."¹⁵ The reporter in Algiers does not ask whether it is the *job itself* that could be causing retention problems. Forget what they were doing: did they look good doing it?

“Fashions for a Woman With a Future”

Alexandra Elias

1940s fashion was complicated by fabric rationing and general conditions of wartime. Practicality and a business-like, menswear-inspired look were increasingly in vogue and *Vogue*. *New York Times* fashion columnist Virginia Pope described the fashionable woman as “sophisticated and subdued;” designers Hattie Carnegie and Henri Bendel stressed neutral colors and narrow suiting.¹⁶

Simultaneously, the German occupation of France had effectively cut off America from Parisian fashions. There were few tears shed over this development, at least in New York:

“It will be readily recalled that with the fall of Paris there was much enthusiastic talk about America. . . becoming the new fashion center of the world. There was, of course, much sincere regret expressed that the baton had to be passed from enslaved France to other hands. Yet the general public and more intimately all the varied elements of the needle trades could not repress a feeling of excitement. . .”¹⁷

At this point there was relatively little couture clothing made in the United States. While most American women could not afford such luxuries, it was largely from French couture styles that readymade clothing took inspiration.¹⁸ American ready-to-wear designers now had to rely on themselves for inspiration. While *Life* would later lament that designers “must concentrate on styles which, at even \$100 or more, will produce volume sales,” it nevertheless highlighted wholesale designers most prominently in its list of important names in fashion.¹⁹

It is no wonder that planners would eagerly turn to popular readymade designers when developing uniforms. It was deemed important that servicewomen never be dowdy; it was decided that Waacs would wear a topcoat designed by Philip Mangone and a light overcoat by

Maria Krum.²⁰ The WAVES chose Mainboucher to design their overall outfit.²¹ These choices were publicized: the anonymous editor of an early *Life* article considered it equally important to include models displaying three WAAC uniforms as images of packed recruiting depots.²²

While the larger WAC was limited to issuing regulation sizes, the much smaller WAVES and SPAR forces offered tailored uniforms at normal clothing stores.²³ This was not a new system; *Sideboy*, the male Navy Midshipmen's School cruisebook, advertised custom uniforms available at F.R. Tripler & Co., Lord and Taylor and Browning King & Co. among other well known New York clothiers.²⁴ Historically the Navy had fostered a more upper-crust image in its officer corps in dress and mannerisms, and the WAVES—including enlisted members--were depicted as a particularly classy part of that circle.²⁵ The first *Life* article depicting a WAVES uniform was about just that—the uniform. A model in the new outfit is posed in Mainboucher's studio, being admired by the designer himself.²⁶

The Army also pursued glamour. “Miss Victoria Gleeson” is a fictional young woman featured in *The Waacs*, a sort of recruiting-novelization-come-manual.²⁷ Vicky is a 1940 Smith graduate and a “real dash,” a “symbol of the new independence of women all over the nation,” with a job in public relations.²⁸ She is issued a “smart khaki-colored dress cap fashioned after the French kepi” and blouses that are “both very good-looking, so Vicky thinks.”²⁹ While she is instructed that tilting her hat back in a more stylishly feminine style “may look coy to you, but to the experienced and sophisticated Army eye it looks ridiculous,” fashion is nevertheless emphasized.³⁰

Fashion was deemed important enough to take the lead in some advertising. An ad in the *New York Times* pictured the Wacs as fashion plates wearing “the smartest suit in the world right

Alexandra Elias

now.” These were “Fashions for a Woman with a Future.”³¹ “How to Serve Your Country in the WAVES or the SPARS,” advertised “\$200 worth of clothes free. . . The trim uniform was especially designed by the famous stylist Mainboucher to flatter every figure and make you look—and feel—your best!”³²

Uniform as Obsession

In Army warehouses supply troubles trumped image. Everyone agreed that a Wac looked better in a well fitted and useful uniform, but if none were available she’d have to make do with what was on hand. In its first winter a Daytona Beach headquarters company sent its personnel to Fort Dix in New Jersey wearing “summer cottons.” They stepped off the train in the middle of a snowstorm and were immediately bundled up in blankets by the angry receiving unit. Daytona Beach simply had no cold weather clothing to issue the transfers.³³ This situation was not unique.

The public was concerned about these inadequate uniforms. However, the definition of what constituted inadequacy differed. Emilee Blair of Poteau, Oklahoma wrote to *Life* regarding a table of WAAC clothing issue that they had published in the previous issue:

My curiosity overwhelms me and compels me to ask, what are the girls going to wear for skirts? I will thank you for an early reply so that I will know that the girls are properly clothed before winter draws on.³⁴

She was assured by the editor that each Waac would receive three khaki skirts. The tone suggests that Waacs needed not only skirts, but *proper* skirts. Improper garb was an affront to cultural norms—Waacs in unfashionable uniforms would be especially prone to disrespect.

Military nurses did not share this problem. While Army nurses served overseas in such dangerous conditions that they were issued actual combat fatigues, the uniforms that they would

have worn stateside were more conventional.³⁵ While in 1943 their dress uniform was changed to that of other female soldiers, they retained unique insignia and a “cap which is flat in back, softer, more feminine and more comfortable looking.”³⁶ Nurse uniforms were no more traditionally feminine in cut than those of their nonmedical counterparts before their merger, yet this insistence on a distinctly “feminine” hat remained..³⁷

While the Nurse Corps looked for distinction, the Army issued a shirt and tie for a more “military” appearance closer to the male uniform. Regardless, regulations initially emphasized fashion over function:

“Tucking the necktie into the shirt in the Army fashion was likewise forbidden because it added a certain undesirable bust fullness to individuals not in need of additional fullness in that respect. This provision had. . . to be dropped in favor of the original system, for Wacs complained that the necktie hanging loose flapped in their eyes, became caught in machinery, was dipped in soup. . . The extra bust fullness was eventually deemed the lesser evil.”³⁸

They must look feminine, but they must also function like soldiers; what constituted a proper combination was up for debate. As similar suiting was in style, the uniform itself was not particularly daring. Still, nurses drew far less flack for similar garb. Was the mere *intention* to resemble male soldiers more important than specific tailoring?

The April 20, 1942 cover of *Life* is rather simple. A woman in loose pants and a jacket sits on a fence, making a hitchhiking gesture with one hand. Beneath her in a simple block font: SLACKS. “As men are being warned that two-pants suits vests and trouser cuffs will soon be

Alexandra Elias

only a memory, women are breaking out in a rash of pants.”³⁹ On the editorial page of the next issue James Hsieh of Raleigh, North Carolina appealed to taste. “An average woman, 5ft. 3 in. in height and weighing 140lb., would look like a sack of potatoes.”⁴⁰

When the Associated Press published an article about the Los Angeles grandfather who advised his heir not to associate with women who drink, smoke or wear slacks, it is clearly tongue in cheek—but notable.⁴¹ When the *St. Petersburg Times*’ Mrs. Beeckman insisted that good manners meant one should not “loll around in negligees or pajamas or pants when you should be wearing a dress,” it portrayed slacks as distinctly unsuitable for young women out in polite society.⁴² When Hobby insisted that her subordinates wear only skirts barring the field, she was reacting against what a popular option among her recruits. Military fashion became a public issue. When Emilee Blair worries that Waacs may not be properly dressed for winter, she *may* fear that the omission of skirts is an implication of slacks. And what could slacks mean, but the adoption of unladylike characteristics?

This may seem like pure speculation, an overeager researcher cherrypicking articles that serve her purposes. But the uniform obsession of the American media regarding the WAC and WAVES coexists with a near absence of coverage of more dramatic sexual scandals. While rumors briefly spread of women being issued condoms, the issue by and large disappears from major publications afterward.⁴³ Wacs were routinely accused of crimes ranging from sexual promiscuity to lesbianism to the point that it negatively affected recruitment. Allegations of lesbianism were brought on partly by a perceived “mannishness” of the uniform. The popular soldiers’ comic “Male Call” featured its protagonist Miss Lace mistakenly sleeping with a woman. “They should have more distinctive insignia on those WAC uniforms!” she complains.⁴⁴

Most allegations of sexual misconduct came from soldiers themselves. “I don't want you to have a thing to do with them,” wrote one man overseas, “Because they are the biggest hours. . . . Lousey, boy, they are lousey ... [sic]”⁴⁵ Such scandal coverage that existed was largely limited to debunking and declarations that “that womanpower is essential . . . in total war.”⁴⁶ If these allegations were as widespread as internal Army histories suggest, the only reason for their omission is censorship.

Back to Algiers. The reporter cannot ask Hobby whether these allegations are having an effect on recruitment. Uniforms are fair game. A public obsession with uniforms may have masked these broader concerns. The WAC fought back in the same language, uniforms, eventually issuing off-duty dresses, allowing lighter coloured accessories to be worn with the uniform and engaging in a prolonged argument with Supply about issuing girdles.⁴⁷ Female soldiers continued to push boundaries, but would look ladylike while doing so. Clothing provided a language in which to couch concerns regarding femininity—what constituted a “smart” woman, and what her dress said about her, was a safe topic.

“Women At War”

“Women at War” is a 1943 film produced by Warner Brothers. It combines recruitment with a narrative following fictional Waacs through basic training. As “clothing and equipment are of first importance,” the women are shown in civilian dress progressing through the line to be issued uniforms. At this point the film cuts to a complete dress uniform, laid flat on an orange background. Then other uniform items are arranged in regimented rows. Finally, makeup. “Yes, even cosmetics. . .” reads the narrator, “they can be purchased at the post-exchange, for a girl doesn't lose her femininity when she dons a uniform.”⁴⁸

Alexandra Elias

The Army stressed that a Waac is under no fewer style obligations than a civilian woman. This scene *weaponizes* the uniform. The individual items are arranged for filming as would be tanks, planes, or ammunition—whereas the combat branches of the Army had been engaged in finding enough weapons for the fight, the obsession of the Wacs was finding a decent outfit. Perhaps the reporter who stopped Hobby in Algiers was on the right track; while the average G.I. fought with his rifle, uniform was a critical element of the WAC arsenal.

Notes

¹H D Donahue, *Fashion Horizons*, Transcontinental and Western Air, Hollywood, 1940.

²“Modern Living: Fashion Designers Find New Style Ideas In Navy,” *Life Magazine*, 28 October 1940, p. 83.

³M E Treadwell, *United States Army in WWII Special Studies: The Women’s Army Corps*, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, 1954, p. 29.

⁴The Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was the Woman Army Corps’ (WAC’s) precursor. The transition to the WAC and away from “auxiliary” status was to ease integration with the Army at large, as occupations of Waacs had increased far beyond the planners’ original intent. However, an in-depth discussion of this expansion and subsequent transition is not the intent of this paper. I will use WAAC and WAC when temporally appropriate, but the transition had little to no effect on uniforms beyond some minor changes in insignia. “Waac” and “Wac”—and “Wave,” the Navy equivalent—are the slang terms for individual female servicemembers, which I also use where contextually appropriate.

⁵J Barrett Litoff & D C Smith, *We’re in This War, Too: World War II Letters From American Women in Uniform*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, p. 124.

⁶“Col. Hobby Denies WAC Drive Failed.” *The New York Times*, 20 January 1944.

⁷N Joseph, *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication Through Clothing*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1986, p. 144; R P Rubinstein, *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1995, pp. 65-67.

⁸The Women Air Service Pilots (WASPs) were a much more daring organization in terms of both organization and dress, and worthy of independent research. However they were never officially incorporated into the Army Air Corps and were disbanded shortly before the end of the war. I exclude them for brevity.

⁹It may seem odd to deemphasize nurses, as nearly all military women before the 1940s were in medical fields. The problem with nurses is that they nurture—that is, they were in an occupation that was by the 1940s so thoroughly gendered that “male nurse” was an oxymoron. This is not to say that nurses are a less important research topic in general because of their more traditional jobs. This is history, not a girl power rally. However, nurses tended to be separated from the military at large not only by occupation but organization.

¹¹This was not the military’s original intention. In the Army the first concepts would have limited women to clerical and menial labor, and were based on the Civilian Conservation Corps example rather than the military itself. Treadwell, 15.

¹²J Falter, “Share the Deeds of Victory,” Poster, U.S. Navy, 1943.

¹³D V Smith, “WAAC: This is My War Too!” Poster, Recruiting Publicity Bureau, U.S. Army, 1943.

¹⁴N Shea, *The Waacs*, Harper and Brothers Publishing, New York, 1943, p. 141.

¹⁵R Cowan, “Women in Uniform Is 1942 Feminine History,” *The Evening Independent*, 7 December 1942.

- ¹⁶ V Pope, "Fashion Shows Two Wartime Faces; The Sophisticated and the Subdued," *The New York Times*, 5 March 1942.
- ¹⁷ H H F Jayne, "Renaissance in Fashion 1942." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 37, No. 5, May 1942, p. 122.
- ¹⁸ L Welters and P A Cunningham, *Twentieth-Century American Fashion*, Berg Publishers, New York, 2005, p. 100.
- ¹⁹ "American Designers," *Life Magazine*, 8 May 1944, p. 63.
- ²⁰ Treadwell., p. 38.
- ²¹ N Baldwin, "Waves Uniforms Stir Enthusiasm At 'Fashion' Show in Washington," *The New York Times*, 29 August 1942.
- ²² "WAAC: U.S. Women Troop to Enlist in Army's First All-Female Force," *Life Magazine*, 8 June 1942, p. 26.
- ²³ L D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, p. 154.
- ²⁴ *Sideboy*, USNR Midshipmen's School, New York, December 1944, pp. 196-238. Lord and Taylor also advertised a military lounge, where officers could enjoy a drink and a smoke while pondering their next uniform purchase.
- ²⁵ For example, much was made in the press of WAVES being trained in dorms on elite women's college campuses, while WACS attended a female version of boot camp on normal Army bases. Meyer, 66.
- ²⁶ "WAVES Uniforms," *Life Magazine*, 21 September 1942, p. 49.
- ²⁷ While not an official publication, *The Waacs* features a forward by Oveta Culp Hobby—a sign of approval if ever there was one.
- ²⁸ Shea, p. 34.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 116.
- ³¹ "Fashions For a Woman With a Future," *The New York Times*, 28 February 1944.
- ³² "How to Serve Your Country in the WAVES or the SPARS," U.S. Navy, Washington, 1942, p. 10.
- ³³ Treadwell, 149.
- ³⁴ "Letters to the Editors: WAACS," *Life Magazine*, 28 September 1942, p. 2.
- ³⁵ R Cowan, "New Field Uniforms For Nurses Designed for Invasion," *St. Petersburg Times*, 19 December 1943.
- ³⁶ "New Nurse's Uniform," *The Science News-Letter*, Vol. 43, No. 7, 13 February 1943, p. 102.
- ³⁷ While previous nurse dress uniforms were blue rather than olive drab, they were strikingly similar in cut to those of the WAAC/WAC.
- ³⁸ Treadwell, 535.
- ³⁹ "Men Lose Their Pants To Slack-Crazy Women," *Life Magazine*, 20 April 1942, p. 63.
- ⁴⁰ "Letters to the Editors," *Life Magazine*, 11 May 1942, p. 4.
- ⁴¹ "Shun Girls Who Wear Slacks, or Smoke, Will Says," *The Milwaukee Journal*, 21 August 1940.
- ⁴² M Beekman, "Good Manners," *St. Petersburg Times*, 16 July 1941.
- ⁴³ Meyer, 23.
- ⁴⁴ Meyer, 154.
- ⁴⁵ Treadwell, 212.
- ⁴⁶ "The Press: O'Donnell's Fall," *Time Magazine*, 21 June 1943.
- ⁴⁷ Treadwell, 531.
- ⁴⁸ J Negulesco, "Women at War," Film recording, Warner Brothers, Hollywood, 1943.

Bibliography

- "American Designers." *Life Magazine*, 8 May 1944.
- Baldwin, N, "Waves Uniforms Stir Enthusiasm At 'Fashion' Show in Washington." *The New York Times*, 29 August 1942.
- Barrett Litoff, J & D C Smith, *We're in This War, Too: World War II Letters From American Women in Uniform*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1994.
- Beekman, M, "Good Manners." *St. Petersburg Times*, 16 July 1941.
- "Col. Hobby Denies WAC Drive Failed." *The New York Times*, 20 January 1944.
- Cowan, R, "Women in Uniform Is 1942 Feminine History." *The Evening Independent*, 7 December 1942.

Alexandra Elias

- Cowan, R, "New Field Uniforms For Nurses Designed for Invasion," *St. Petersburg Times*, 19 December 1943.
- Donahue, H D., *Fashion Horizons*. Film Recording, Transcontinental and Western Air, Hollywood, 1940.
- Falter, J, "Share the Deeds of Victory." Poster, U.S. Navy, 1943.
- "Fashions For a Woman With a Future." *The New York Times*, 28 February 1944.
- "How to Serve Your Country in the WAVES or the SPARS." U.S. Navy, Washington, 1942.
- Jayne, H H F, "Renaissance in Fashion 1942." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 37, No. 5, May 1942.
- Joseph, N, *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication Through Clothing*. Greenwood Press, New York, 1986.
- "Letters to the Editors." *Life Magazine*, 11 May 1942.
- "Letters to the Editors: WAACS." *Life Magazine*, 28 September 1942.
- "Men Lose Their Pants To Slack-Crazy Women," *Life Magazine*. 20 April 1942.
- Meyer, L D, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II*. Columbia University Press, New York, 1996.
- "Modern Living: Fashion Designers Find New Style Ideas In Navy." *Life Magazine*, 28 October 1940.
- "New Nurse's Uniform." *The Science News-Letter*, Vol. 43, No. 7, 13 February 1943.
- Negulesco, J, "Women at War." Film recording, Warner Brothers, Hollywood, 1943.
- Pope, V, "Fashion Shows Two Wartime Faces; The Sophisticated and the Subdued." *The New York Times*, 5 March 1942.
- Rubinstein, R P. *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture*. Westview Press, Boulder, 1995.
- Shea, N, *The Waacs*. Harper and Brothers Publishing, New York, 1943.
- "Shun Girls Who Wear Slacks, or Smoke, Will Says." *The Milwaukee Journal*, 21 August 1940.
- Sideboy*. USNR Midshipmen's School, New York, December 1944.
- Smith, D V, "WAAC: This is My War Too!" Poster, Recruiting Publicity Bureau, U.S. Army, 1943.
- "The Press: O'Donnell's Fall." *Time Magazine*, 21 June 1943.
- Treadwell, M E, *United States Army in WWII Special Studies: The Women's Army Corps*. U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, 1954.
- "WAAC: U.S. Women Troop to Enlist in Army's First All-Female Force." *Life Magazine*, 8 June 1942.
- "WAVES Uniforms." *Life Magazine*, 21 September 1942.
- Welters, L and P A Cunningham, *Twentieth-Century American Fashion*. Berg Publishers, New York, 2005.