

When Girls Are Soldiers

OVETA CULP HOBBY

AS THE WAR progresses, more and more girls still in high school will be facing important decisions concerning the various avenues of work and military service open to them.

Never before have such opportunities been available to women; never has woman-power been so urgently needed by industry and the military forces. And yet in spite of these great demands of the moment, there is general recognition in our society that these eager young people have an obligation to reflect thoughtfully on the needs of the future. What they do now will determine the balance in our social forces through the years to come. It may seem less dramatic to remain in school, but educators are on solid ground in insisting that the path of duty for the young American runs parallel to the line of preparation for future citizenship. For the serious problems of postwar reconstruction, we need a generation which is soundly trained, well-educated, and emotionally mature.

The same general qualifications ap-

pertain to service in the Women's Army Corps. In fact, much of the success of the Corps during its first year and even its recent entry into the Army of the United States must be attributed to the fact that the education and experience of its members enabled them to meet successfully and well-nigh automatically the demands of military life. In this particular, the statistics of the Corps are most impressive, a survey of the WAAC as of May, 1943, having shown 67 per cent to be high school graduates. Fourteen per cent of these were college graduates as well, while 38 per cent had taken some college work and others had attended trade or business school.

Although college is not a requirement for the officer candidate, college women have so far been the primary source of officers in the Corps. Trained in democratic schools for peacetime pursuits, the great majority of these women soldiers have adapted themselves most adequately to the discipline of military life in the wartime establishment and have converted their civilian skills to military uses with maximum efficiency.

The requirements for entry into the Corps are consistent with the general goals of American education in this century. These are, briefly: sound health and physical vitality; two years of high school plus a score of 70 on the Mental Alertness Test or of 80 where the school requirement is waived for unusual work experience; stability

A chance to join the armed forces of a nation has not always been a woman's privilege. Preparation for this new experience and an understanding of its full meaning for those who share in it may be greatly facilitated by our schools. In this article, Col. Oveta Culp Hobby, Director of the Women's Army Corps, discusses with educators the philosophy and goals of the WAC.

and emotional maturity. The age range is from 20 to 50 years.

Personality Qualifications for Army Success

As to specific personality qualifications, they are the same as make for an optimum success in civilian pursuits. However, the peculiar environment and demands of military service call for special adjustments and tend to highlight characteristics that might go unnoticed in civilian life where there is less disciplinary restriction and more personal choice of associates, living conditions, and vocational pursuits.

Foremost of all qualities needed for successful service in the WAC is adaptability. The lack of privacy, the necessity for living according to a precise schedule, and the insistence on conformity, all call for an unusual flexibility. The girl who has been pampered at home, the seclusive, withdrawn girl who has never joined in group activities as she grew up, the habitually aggressive and dominant girl, the girl who is so rigidly set in her daily habits and accustomed groove that she is disturbed by any change, will not find adjustment to the Corps an easy one. But the girl who has learned that the world does not revolve around her, who is prepared to accept personal restrictions cheerfully and objectively, who has tolerance and humor and a wholesome, easy disposition, will find in military service a challenging new life where individual prerogatives are replaced by the heartening experience of group solidarity.

Another essential quality is self-discipline. Probably one of the most important marks of an individual's ma-

turity is the way he has worked out his adjustment to authority. Service life calls for a high degree of self-control, of ability to restrain oneself even under trying conditions, of ability to take criticism without hurt feelings, of impersonal acceptance of orders.

If a girl's early experience at home or in school has been such that she grew up learning to view authority as a reasonable condition of ordered life, if she has learned to subordinate and defer her immediate desires for future ends, she will understand the necessity for Army regulations and procedure and willingly accept them. But if her experiences have made her resent or rebel against authority in whatever form—whether in the person of her parent or her teacher, of her school, the law, or the Army, as the case may be—if she has always been given what she wants when she wants it, she will have a most difficult time of it in the service.

Discipline and Soldiering

The best discipline is self-discipline. Ideally, the acceptance of regimentation is a conscious and intelligent act promoting a high degree of self-respect. It is just as important that a girl should not lose her mental or moral integrity by leaning too much on authority. The truly well-disciplined person will remain so in the absence of authority as well as in its presence. Such an individual will maintain her own standards at all times.

For the girl who is not sufficiently weaned from her home, Army regimentation can come to take the place of parental control. Though she may fit into her groove adequately enough as a soldier, she may never be able to as-

sume leadership but tend to remain a follower. Our officer material is carefully screened in this respect. An officer must not only accept authority, but exercise it. If she is insecure or too dependent on authority herself, she is apt to take any infraction of discipline as a personal challenge to her competence, reacting to it emotionally rather than objectively.

Compensations of Army Life

But for all the demands and restrictions of Army life, there are compensations—immeasurable ones. Perhaps the greatest of these is that which comes from the feeling of having a real share in the tremendous job the country is doing, of being an active part of the struggle. There is the stimulation of comradeship with others, the deep satisfaction that comes from working shoulder to shoulder with others having the same goal. The sense of identification with a force so much greater than oneself raises the smallest job to real significance. Not all can have the experience of serving abroad or of being placed in high positions. There is romance and adventure in the WAC but it is the romance primarily of hard work and service.

Experience has shown that the human factor is of vital importance, especially in an officer. In an interesting study made recently of some eight hundred auxiliaries and officer candidates, qualities such as sympathy, kindness, and human consideration headed the list of those voted most desirable in an officer. Interest in the welfare of others, genuine liking of people, unselfishness, loyalty to others, capacity for seeing each person as an individual, not just as a part

of the group—these occurred again and again. The ability to get on with people, to win their cooperation, is one of the most fundamental for success in the Corps.

Pre-induction Training

Educators have raised the question of what may be done by way of specific pre-induction training to equip high school girls for Army jobs. Space does not permit a detailed analysis of the subject here, nor can we consider the curricular adjustments and vocational courses so well developed by the High School Victory Corps and many of our colleges and trade schools. It may be worth emphasizing, however, that while training directed toward military needs is valuable and may lead to specialized assignment in the Corps—particularly in the field of clerical work where there is constant demand for personnel—these requirements and the methods of recruitment are subject to change, and individual students should obtain personal information from local recruiting agencies when they are ready to undertake special training. The Army attempts to utilize the technical skills of its personnel to the full, but the woman who enlists should realize that military needs rather than individual preferences must dictate assignments.

Nevertheless, it may be of interest to note that Wacs now fill 155 different jobs, and the list may be expanding. These fall into eight main categories: administrative and clerical; technical and professional; motor-vehicle drivers; food; mechanical, trade, and manual; communications; radio; stock and supply. The first two claim by far the largest percentage of the enlisted Corps.

Opportunities for officers lie in several directions: in administration and training of the Corps proper, calling for leadership capacity which implies insight and understanding of the strong and weak factors in human behavior and the direction of these; and administrative, technical, and professional work requiring highly skilled personnel through the Army generally.

When needed skills are not available among its personnel, the Army offers special military courses in its Specialists' Schools. These provide excellent training that can later be utilized in civilian life. Actually, the Army is a school of higher education—not only vocationally, but emotionally, intellectually, and socially as well. It offers opportunity for the development of leadership, the assumption of authority, the acceptance of discipline, and experience in working cooperatively with others. It gives, in effect, a course in character-building and in that sense provides a practice ground for future citizenship.

When Girls Help Make Democracy

There is probably no greater service that educators in secondary schools can do their students and the Corps at the same time than to make young women conscious of the character of the women's services, of their history, of their purpose and, above all, of the nature of the present emergency that has brought them into being. For it is only when these propositions come to be fully understood that the young women of today will see clearly their place in the social and dynamic life of our democracy and begin to understand

the nature of the forces which require that in these times even the free individual must submit voluntarily to the common interests of our free society. The Corps today has become the symbol, not only of woman's full contribution to our national effort, but of the willing participation of all elements of our society in those undertakings which are essential to its survival in this time of crisis.

One of the great problems facing us if our democratic way of life is to survive is how to give a maximum freedom of expression and opportunity for development to the individual within the necessary confines of the state. Toward this end, service in the WAC, with its shared sacrifices, shared duties, shared activities, and common goals, provides the finest kind of training for the voluntary subordination of the individual to the whole. Here is demonstrated the principle of self-discipline in an ordered world: that a certain amount of authority is essential if we wish to be free—even to the point of regimentation in time of emergency. Here, too, may be practiced techniques for enlarged group living: the capacity to give and take, to assume responsibility, to defer personal wishes for social needs, and the human qualities of tolerance, kindness, and understanding.

The woman soldier who puts aside her individual wishes for the sake of the group will find herself immeasurably enriched thereby. In serving in the Army, women not only give but receive, not only learn to become good soldiers but good citizens, capable of playing an effective role in the world.

Copyright © 1943 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.