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Mildred C. Bailey, 90

Head of WAC Was Third Woman to Become General in U.S. Military

By [Matt Schudel](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, August 23, 2009

Mildred C. Bailey, 90, a retired brigadier general who directed the Women's Army Corps in the 1970s and who was the third woman in the U.S. military to reach the rank of general, died July 18 at the Knollwood military retirement facility in Washington. She had Alzheimer's disease.

Gen. Bailey was director of the Woman's Army Corps (WAC) from 1971 to 1975 during a turbulent period



Brig. Gen. Mildred C. Bailey said women were

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marked by the Vietnam War, social change, and demands for greater equality and opportunity for women.

She was promoted to brigadier general at the time but was not eager to accept the job, maintaining that other women were more qualified to lead the corps. She recalled in a 2000 interview with the Greensboro (N.C.) News & Record that when the Army chief of staff, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, summoned her to his office, "He didn't ask me if I wanted to be director. He said, 'Col. Bailey, you are the next director.' I said, 'Yes, sir,' and saluted."

Westmoreland gave her a formidable task: "I want you to change the image of women in the Army."

At the time, Army women were concentrated in nursing and clerical roles and were prohibited from applying for hundreds of jobs open to men. With the elimination of the military draft and the creation of the all-volunteer Army in 1973, women could work in practically any military specialty, excluding combat. Many other traditional barriers to women in the military vanished under Gen. Bailey's leadership.

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"The volunteer army really drove the change, and she was at the point of the spear," said retired Maj. Gen. Carl H. McNair, who worked with Gen. Bailey. "It was a pivotal era. That was a giant step in a short time."

During Gen. Bailey's four years as WAC director, the number of women in the Army grew from 13,000 to 39,000 -- the highest number since World War II. For the first time, women were allowed to command

as fit for combat duty as men. (Matt Schudel - Tw p)

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men. All-female units were abolished, women became eligible for campus ROTC programs, and dress codes were relaxed.

The integration of women into the regular Army may have been too successful as far as Gen. Bailey was concerned, because while she was director, the Defense Department decided that her beloved Women's Army Corps would be shut down.

She tried to fight the decision, arguing that WAC traditions were worth preserving and that women would face greater obstacles to advancement in the regular Army, but to no avail. She also vehemently opposed relaxing the Army's rules on pregnancy and motherhood, believing that pregnancy should remain grounds for immediate discharge.

Shortly before Gen. Bailey retired as WAC director in 1975, the pregnancy restriction on married and single women was lifted. In 1978, the Women's Army Corps was abolished as a separate unit, and women were integrated into the rest of the Army.

"The Army needed the women more than they needed the Army," McNair said. "I would tell you as someone who served 32 years, it's truly been very good for the Army."

Gen. Bailey, who spent much of her career in the intelligence service, long maintained that women were as fit for combat duty as men. She looked forward to the day "when gender, race and religion will have nothing to do with whether you have equal opportunity in life," she said in 2000.

Mildred Inez Caroon was born April 18, 1919, in Fort Barnwell, N.C. Her friends knew her as Inez.

She graduated from the Women's College of the University of North Carolina (now the University of North Carolina at Greensboro) and was a high school French teacher when World War II broke out. In 1942, she joined the old Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, which was renamed the Women's Army Corps a year later.

She taught English to French pilots during the war and later served as an intelligence officer in Germany and Washington. From 1963 to 1968, Gen. Bailey -- whose hair turned a striking white in her 20s -- traveled the country as a WAC emissary, explaining the role of women in the military and recruiting new members.

During her 33 years in uniform, she faced continual sexual harassment, she said, but added: "You figured out a way to live with it, or you quit."

In 1943, when she married Marine Sgt. Maj. Roy C. Bailey, they had to get special permission, because military rules forbade fraternization between officers and enlisted men. When Gen. Bailey was assigned to Germany, her husband, now a civilian, was not allowed to join her as a dependent family member. He went to Germany at his own expense, and they had to find housing off base.

More than 20 years later, when Gen. Bailey was WAC commander, women finally received the same privileges concerning family dependents that men had long enjoyed.

"I don't feel cheated," Gen. Bailey told the Greensboro newspaper in 2000. "I hate to say it, but World War II coming along changed my life. I would have never known anything else if it hadn't."

Her decorations included the Distinguished Service Medal, Legion of Merit, Meritorious Service Medal and Army Commendation Medal. Her husband died in a traffic accident in 1966. She had no immediate survivors.

In later years, she helped raise money for the Women in Military Service for America Memorial, which opened at Arlington Cemetery in 1997.

"She felt strongly about recognizing the pioneers in the Women's Army Corps," said retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Wilma L. Vaught, president of the memorial foundation's board of directors. "As much as anyone I've ever known, she loved the Army."

In the words of McNair, who knew Gen. Bailey for more than 35 years, "She was a lady, and she was a soldier."

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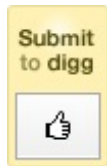
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