Spring 1993

Making Waves in the Bronx: The Story of the U.S. Naval Training School (WR) at Hunter College

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Severe manpower shortages, which resulted from fighting a war on two fronts, forced U.S. Navy officials to enlist women in World War II. Precedent already existed for women serving in the Navy since 11,275 women had contributed to the war effort in World War I. Women at that time received no formal indoctrination nor was any formal organization established.

There was considerable opposition to admitting women into "this man's Navy" during World War II and a Women's Reserve had few champions among the Navy's higher echelons. Congress, public interest, and even advocacy from the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs pressured the Navy into seriously pursuing the establishment of a Women's Reserve. Training women for onshore naval duty, it was reasoned, would free deskbound men for combat.

Elizabeth Reynard, then a Barnard College professor of English, was commissioned by the Navy to explore the design of the program, and she gave the Women's Reserve its acronym WAVES, standing for Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service.
An advisory council, chaired by Dean Virginia G. Gildersleeve of Columbia University and consisting of prominent women educators from across the country, helped organize and establish standards and procedures for the WAVES. The advisory council recommended the appointment of Mildred McAfee, president of Wellesley College, as director of the WAVES program.

On June 30, 1942, the Women's Reserve of the U.S. Naval Reserve was established. An enrollment quota of 11,000 was projected: 10,000 for enlisted personnel and 1,000 for officers. Officer indoctrination was given at Smith College and these women became the administrators and teachers at the Women's Reserve schools. Enlisted personnel initially received basic training at Oklahoma Agricultural & Mechanical College (Stillwater), Iowa State Teacher's College (Cedar Falls), the University of Wisconsin (Madison), and at the University of Indiana (Bloomington).

When it was found that naval indoctrination was inadequate, it was decided that a massive "boot camp" should be established to effect better training and orientation. Finding a site which could accommodate some 6,000 persons at any one time was no easy task. When Texas State College for Women (Denton) rejected the idea of a naval training school, the Bronx campus of the all female Hunter College was considered. That Elizabeth Reynard knew both Fiorello LaGuardia, mayor of New York City, and George N. Shuster, president of Hunter College, eased matters considerably. The Navy approached both men informally regarding the training school. Having patriotic motivations, both were happy to assist in the Navy's efforts to bring the war to a close. James J. Lyons, borough president of The Bronx, was also enthusiastic about the Navy using the uptown Hunter campus. Indeed, Lyon's own secretary, Margaret Persson, enlisted in the WAVES.

On December 30, 1942, the secretary of the Navy authorized the establishment of a boot camp at Hunter College. The Navy's formal request and letter of intent regarding use of the Hunter College Bronx division campus was sent to Mayor LaGuardia on January 5, 1943. Building changes necessitated by combining Hunter downtown and uptown programs were to be borne by the Navy. Expenses incurred by the removal of laboratory equipment for the teaching of biology, chemistry, and physics were to be included. Additionally, the Navy was charged the annual rental fee of $200,000 made payable in monthly installments of $16,666.67.

At a special meeting on January 8, 1943, the Executive Committee of the Board of Higher Education approved the use of Hunter College's Bronx buildings as outlined in the January 5, 1943, letter. The "Navy Dept. Project, Hunter College," as the Board of Higher Education came to refer to the U.S. Navy Training School (WR), was approved by the full board effective January 25, 1943.

The Navy found the Hunter College site well suited for the Training School. Its four well-constructed stone buildings (Gillet Hall, Davis Hall, Gymnasium Building, and Student Hall) and roomy campus could be adapted easily by the Navy for its administrative, testing, and orientation purposes. City and college officials, too, were willing to make the campus available to the Navy. Transportation facilities were excellent with two subway lines in close proximity to the campus, and having a New York City location was considered an asset for Navy recruiting purposes.

Drilling and reviews were held at the nearby expansive Eighth Regiment Armory (Kingsbridge Armory) of the New York State National Guard during inclement weather. Immediately south of the campus, Walton High School provided an auditorium, which could seat 1,399.

Since Hunter was a commuter college with no dormitories, the housing of enlisted personnel and officers was the most critical problem faced by the Navy. Originally, it was thought that barracks might be built on the Hunter campus. The idea was scrapped, however, because of the lack of sufficient shower facilities on campus and the need for speedy establishment of the station. The Navy chose instead to use the authority of the Second War Emergency Act to commandeer five- and six-story apartment buildings in the immediate area. The secretary of the Navy requested the attorney general to institute condemnation proceedings on the first four apartment buildings commencing on January 7, 1943. Additional condemnation proceedings were subsequently instituted until a total of seventeen buildings were finally taken over for Navy barracks. Of these apartment buildings, ten were on University Avenue, two on Strong Street, two on Reservoir Avenue, two on West 197th Street, and one on West 195th
Fourteen buildings were used for recruit barracks, two for ship's company personnel (one for men and one for women), and the final building was for female officer quarters.

The Navy announced its intent to take over the Jerome Park area apartment buildings on January 9, 1943, and, by January 11th, tenants received formal notification via memorandum from E.J. Marquart, Rear Admiral, USN, Commandant, Third Naval District. Understandably upset at being uprooted from their homes by the Navy, tenants held protest meetings, but to no avail. In all, 613 families or 1,860 persons (not including about 100 people already in the armed forces) were evicted from their apartments. The Mayor's Committee on Property Improvement assisted the tenants in relocation and paid their moving expenses. This fact did not, however, make up for the inconvenience or financial hardship of tenants. In a letter to the U.S. Navy dated February 8, 1943, Mrs. Margaret Tully of 80 Strong Street speaks of having to "pay more rent" for her new apartment in order to "get out quick." She continues by protesting that "the U.S. Navy should at least pay my difference in rent... I am a poor woman and something should be done."

When the first five buildings were finally vacated on January 31, 1943, the Navy had to work rapidly to clean, paint, and make necessary electrical changes to the apartments, which were being converted to barracks. Furnishing the apartments, too, was a mammoth job. Converted passenger liners and merchant ships, such as Manhattan, America, and Normandie, provided eighty-five truckloads of furnishings, which equipped the apartments and school. The WAVES slept on wooden double-deck bunks and each room was equipped with a locker, chest of drawers, table, chair, and lamp. Apartment sizes varied and two to four girls occupied each room, dining and living room included, for sleeping purposes. Kitchens were used for washing and the stowing of gear, but never for cooking.

The U.S. Naval Training School (WR) was formally commissioned on February 8, 1943. Celebrated as "WAVES and SPARS Day" by the city, jurisdiction of the Hunter uptown campus was formally transferred from Mayor La Guardia to commanding officer Captain Amsden, U.S.N. A mass swearing-in ceremony was held at City Hall for an initial group of 350 WAVES and SPARS (Coast Guard women). Afterwards, the women marched to the IND subway for a fare-free, non-stop ride to the Training School in The Bronx. The American Women's Voluntary Services manned some thirty-five information booths around the city, distributing enlistment applications and providing information on the WAVES and SPARS. Movie theaters and store windows publicized the enlistment drive through special displays.

Captain Amsden and his staff had the daunting task of establishing the largest naval boot camp in the country at the station which the Navy came to call the "U.S.S. Hunter."

Virginia Gildersleeve, chairwoman of the Advisory Council for the Women's Reserve, United States Navy, praised Captain Amsden for his genius in planning the location and function of nearly two hundred offices and departments at the newly established Training School. It was a plan which, she noted, was so "sound and workable" that it "never thereafter had to be changed in any fundamental way." Gillet Hall housed the administrative offices, and the medical and dental department. Davis Hall was the site of training activities, the coffee shop Betty Boot, ship's service, the beauty shop Mona Monet, uniforming, and personnel classification. The Gym Building was for indoor athletics, swimming, and the neuro-psychiatry ward. Student Hall was the site of the mess hall, the station band, the chaplain's office, the library, and recreation room.

It was at the "U.S.S. Hunter" that women received their uniforms, supplied personnel information, were indoctrinated in naval tradition, learned to march, underwent physical and aptitude examinations, and were screened and classified for the various types of positions available. Training varied from six to eight weeks in length. At one period in September, 1943, when personnel needs were so great, training was even shortened to four weeks. Some 1,680 new recruits arrived every two weeks, with a similar number leaving for special training or duty assignments. About 5,000 recruits were at the station at all times.

The Training School had a rocky start because of the speed required for its establishment. Being near Navy supply points (Brooklyn and Bayonne) helped. Captain Amsden's easy access to the director of naval personnel, too, proved advantageous in solving a myriad of knotty problems in the early days.
Housing was being prepared as quickly as possible, but sometimes the staff was no more than one or two dozen bunks ahead of the incoming recruits. Next to housing, food preparation and the serving of meals was a major challenge. Feeding three meals a day to 5,000 people was a requirement that went far beyond the capabilities of the Hunter cafeteria, which ordinarily served light lunch to 1,500 people in a day. A typical grocery shopping list for a one month period at the “U.S.S. Hunter” comprised 56,000 pounds of beef, 32,000 pounds of beef livers, 13,000 pounds of pork loins, 11,000 dozen eggs, 18,200 pounds of cabbage, 10,880 pounds of apples, and 20,190 pounds of oranges.

Refrigeration had to be rented nearby and the kitchen facilities had to be greatly expanded. Five scheduled seatings in a two hour period were required for each meal. One company could be served every five minutes and each recruit was allowed some seventeen minutes to eat. Table manners soon became secondary to speed as many a hungry new WAVE discovered. Reaching across the table and grabbing what she needed as well as taking big bites became an automatic reflex. There was often a shortage of silverware, and one learned to do a great deal with a few utensils. One former WAVE recalls with amusement the horrified look of a civilian godfather of one the WAVES, on leave, as he watched her stir her coffee with a fork.

Outfitting the WAVES was a task which took the combined efforts of six major New York department stores, under the aegis of the Retailer’s Uniform Agency, Inc. Most former WAVES remember Saks Fifth Avenue, but Macy’s, Bloomingdale’s, Loesser’s, Abraham and Strauss, and John Wanamaker also supplied clothing. WAVES were allocated two hundred dollars for their uniforms, which were designed by the French-born couturier Mainbocher. Numerous shortages existed in the early days, and WAVES might go through a good part of basic training wearing civilian clothes and the Navy hat.

Daily living for a WAVE at the Training School meant being confined to the base, speaking to no civilians, hearing no radio, and reading no newspapers. The day began with two bells for reveille at 5:50 AM (0530) and lasted until the final two bells for taps at 9:30 PM (2130).

A typical six-week program during the period October, 1943 to February, 1945 included instruction (36 hours), drill (24 hours) physical education (19 hours), and movies (14 hours). Miscellaneous (32 hours) consisted of regimental review, company meetings, war orientation, inoculations, payroll matters, fingerprinting, identification card photographs, orientations, and insurance and bond lectures.

Classroom instruction included Navy history and customs; the naval chain of command and various insignia used; aircraft, ships, and equipment; naval language, procedures, and courtesy; military discipline; shore establishments; and discussion of the various types of positions available to women. Visual aids were heavily used and war orientation was also given. All instruction was meant to acclimate the WAVE to the Navy and to instill a sense of pride in being part of the service. Most classroom instruction was conducted in Davis Hall.

Marching for two hours a day, often to the tune of Navy songs, and drilling for dress reviews were activities which many WAVES long remember. One WAVE recalls that they “marched everywhere even in the dark going to breakfast at 6 AM (0600).” A cold wind blew across the Jerome Park Reservoir on winter days, down by the “beach.” Others remember summertime marching in New York heat, with shoes sticking to the tar, and being given salt tablets to prevent heat prostration.

Physical fitness and conditioning of the body were high priorities at the Training School. Having seven gymnasiums, a swimming pool, and an outdoor drill field, the WAVES had ample facilities available on the base for recreation and increasing agility and coordination. Games, such as tennis, softball, volleyball, and badminton, were played, sometimes competitively. Calisthenics were conducted both indoors and outdoors, weather permitting. Posture improvement, too, received attention in the interest of good health and producing a poised, military bearing.

Determining that recruits were physically and mentally fit for service was an important part of the boot camp experience. Complete physicals were taken, family histories and inoculations were given, teeth and feet were checked, and even psychiatric observations were made. WAVES stood in long “daisy chain” lines for medical examinations, X-rays, and laboratory work. Using a team of physicians and nurses, some 260 recruits were examined each day.
Testing by the Selection Office was conducted in Gillet Hall's auditorium, as well as in Student Hall's "Little Theater." The tests assisted in the classification and assignment process. Beyond testing for general classification, reading, arithmetic, and spelling, the tests gauged mechanical and clerical aptitude.

Recreation was built into the WAVES crowded schedule as a morale builder and included variety show "Happy Hours" on Monday nights at Walton High School, as well as Friday Evening Captain's concerts. The best in entertainment was made available: singers, concert pianists, ballet troupes, and orchestras. Vladimir Horowitz, Kate Smith, Frank Sinatra, Eddie Cantor, Ray Milland, and Jimmy Durante all made appearances. The WAVES also entertained themselves with glee club performances, skits, and shows.

Shore leave gave WAVES a chance to tour Manhattan. The Empire State Building, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Radio City Music Hall, for example, were popular WAVE stops. The Automat was always good for a quick, nutritious meal, and riding New York's double-decker buses on a shopping excursion was fun. The Service Women's Center was located at the centrally located Biltmore Hotel. Sponsored and staffed by Kappa Kappa Gamma, the Center was a nice place for both officers and enlisted women to meet friends, get theater tickets, and freshen up for an evening out.

Dignitary visits to the Training School were always exciting for the WAVES. President Franklin D. Roosevelt stopped at the station on October 21, 1944, and inspected the troops in a regimental review at the Armory. First Ladies Grace Coolidge and Eleanor Roosevelt also toured the station. Madame Chiang Kai-Shek, too, made an official visit.

Navy officers tried to maintain a positive image of the WAVES in the eyes of the public. In September, 1943, for example, the WAVES staged a show to sell $3,000,000 in war bonds. The general public could gain admittance to the show by buying war bonds at the gate to the Station. A two-week "WAVES at War" display staged on the mezzanine of the busy Rockefeller Center International Building was another example of keeping the WAVES and their work visible to the public. Both events also helped in the Navy's enlistment drive.
To qualify for admission into the WAVES, a woman had to be a United States citizen between the ages of 20 and 36, with a high school diploma or its equivalent, and preferably single. If married, the husband could not be in the armed forces and children could not be under 18 years of age. Restrictions on marriage to enlisted men were lifted in November, 1943. Pay was $50 per month, and women were subject to the same discipline and regulations as men.

There was no typical WAVE. The women came from all social strata from across the country. As former teachers, bookkeepers, store clerks, hair dressers, office managers, opera singers, etc., the women brought a great breadth of experience to the Reserve. WAVES came to perform the most exacting of positions. Whether parachute riggers, pharmacist’s mates, instrument flying trainers, storekeepers, radiomen, clerks, mechanics, dispatchers, laboratory technicians, mailmen, decoders, or navigators, the work of the WAVES was vital to the war effort. Indeed, the WAVES were imbued with the concept that not performing their jobs would be equivalent to a battle casualty.

By August, 1945, when the war ended, some 3,000 WAVES were still in training at the “U.S.S. Hunter.” The last class of WAVE trainees graduated in October, 1945. Originally designed as a boot camp, the Training School offered cooking and baking, supervisory specialists, mail, rehabilitation and occupational therapy and hospital corps. The hospital corps school graduated on December 6, 1945.

On November 2, 1945, the Navy Department formally notified the Board of Higher Education of its intent to terminate the U.S. Naval School contract. The contract called for ninety days notice, making the termination date January 31, 1946.

Inadequate and crowded facilities had been the lot of the Hunter facility and student body during the war period. Understandably, both groups were eager for prompt return of the Bronx buildings for college purposes.

Space shortages and facilities renovation at its Manhattan site were not the only problems which Hunter College had to contend with regarding the Navy project. Black Hunter College graduates were affronted by the racial discrimination practiced by the Navy, and by the armed forces more generally. A group which called...
itself the "Wisterians" protested the barring of Black women by the Navy. One Hunter group even exhorted the Board of Higher Education to "refuse the use of Hunter College to the WAVES until its policy of discrimination is abandoned." By October, 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt approved a plan which lifted the ban on accepting Black women into the WAVES. The "U.S.S. Hunter" soon thereafter had Black women and officers training and working at the Station.

Personnel shortages in the Navy Cost Inspector's Office, coupled with periodically required audits, sometimes presented the vexing problem of meeting the payroll for Hunter custodial staff assigned to the Bronx buildings and paid by the Navy. On more than one occasion, the New York City Council was petitioned by the Board of Higher Education for working funds to meet expenses.

The "U.S.S. Hunter" was officially decommissioned on February 1, 1946. The ship's bell tolled six times and a WAVE honor guard lowered the colors. Subsequently, keys to the four Bronx campus buildings were turned over to Dr. George N. Shuster, the college president, by Captain Frank W. Schmidt, representing Rear Admiral Monroe Relly, commandant of the Third Naval District.

The Station had served for three years as the site of the U.S. Naval Training School (WR). In all, 91,138 women had been enrolled in the School: 85,885 WAVES, 1,914 SPARS (who trained at the Station from February 17, 1943 to June 12, 1943), and 3,339 Marines (who trained at the Station from March 26, 1943 to July 10, 1943). With a loss of 5,168 women, the discharge rate was 5.6%; and the number of graduates from the Training School was 85,970: 80,936 WAVES, 1,844 SPARS, and 3,190 Marines. Additionally, a few members of Les Service Femmes de la France, French service women, trained at the Station, and the training of the WAVES was viewed by British and Canadian women's units.

The Navy Department was eager to sever its contractual relationship with Hunter College quickly. Once notice was given, a lump-sum settlement was offered for the restoration of the Bronx buildings. Ordway Tead, chairman of the Board of Higher Education, rejected this idea, however, saying:

The determination of a lump sum arrangement would be particularly difficult...in view of the complex major changes made in our structures. The execution of all the work necessary to restore our buildings in the present uncertain labor and material market would prove a very difficult process, and we do not wish to undertake it. We believe that the Navy...would be in a very much better position to restore the buildings in a much shorter period.

The Navy tried to effect the restoration of the Bronx buildings through its Bureau of Yards and Docks. Personnel shortages due to the Navy's demobilization process, however, meant a dearth of personnel and delays. Compounding the problem was the subsequent use made of the Bronx campus for the first American meeting of the United Nations Security Council. It was not until 1948 that final settlement for restoration of the Bronx buildings was made by the government with the city of New York in the amount of $313,701.54. Included in this settlement were legal fees and damage surveys conducted by Thompson, Homes and Converse, the original architects of Hunter College's buildings in The Bronx.

The four Hunter buildings which the WAVES used at the Training Station are still being used at today's Lehman College. The campus now has fifteen buildings, which help block some of the cold breezes coming off the Jerome Park Reservoir. All of the nearby apartment buildings commandeered by the Navy in the 1940s are back in civilian hands and in use. The three-foot ship's bell left by the Navy in 1946 still stands in front of the gymnasium, serving as a reminder of the special use made of the campus during World War II.

For many former WAVES, the boot camp experience they had at the Training School was a time which tested their physical and mental stamina to the fullest. One former WAVE recalls thinking during her boot camp experience, "If I can survive this, I can live through anything." Remembering that thought, she says, has made many of life's difficulties more bearable.

Lasting friendships were formed by many at the "U.S.S. Hunter" and an abiding sense of pride in serving their country in the WAVES has endured for these women to this day.
NOTES

6Ibid., p. 7.
9Letter from Mrs. Margaret Tully to the U.S. Navy dated February 8, 1943. In U.S. Naval Administration.
10Ibid., p. 11.
11Many a Good Crusade, p. 278.
12U.S. Naval Administration, p. 56.
13Ibid., p. 24. It should be noted that wings of both Gillet Hall and Davis Hall were also used by April, 1945 in housing WAVES, much to the chagrin of college officials.
14"Man Does Shopping for 6,000 Women," February, 1943. Clipping in Board of Higher Education Central Files. The exact date and newspaper are unclear.
15Interview with Barbara Anne Lyons by Tabitha Kirin on May 9, 1987. Lehman College Library of the City University of New York. The Bronx Institute Archives Oral History Collection.
16Letter from Ellen Mooney Thompson to Dr. Larry E. Sullivan, dated January 14, 1989. In WAVES Memorabilia, Lehman College Library of the City University of New York, Special Collections.
17U.S. Naval Administration, p. 46.