

WORLD WAR II: Latham enlisted at the age of 21 in 1942

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women the chance to fill support roles, thereby freeing up more men for combat duty. It was modeled after comparable British units, which made the knowledge, skill and special training of women available to the national defense during World War II.

The first contingent of close to 800 members began basic training at Fort Des Moines Provisional Army Officer Training School, Iowa. An additional four training centers in Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts and Louisiana were also opened that same year. Except for weapons and tactical training, the women's courses paralleled those for Army men. Initially the women were trained in three major specialties — switchboard operators, mechanics, and bakers. Later the ranks were expanded to dozens of specialties.

WAAC members began deploying overseas in 1942. Most assignments were to the European Theater of Operations; in total over 8,300 served in England, France, Germany and Italy. Others deployed to the Pacific

and the Far East. In July 1943 the WAAC was changed to the Women's Army Corps (WAC) when it was authorized as a branch of the U.S. Army.

During the same time other branches of the U.S. military had units similar to the WAC. Women served as Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP); Marine Reservists (popularly termed *Marinettes*) which then became the Marine Corps Women's Reserve; as WAVES (a WWII division of the U.S. Navy standing for Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service); and the WWII Coast Guard SPARS.

In July of 1942, Margaret (Simmons) Latham, from Sisters, enlisted in Portland at the age of 21. Latham served from 1942-1945 in the Women's Army Corps. Soon after enlisting, the soon-to-be WASP program was formed and Latham received the rank of Aviation Cadet.

Though Latham was an Aviation Cadet, she did not pilot any aircraft during her time of service. Much of her time was in the communications division. She, along with other colleagues, served in England on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Latham was tasked with guiding bombers and allied forces to their destinations.

Immediately following D-Day Latham was deployed to France with a small group of WACs.

"I remember her telling the story of being placed in a building the Army was using as barracks outside of Chartres, France immediately after D-Day," said Marlynn Latham Murphy, Latham's oldest daughter, a resident of Sisters. "She and another colleague asked for permission to go to an upper floor of the building to search for firewood to boil water and do laundry; when they opened armoires the bodies of dead German soldiers fell onto them — it was that soon after D-Day."

Latham spent her childhood on the family ranch at Cline Falls. In her teen years the family purchased a larger ranch near Sisters in the Cloverdale area.

"She would have been in the first graduating class at the new Sisters High School," said Murphy. "But they completed the school the year after she graduated. Her diploma is from Redmond High School."

"She had so many adventures," said Murphy. "The Army Corps wanted her to go to Officer's Candidate School, but she didn't want to be an officer."

Latham was discharged

from the Women's Air Corps Service Pilot program in 1945 with the rank of Corporal.

About 150,000 American women eventually served in the WAAC and the WAC during World War II. They were the first women other than nurses to serve with the Army. Those 150,000 women who served released the equivalent of seven divisions of men for combat.

After the victory in Europe in May 1945 and the surrender of the Japanese the following August, the remaining WAC training centers at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, and Fort Des Moines were closed and no further WAC training was conducted.

In February 1946 the War Department began a program aimed at retaining women still in service and re-enlisting those who had served during WWII. In 1948 President Truman signed into law the Women's Armed Services Integration Act that permitted women in the Regular Army and the Organized Reserve Corps. A new training center at Camp Lee, Virginia, was opened in 1948.

The WAC was disbanded in 1978 and all female units were integrated with male units.

Latham was proud of her service and enjoyed her time in the WAC and her service



PHOTO PROVIDED

Margaret Simmons Latham.

as a WASP. She was part of a military family — her husband, past director of the VA in Bend and an Army Veteran who served in both WWII and Vietnam, also served as the Public Information Officer for the Oregon National Guard for many years. After her service she traveled to many of the WAC reunions throughout the United States through the remainder of her life.

Margaret Simmons Latham died in Salem on December 16, 2014, at the age of 93. She is survived by her eldest daughter Marlynn Murphy who lives in Sisters with her two young boys, Donovan (age 6) and Liam (age 9); daughter Heidi Burnette of Franklin, TN; and son Renee Latham of Eugene.

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