

KATHRYN REGINA GABBERT PRIVATE U.S. ARMY

WORLD WAR II
1921 - 1999

WRITTEN BY MADISON DEEL AND BAYLEE WILSON
UNIVERSITY HIGH SCHOOL
INSTRUCTED BY MEGHAN DUNN

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Kathryn Regina (Lemon) Gabbert was born on November 9, 1921, in Ritchie County, West Virginia, to Benjamin Franklin Lemon and Flossie Audra Lemon. Her father, a 28-year-old oil worker, was born in the small town of MacFarlan like Kathryn herself. 19-year-old Flossie's family was from neighboring Wirt County. The Lemons had deep roots in MacFarlan, as evidenced by a family cemetery that remains there to this day. It is probable that Benjamin and Flossie had lost a newborn daughter the year before Kathryn's birth. Lorena Marguerite, born September 27, 1920, appears in the Ritchie County birth register, but not thereafter. Kathryn was the eldest, and would later have two younger brothers, Robert and Benjamin Jr.

Unlike the coal for which much of West Virginia is known, Ritchie and Wirt counties were endowed with an abundance of oil. Its value was on the rise throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This being so in Wood County, too, the Lemons had moved to Parkersburg by 1926. The address of one of the Lemons' residences was on Camden Street, named for oil baron and U.S. Senator James Newlon Camden who opened one of the nation's first oil refineries in Parkersburg in 1869.

Sixteen-year-old Kathryn and her family were living at 620 Camden Street when the Ohio River flooded in January 1937, rising a catastrophic 55.4 feet in Parkersburg, forcing 300,000 people in various cities and towns along the Ohio to flee. Most likely the Lemons fled as well, since their Camden address was within the flood zone. Finding a new home amid the devastation may be why the family doesn't appear in the city directory the following year. They took up lodging with a farmer named John William Patterson about ten miles outside of Parkersburg in the town of Walker where they were living at the time of the 1940 census.

Benjamin supported his family with steady employment at Parkersburg's American Viscose Company, which made synthetic nylon and other petrochemical products. That, too, was disrupted on June 5, 1938, when "between 150 and 200 workers in the spinning department [at American Viscose] walked out," causing a complete shutdown. Benjamin would have been idle until the strike was resolved. It is not clear if Kathryn's father participated in the walkout, but he was still employed there during the 1940s. Kathryn, who had not completed school past the seventh grade, was not officially employed anywhere by the age of 18.

New opportunities awaited Kathryn in wartime America, however, as the United States clambered out of the Depression and into a state of rearmament for World War II. Kathryn, by now a teacher, left her civilian life to join the Women's Army Corps (WAC). In addition to gainful employment and the



opportunity to serve her country, Kathryn was also part of a Lemon family tradition. Her father had been an Army ambulance driver in World War I, and both brothers also appear to have served. Kathryn traveled more than a hundred miles to enlist in the WAC at Columbus, Ohio, on October 28, 1943. That year saw the Women's Army Corps at peak recruitment with 62,859 women enlisting.

The WAC was the successor to the WAAC, or Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. The WAAC, created in May 1941, was an effective organization that trained women for all branches of the Army to "Replace a man for combat"



Kathryn (marked) swears the WAC oath in Charleston, West Virginia, as pictured in the Sunday *Charleston Daily Mail* on November 28, 1943.

(the official slogan), freeing up fighting power for the front lines. Tens of thousands of women flowed out from Fort Des Moines in Iowa, and several other training centers, to become typists, radio operators, weather observers and forecasters, cryptographers, sheet metal workers, parachute riggers, link trainer instructors, bombsight maintenance specialists, aerial photograph analysts, control tower operators, telegraph operators, cryptologists, and more. Members of the WAAC served with the Army rather than in the Army. In exchange for their service, they received food, uniforms, accommodations, pay, and medical care.

Unfortunately, the WAAC-to-WAC name change became a necessity in 1943. Prevailing male attitudes in the military had led to false rumors that many WAACs were prostitutes or, at the very least, of morally questionable character. As historian Julia Bellafaire put it, "Enlisted soldiers tended to question the moral values of any woman attracted to military service and passed these beliefs on to their families at home." A Washington, D.C., newspaper published a scandalous column—later retracted as fabrication—that the WAAC issued its soldiers medication for venereal disease. A Congressional investigation led to nothing but praise for the WAAC, but the damage had been done. The organization rebranded as the WAC (with the same leader, Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby) and picked up where it had left off. Nearly 75 percent of the women in the WAAC chose to become a part of the WAC, and the organization fully integrated into the Army with WAC members receiving actual U.S. Army ranks.

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These changes had all taken place by the time Kathryn Regina Lemon's name appeared with 20 other WAC recruits in the *Charleston Daily Mail* on November 28, 1943, listed as bound for Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. Oglethorpe was the third WAC training center opened to accommodate the continued demand for WACs. Kathryn was to join Oglethorpe's second WAC training company in the small northwest Georgia town of 1,000 residents. There may have been rough edges to the experience—Fort Oglethorpe's first graduating class was unable to obtain proper uniforms, a state of affairs that was epidemic across multiple training facilities, and which incensed WAAC leadership in early 1943. By the time the WAAC-WAC transition occurred in September 1943 and Kathryn had reached Georgia (at the end of November), the situation appears to have been remedied.

Kathryn and her fellow recruits likely took the train from Charleston, West Virginia, where they took the WAC oath, to Chattanooga, Tennessee. Oglethorpe was only a few miles south of Chattanooga, barely across the state line. Her post-graduation trajectory is difficult to determine, but training for WACs was a relatively consistent process.

In her first week Kathryn would have been assigned to a "receiving company" for orientation, initial interviews, and a uniform. In her second week she would have transferred to a basic training company to begin "instruction in Close Order Drill, Military Customs and Courtesies, Map Reading, Company Administration, Physical Training, and many other subjects," according to the WAC handbook. Depending on a trainee's aptitude, destinies forked after basic training—some women were immediately assigned to army posts, others stayed on for additional instruction at one of several "specialist schools" elsewhere. In 1943, the number of hours spent in basic training nearly doubled, and basic was extended from four weeks to five (for a total of six, including the initial orientation week).

Fort Oglethorpe could handle about 8,500 basic trainees at a time and processed over 52,000 women—second only to the original and longest-serving WAC training center in Des Moines, Iowa. In all, roughly 150,000 WACs served during the war in nearly every conceivable noncombat occupation.

Not much is known about Kathryn's subsequent time with the WAC. She may have graduated in early February 1944, which is roughly consistent with the length of training she would have received. Unfortunately, unless an individual WAC remained within the Women's Army Corps itself, she was then parceled out to an individual post and dropped out of sight from records available today. Most World War II literature focuses on fighting units, and the muster rolls documenting women on army bases and in support facilities appears scant by comparison. As a result, most of what can be told of individual WAC experiences comes from oral histories, or records preserved by former WACs themselves. No such material has yet been located for Kathryn.

She left the WACs on December 7, 1944, after about a year. Kathryn does not appear to have undergone any officer training, since she was discharged at the rank of private. By the end of the war, Kathryn had returned to Parkersburg. She married George Grayson at some point between 1944 and 1950, and they had at least one child, Karen Darlene Grayson. The relationship ended in divorce by the end of the decade, however. In 1950, Kathryn was living with her mother, her younger brother Robert, her daughter Karen, and a young lady named Naomi Postlewait who was hired to help in the home. Because all of the adults in the home worked, it is probable that she provided childcare for three-year old Karen. Kathryn's work at that time was as a janitress at a local post office, where her wartime service possibly gave her an advantage in securing a job in the federal system.

Kathryn remarried to Elsworth Lee Gabbert, a Wirt County native, in 1955. She and Elsworth lived on Elder Street in Parkersburg with several children. Elsworth had three sons—Kenneth, Elsworth Jr., and Forrest—and two daughters, Vivian and Carolyn, from his first marriage. He also had one child with Kathryn named Rebecca Gabbert. When Elsworth died in 1965, Kathryn did not marry again. When she passed away on March 22, 1999, it was in her hometown of Parkersburg where her journey to the WACs had begun. She is interred in West Virginia's Grafton National Cemetery.

The class of graduating WACs below is most likely Kathryn Gabbert's. Unfortunately, many of the soldiers' names are missing from the caption. *Dorothy H. Jordan Collection, UNC Greensboro*



ABOVE: WACs play baseball at Fort Oglethorpe, 1944. BELOW: Three WAC military police by the Fort Oglethorpe sign. *Dorothy H. Jordan Collection, UNC Greensboro*



SOURCES FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

SOURCES

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

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As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

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Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council
1310 Kanawha Blvd E, Charleston, WV 25301
wvhuman@wvhumanities.org
www.wvhumanities.org
304.346.8500



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