

# **ATHLETICISM, MILITARISM, AND PHYSICAL PREPAREDNESS**

## **The Politics of Physicality: WWII-era American Female Physical Educators and the U.S. Army Air Forces at War**

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Some fifty years ago, America's wartime mobilization provided females with a short-lived, but significant and high-profile, involvement in a somewhat reluctant state military machinery and in war-related industry. Their unprecedented involvement demanded that American society loosen, albeit only temporarily, the significant cultural prescriptions regarding appropriate spheres for females. But this social shift was not accomplished easily: it provoked considerable tensions, compromises, and threats to established notions of femininity.

With the advent of female enlistees, the Army Air Forces faced a unique situation. Historically, wartime invariably provokes despair about the lack of national physical fitness and the issuing of new physical training directives and new educational policies for physical education. Until WWII, however, this phenomenon was typically cloaked in a particularly male guise: it was for a male military that drill and sports programs were designed to instill needed discipline, aggression, and emotional control, whilst cementing bonds of camaraderie for Preparation. By contrast female physical educators historically had what could be seen in some senses as the “luxury” of creating their own, significantly different, agenda, since females had no access to the state military complex.

The creation of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps changed the rules of the game. The Army scrambled to create a physical training regimen for the basic training of female recruits, and this, ostensibly, challenged female physical educators’ visions of “appropriate” physical activities for women. The highly controversial Program that they created for basic training has been termed in the official history of the WAC to be the only “masculine-type course.” It encountered “serious objections on the grounds that it might be harmful to women.” Apparently, “...more time and concern was given...” to WAC physical education, than to any other aspect of basic training, “with less satisfactory results.”

This research examines the tensions and compromises that led to this scenario. It documents the important contributions made to the American war effort by female physical educators, and identifies how they attempted, with various degrees of success, to impose their well-articulated philosophy of physical education and sport (with its vision of “appropriate” physical activities for women) on the WAC. The analysis is based upon manuscripts from key players in the WAC physical training phenomenon: Mabel Lee, the National Association of Directors of Physical Education for College women, the National Advisory Committee of the Women’s Army Corps, AAHPERD members who are WWII veterans, or who were civilian physical educators involved in wartime physical fitness and training programs, and Army Air Force documents.