

# Women Music Teachers as Military Band Directors during World War II

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine how women music teachers became the United States' first female military band directors. Interviews with seventy-nine World War II military bandswomen revealed that seven of the ten chosen female directors were music teachers prior to their enlistment in the Army, Coast Guard, or Marines—band and orchestra teachers, music supervisors, and a college professor. Six of those seven directors are included in this study. Research questions pertained to their childhood music education, formal schooling, music-teacher employment, why they quit teaching to enlist, military education, military leadership and performance experiences, how they continued music making after the war, and the meaning of this experience for their lives. Corroboration of interview responses with primary and secondary sources—census data, school records, city directories, social security index, newspaper articles, photographs, diaries, military documents, military and WWII books—revealed that these music educators had accurate memories, outstanding music education and performance backgrounds, substantial leadership experiences, and diverse musical backgrounds that made them good choices for leading military bands and ensembles. All were part of significant firsts for women in the military. Near the end of their lives, they believed that their service as a military band director and musician had substantial impact on their lives and in some cases valued as “the most important” experience of their lives.

## Keywords

band, music teachers, military, women band directors, WWII

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Catastrophic national events can affect societal tenets. Charles Murray, a political scientist, wrote that “a single day often comes to demarcate the transition between eras.”<sup>1</sup> Murray recognized that “December 7, 1941 became the symbolic end of an America that held the world at arm’s length and the beginning of America the superpower.”<sup>2</sup> For women in the United States, December 7, 1941, also became a symbolic end to women’s place being in the home. With war declared on the Empire of Japan by the US government on December 8, 1941, the nation immediately put into effect political and military strategies to join with and help advance an Allied troop victory. To help defeat the Axis forces around the globe, the US military would need to enlarge their manpower; therefore, conscription was enacted. Another strategy to enlarge the military was to draw upon “the vast reserve of women power.”<sup>3</sup> Secretary of War Henry Stimson made the following public declaration that would change US women’s lives forever, “The War Department must fully utilize, immediately and effectively, the largest and potentially the finest single source of labor available today—the vast reserve of woman power.”<sup>4</sup> Six million women entered America’s workforce, garnering the nickname “Rosies” after a fictional character, Rosie the Riveter. Another 450,000 entered the military as reservists.<sup>5</sup> Women experienced a variety of new work and leadership opportunities that they never fathomed would be available to them.

This article conjoins topics of women in music, education, and the military at a time in the nation when women had the opportunity to emerge into society and reveal on a world stage how competent they could be flying a plane, fixing an engine, driving a troop truck, commanding troops, or conducting a military band. Some women had long desired to make a living as a performing musician, but were forewarned that performing opportunities for women were not abundant and they should be a music teacher. Therefore, when the opportunity to play in an all-women’s military band presented itself, some women music teachers left their jobs.

Women have long been leaders in music education as Sondra Wieland Howe reports in her 2014 book, *Women Music Educators in the United States: A History*. She researched and wrote about music teachers who were both “outstanding female leaders and . . . women with more ordinary lives.”<sup>6</sup> Although there has been some

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960–2010* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2013), 3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers’ War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York: Free Press, Simon & Schuster, 2004), 37.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. This moment would encapsulate the ideals of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century suffragettes who had fought and died for enfranchisement: women being asked to participate with men in winning a war.

<sup>5</sup>*In Defense of a Nation: Servicewomen in World War II*, eds. Jeanne M. Holm and Judith Bellafaire (Washington, DC: Military Women’s Press, 1998), 77.

<sup>6</sup>Sondra Wieland Howe, *Women Music Educators in the United States: A History* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2014), xxii.

new research written on women music teachers in the last decade, it's still not prevalent. Scholars have long recognized that not enough has been published on women in music education and holes still exist. In 1992, George Heller and Bruce Wilson, in their "Historical Research" chapter in the *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, wrote, "Gaps remain in the present story of people, places, and ideas associated with music teaching and learning. New interpretations of old subjects are needed, especially to discover the roles of ethnic and racial populations and women."<sup>7</sup> Humphreys reported that "two leading music education history books provide inequitable sex and regional representations of historic music education activities in the United States."<sup>8</sup> In the same article, Humphreys added, "Organizations and professional leaders tend to leave voluminous readily accessible written records, whereas more ordinary people, including most music teachers, do not. . . . Clearly, the top-down approach to history contributed to the inequitable representation of women."<sup>9</sup> Bowman suggested that researchers "identify women whose contributions have been overlooked and excluded and rewrite histories to include them."<sup>10</sup> A few years later, Roberta Lamb, Lori-Anne Dolloff, and Sondra Howe in their chapter on "Feminism, Feminist Research, and Gender Research in Music Education" in *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning* concluded, "Much research still desperately needs to be done in order to add all of the facts that could be discovered about women in music and music education."<sup>11</sup>

Cox suggests that music education historians should be aware of the various "cultural contexts" where teaching and learning of music takes place.<sup>12</sup> It then follows that music educators need to research and publish on military music education. Kerbey wrote, "studies of female military band conductors are all but non-existent."<sup>13</sup> It is the aim of this article to help fill the gap on women in music education and as military band conductors by documenting the contributions that women music teachers made while serving in military bands during World War II.

<sup>7</sup>George N. Heller and Brian D. Wilson, "Historical Research," in *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, ed. Richard Colwell (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 102.

<sup>8</sup>Jere T. Humphreys, "Sex and Geographic Representation in Two Music Education History Books," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 131 (1997): 80.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>10</sup>Wayne D. Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 377.

<sup>11</sup>Roberta Lamb, Lori Ann Dolloff, and Sondra Wieland Howe, "Feminism, Feminist Research, and Gender Research in Music Education: A Selective Review," in *The Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, ed. Richard Colwell and Carol Richardson (New York: Schirmer Books, 2002), 648–68.

<sup>12</sup>Gordon Cox, "Transforming Research in Music Education History," in *MENC Handbook of Research Methodologies*, ed. Richard Colwell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 77.

<sup>13</sup>Therese D. Kerbey, "A History of the 14th Army Band (WAC): 1949–1976" (doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University, 2015), 23.

One reason that women music teachers may have been motivated to join the military to serve as musicians is that their professional organization, The Music Educators National Conference (MENC), urged music teachers to get involved in their communities by performing music to bolster the spirits of Americans.<sup>14</sup> MENC started several war programs, two were American Unity through Music,” which volunteered the services of the organization to leaders in Washington to help foster national cohesiveness, and “Music-Education-in-Wartime Program” that “called for the cooperation of every music educator by orienting courses of study, public performance plans, community relations . . . to the activities of the War Department, Treasury Department” and other government agencies. Since MENC stated that “music education is pledging to give its utmost in war service and peace planning” and the publication noted that “many music teachers were serving in the military,” women music teachers may have joined the service as their way to meet this call to service by their professional organization.<sup>15</sup> MENC showed support of the military music teachers who had enlisted by publishing their names, service branch, rank, jobs, and hometowns in a reoccurring column titled “We Served Too” in the *Music Educators Journal*.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, in one case, the journal published a long article that included the music teachers’ written descriptions of their musical jobs in the armed forces, “Camp, and Sea, and Oversea,” which could have inspired women music teachers to enlist.<sup>17</sup>

The current study is about the women music teachers who were a part of the newly formed women’s military bands, which were part of the newly created women’s military branches—the Coast Guard SPARs (an acronym for the Latin Coast Guard motto, *semper paratus*, and its translation, “always ready”), the Marine Corps Women’s Reserve (MCWR), Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), and the Women’s Army Corps (WAC). This study will examine six women music teachers’ experiences as the nation’s first female military band directors.

## Methodology

In a 1998 article, Howe recommended, “Additional sources of evidence (diaries, oral interviews, newspaper accounts) would be needed if historians were to write accurate accounts that included the female experience in music education.”<sup>18</sup> Aligning with this recommendation, beginning in 2001 through 2007, seventy-nine oral histories

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<sup>14</sup>Michael L. Mark, “MENC and World War II Programs,” *Music Educators Journal* 67, no. 3 (1980): 46.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>16</sup>“Camp and Sea and Oversea,” *Music Educators Journal* 30, no. 1 (September–October 1943): 34, 36, 38, 40.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Sondra Wieland Howe, “Reconstructing the History of Music Education from a Feminist Perspective,” *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 6 no. 2 (Fall 1998): 97.

were collected from women who served as members of the US women's military bands.<sup>19</sup> Alan Solomon and George Heller suggested that "historians work with both primary and secondary sources in search of corroboration to establish historical facts."<sup>20</sup> Of those interviewed, it was discovered and verified from interviews, military and school documents, military books, and newspaper articles that seven of the women bandleaders were music teachers before the war who after enlistment were chosen to conduct and lead an all-women's military band—a first for women and the US military. Six of those seven women music teachers are included in this study: Leonora Hull (WAC), Joan Lamb (WAC), Mary Nelson (WAC), MaryBelle Nissly (WAC), Charlotte Plummer (MCWR), and Adah Straus (WAC)<sup>21</sup> (see Figure 1). A historical biography for each follows answering the following research questions:

1. What were the women band directors' prewar music education experiences?
  - a. Their personal training, how did they initially learn to play instruments?
  - b. Their school music education experiences?
2. What prewar music-teaching positions did the women directors hold?
3. Why did the six women leave their music-teaching jobs to enlist in the military?
4. What military education, music performance, and leadership experiences did the women have while serving?
5. How did these six women continue to engage in music after the war?
6. How did they think their military service impacted their lives?

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<sup>19</sup>Jill M. Sullivan, *Bands of Sisters: U. S. Women's Military Bands During World War II* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011). Women were easy to locate because their band experiences during the war had resulted in a community of sisters that stayed networked for over sixty years and continues today with its living members.

<sup>20</sup>Alan L. Solomon and George N. Heller, "Historical Research in Music Therapy: An Important Avenue for Studying the Profession," *Journal of Music Therapy* 19, no. 3 (1982), 169.

<sup>21</sup>Edith Taft of the SPAR Band was the music teacher chosen to be an assistant director that was not included in this study. She was not included because of a lack of sources found on her. There were other female music teachers who were members of the women's bands, but they were either deceased prior to the start of data collection in the year 2001, were not music teachers prior to enlisting, or not chosen to lead the military bands. They did, however, serve in other important ways, such as doubling on needed instruments, showing flexible musicianship to swiftly learn new instruments when needed, performing solos in the community or radio and arranging music. Some of the music teachers kept meticulous written records and compiled artifacts during and after the war, evidenced in diaries and scrapbooks. One music teacher, Bonnie Smallwood Medin of the Marine Corps Women's Reserve Band and choir teacher from Oklahoma, donated her time over sixty-five years to writing a quarterly newsletter that kept the women connected and facilitated reunions, two of which the author of this article attended in California and Minnesota.

| <b>Name, birth/<br/>death dates, birth<br/>state</b> | <b>Pre-War Education &amp;<br/>Major Instrument</b>                                 | <b>Pre-War Music<br/>Teaching</b>  | <b>Military Branch,<br/>Job, Rank</b>                               |
|--|---|--|---|
| Leonora Hull*<br>(1916–) Florida                     | Oberlin College, Ohio,<br>Bachelors of Music;<br>piano, organ                       | Dillard University,<br>Louisiana: piano,<br>harmony;<br>South Carolina State<br>University: piano,<br>organ, harmony | 1943, WAC, director<br>404th WAC Band,<br>Staff Sergeant            |
| Joan Lamb*<br>(1918–2007) Ohio                       | Baldwin Wallace<br>College, Ohio,<br>Bachelors of Music Ed;<br>trumpet, cello, oboe | Elementary Band<br>and English in Ohio   | 1942, WAAC,<br>director 400th<br>WAC Band, Master<br>Sergeant       |
| Mary Nelson*<br>(1920–2004) New<br>York              | SUNY Potsdam,<br>Bachelors of Music Ed;<br>piano, voice                             | Music Supervisor in<br>New York  | 1942, WAAC,<br>director, Warrant<br>Officer                         |
| MaryBelle Nissly<br>(1918–1999)<br>Pennsylvania      | West Chester State<br>Teachers College,<br>Bachelors of Music Ed;<br>flute          | Music Supervisor,<br>High School Band in<br>Pennsylvania   | 1942, WAAC,<br>director 401st WAC<br>Band, Warrant<br>Officer       |
| Charlotte<br>Plummer* (1918–<br>2005) Oregon         | University of Oregon,<br>Bachelors of Music Ed;<br>clarinet, sax                    | High School Band in<br>Oregon  | 1943, MCWR,<br>director, Master<br>Sergeant                         |
| Adah Straus*<br>(1914–2014)<br>Virginia              | Northwestern<br>University, Bachelors of<br>Music Ed; violin, horn                  | High school band<br>and orchestra in<br>Virginia   | 6/23/43, WAC,<br>assistant director,<br>403rd WAC Band,<br>Sergeant |

**Figure 1.** Summaries of women's backgrounds.

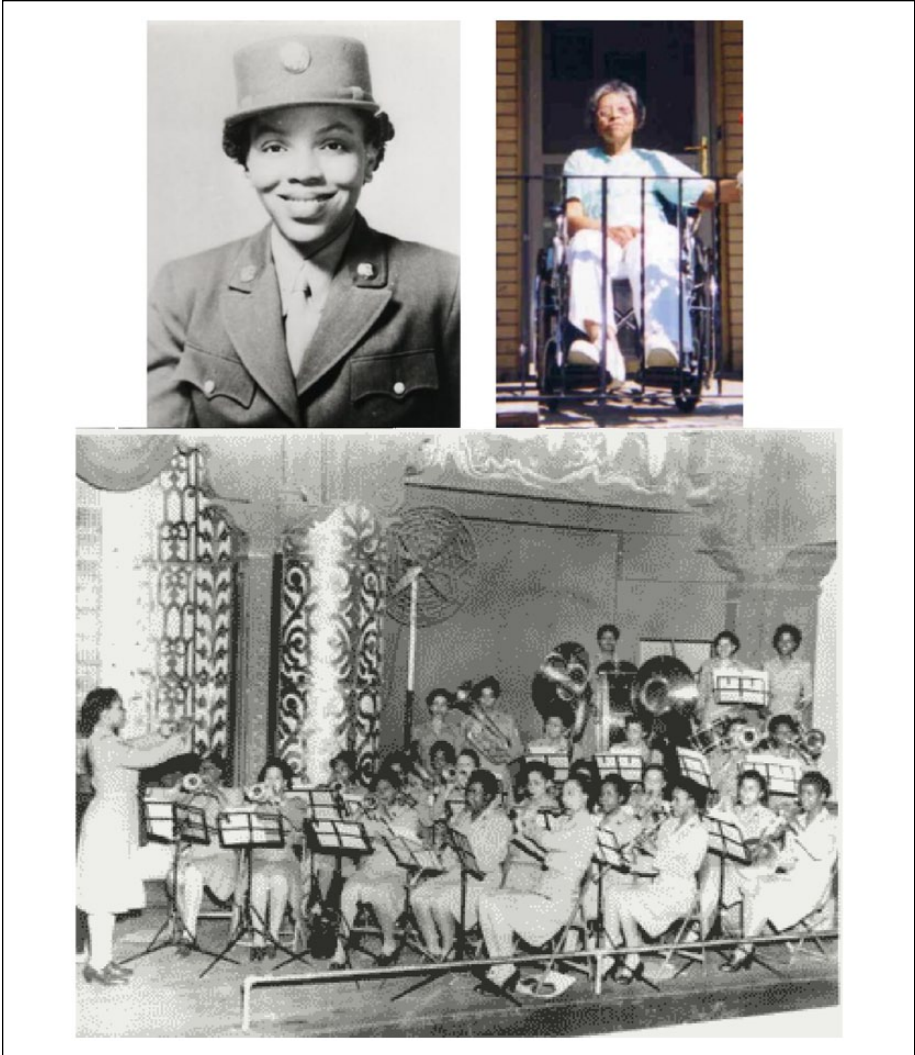
\*Women interviewed, surnames used in this figure.

## Women Directors

### *Leonora Hull Brown b. June 15, 1916*

Leonora Hull was the first female African American director of a US Army military band, the the 404th Women's Army Corps Band, an all-female African American Army band stationed at Fort Des Moines, Iowa<sup>22</sup> (see Figure 2). Prior to the war, Leonora was a professional church musician and a college music professor. She was a

<sup>22</sup>Jill M. Sullivan, "Women's Military Bands in a Segregated Army: The 400th and 404th Women's Army Corps (WAC) Bands," *Journal of Band Research* 41, no. 2 (2006): 15. Author interviewed Leonora Hull Brown on September 5, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, at her home.



**Figure 2.** Photographs left to right: Enlistment March 23, 1943; September 5, 2003, Chicago; 404th WAC Band, Chicago, Illinois, War Bond Drive, Savoy Ballroom, 1945. Source: Photographs courtesy of Leonora Hull's personal collection.

highly qualified musician but had zero experience with the band idiom. Nevertheless, the Army got their money's worth from this woman who had enlisted after working several college music teaching positions instructing piano, organ, and harmony classes. Leonora enlisted with the hope of re-tooling for a new occupation believing that the Army could provide an exciting change for the next phase of her life. She remarked,

“I was tired of teaching and tired of music.”<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately for Leonora, but fortunately for the African American female troops at Fort Des Moines, Leonora’s musical expertise landed her in another music-teaching position, this time directing the 404th Women’s Army Corps Band, which she communicated turned out to be the most memorable musical experience of her life.<sup>24</sup>

Leonora Hull’s life story begins in Jacksonville, Florida, where she was born on June 15, 1916, to a father who was a railroad-postal clerk with no formal education about whom Leonora spoke proudly, “He was a quiet man who held a mail-clerk position for a post office that was on a train. He was head clerk, and that was unheard of, but he passed the civil service test.”<sup>25</sup> Previously, her father had served in the Army’s segregated cavalry during the Spanish-American War, stationed at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. Leonora reported that her mother was Catholic, and was very musical, playing piano at home and with the local town band. Her mother had attended the Florida State College for Women.<sup>26</sup> Her parents had three children and Leonora was the eldest. Leonora began private piano lessons at age five, studying with their neighbor who had briefly attended the New England Conservatory. Leonora studied piano throughout her youth, “I went to a private high school, a girls’ school, Bethune-Cookman, and we had teachers who were from the North—white teachers.”<sup>27</sup> She would go on to study piano throughout her youth and major in music at Oberlin College.<sup>28</sup>

After attending Oberlin for three years, she was asked to teach piano and harmony for one year in New Orleans at Dillard University. After that year, she went back to Oberlin and completed her bachelor’s degree in music, graduating in the spring of 1940. Following graduation, Hull secured a position at South Carolina State University teaching organ, piano, and harmony. While in this job, she decided to enlist in the

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<sup>23</sup>Interview with Leonora Hull Brown, September 5, 2003, on the front porch of her home in Chicago. Permission granted and photographs courtesy of Leonora Hull Brown. All interview transcripts for this research, photographs, audio recordings reside with author, Tempe, Arizona. The abbreviation “cld” was often used in Army documents when referring to the 404th WAC Band. The abbreviation stood for “colored.”

<sup>24</sup>Hull interview, 2003.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. Leonora also shared information that her grandmother was a slave in South Carolina who ran away to Florida when she heard she was going to be sold, “One night, she heard her master promise to give her to his friend, and so, she ran away. She ended up in Florida and married my grandfather. She was half white, her papa was white.”

<sup>27</sup>Interview with author, Chicago, 2003. When Leonora attended high school at “Bethune-Cookman” as she referred to the institution, it was called Daytona-Cookman Collegiate Institute. This information was taken from the Bethune-Cookman University website, [http://www.cookman.edu/about\\_BCU/history/index.html](http://www.cookman.edu/about_BCU/history/index.html).

<sup>28</sup>When interviewed in 2003 in her home, she had no diploma; therefore, the author wrote to Oberlin College to verify her graduation date in 1940. Her graduation date and degree earned were confirmed by an archivist at Oberlin College on October 15, 2015.

Women's Army Corps (WAC).<sup>29</sup> She reported that recruiting officers from the WAC came to the university to recruit students, "I didn't pay much attention to them initially, but I was so tired of teaching school, and so tired of music. I eventually decided to join the Army. . . . I always wanted to be a doctor, but I knew I'd have to go back to school for science and another eight years. I was getting old. I wanted children so I thought I'd better go into the Army. . . . I didn't enlist out of love of country."<sup>30</sup> She expressed that her father was "thrilled" that she had enlisted, but her mother "hated it. She was scared I would get killed."<sup>31</sup>

In 1943 at the age of twenty-six, Leonora joined the WAC and was sent to the only location in the US for African American Army female troops, Fort Des Moines, Iowa—the same place that her father had been stationed while in the cavalry during World War I. She shared her first impressions of Iowa's abundant export, "Oh, there were fields and fields of corn. It was beautiful corn, great big ears of corn."<sup>32</sup> She remembered that she lived in "separate areas of Fort Des Moines for the Negroes . . . it was segregated."<sup>33</sup> Although promised "separate but equal" experiences and facilities for the black and white female troops, the white troops had an all-female band and the black women did not. After some complaints, it was decided by the head of Fort Des Moines that the black women needed a band of their own. The director of the "white" female band at Fort Des Moines, Master Sergeant Joan Lamb, was ordered to start a black-female band. After pouring through their personnel records, she discovered Private First Class Leonora Hull who was part of the signal corps. Lamb selected her to be the director of the black band.<sup>34</sup> Hull in an interview, "I was tired of teaching, tired of music, and I ended up directing a band!" Hull worked alongside of Lamb learning to direct and teach the band, and spent her two years as a music teacher of a beginning then intermediate band, a choir, and a jazz ensemble. She was eventually able to take the band on tour throughout Iowa and to Chicago for war bond drives, performing for mostly white audiences. Toward the end of her enlistment, she got pregnant and was forced to leave the military with an honorable discharge.<sup>35</sup> After the

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<sup>29</sup>Military records accessed from ancestry.com confirm that Hull enlisted from Fort Jackson Columbia, South Carolina, that she had four years of college, that she was teaching at a school at the time she enlisted, and that she was married when she enlisted. The record also confirmed that she was a resident of Florida.

<sup>30</sup>Hull interview, 2003.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid. Margaret E. Treadwell, "The Women's Army Corps," in *United States Army in World War II, Special Studies* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1954), 77; Martha S. Putney, *When the Nation Was in Need: Blacks in the Women's Army Corps during World War II* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>34</sup>Jill M. Sullivan, "Women's Military Bands in a Segregated Army," 15.

<sup>35</sup>For more details about the military policies for pregnant women, read Bettie J. Morden, *The Women's Army Corps 1945–1978* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History United States Army, 1990), 138.

war, Leonora raised a family, two sons, and continued to play professionally as an organist and pianist in churches and taught private piano lessons. Today one son is a full-time jazz musician living in Chicago but performing throughout the United States.<sup>36</sup>

Near the end of the interview when asked what impact her military service had on her life, she immediately spoke about the medical benefits she was receiving. She responded, “I would be totally disabled if it hadn’t been for the Army, and the medical bills, I couldn’t have paid them. You know all of the equipment I need, special chairs and rails for my bed. Everything I need, I can get.”

### *Joan Alma Lamb (1918–2007) (see Figure 3)*

On February 8, 1918, Joan Lamb was born in Sandusky, Ohio, as the only child of Emma and Lesley Lamb, who were enthusiastic amateur musicians—Lesley played trombone and ukulele and Emma played piano. Soon thereafter, the family moved to Vermillion, Ohio, where Joan attended elementary school and one year of junior high.<sup>37</sup> When Joan reached seventh grade, her father purchased her a trumpet, which she learned to play in an instrumental class at school and taking private lessons. In 1931, while Joan was in the eighth grade, her family lost their home due to the economic hardships associated with the Depression; consequently, her family moved to an apartment in Lakewood, Ohio, close to Cleveland where her mother and father had found work. Lamb recalled that Lakewood had an “excellent school system” and that she enjoyed her time at Harding Junior High School and Lakewood High.<sup>38</sup> She remembered starting cello in the eighth grade enticed by two factors: she could get out of gym class if she played in both band and orchestra, and the school would provide her with an instrument. In high school, Joan played both trumpet and cello.<sup>39</sup> She remembered attending band contests in junior and senior high school, and she attended an honor festival at Cleveland Heights High School three years in a row, where she auditioned on both instruments and was selected each year to play cello in the orchestra in the morning and trumpet in the band during the afternoon.

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<sup>36</sup>The author attended a performance of Leonora’s son’s jazz band in a nightclub in Phoenix, Arizona, and was able to speak with Rodney about his mother’s life about her military service.

<sup>37</sup>Joan A. Lamb, interview by author, August 19–21, 2003, Pahrump, Nevada. The author of this study wrote a biography article about Lamb’s music teaching career, military experiences, and music therapy thesis and work (see note 39). Additionally, the author wrote an article about Lamb and Leonora Hull’s work together in the WAC forming and training an African American WAC band, see note 22.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Much of the writing on Joan Lamb in this section has been previously published by the author of this study in a biography article. See Jill M. Sullivan, “One Ohio Music Educator’s Contributions to World War II: Joan A. Lamb,” *Contributions to Music Education* 33, no. 2 (2006): 27–51. Permission was granted by the journal editor to use that material in this article; Lamb interview.



**Figure 3.** Lamb with oboe, 1943, photograph courtesy Joan Lamb’s personal collection; Lamb with Linzie, 2003, photograph taken by author used with permission.

After graduating from high school, Joan attended Baldwin Wallace College in Berea, Ohio, where she studied “music education as an instrumental major.”<sup>40</sup> She remembered taking a methods course where she learned to play oboe: “When I was in college, we were required to take an instrument from a family where we didn’t already play an instrument. I had to take a woodwind, so I chose the oboe. I liked it so much I stayed with it.”<sup>41</sup> She studied privately with Arturo Stefano, who she remembers had been a member of the Cleveland Orchestra in the 1920s. Joan progressed quickly and after three years of study, she played oboe and English horn in the Cleveland Women’s Orchestra, and the Cleveland Philharmonic—a training orchestra for the Cleveland Orchestra.

After graduation in 1940, Lamb was hired to teach instrumental music in the rural Ohio town of Cooperdale; however, she ended up teaching grades 1–12 vocal music along with English and Science to the high school students. Being that she had been an English minor in college, she felt somewhat prepared to teach that subject, but this was not the case for science. Unfortunately, the instrumental assignment never materialized because the school district determined there was no money to purchase instruments, and according to Lamb “there were no instrumental-rental programs in those days.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Lamb interview; *U.S., Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936–2007* [database on-line]. Ancestry.com Operations, Provo, UT, 2015.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

She remembered liking the school, the children, and her fellow teachers; however, she left this job at the end of the year hoping to find an instrumental position. The following summer, her former band director helped her to secure what he thought was an instrumental position in Lakewood, the district where she had attended junior and senior high school. She described her second teaching job as follows: "I was supposed to be developing an instrumental program. It never happened. Mr. Jewel wanted the program and the principal emphatically did not! I wound up teaching fourth grade. . . . When the administration realized what it was going to cost to establish an instrumental program, they decided not to start one."<sup>43</sup>

She was very disappointed with this development and once again, at the end of the school year, looked for another job teaching instrumental music. In the fall of 1942, she secured another music position where she would begin elementary students on instruments. She would travel between two cities, Aurora and Mantua. Finally, in this position, she taught a small elementary band in Mantua. Although she enjoyed her time teaching in Mantua, she was not satisfied with the overall assignment. After three years of disappointing teaching positions, and after the military had drafted her fiancé, she decided to investigate military options for women. She discovered that the Army's WAAC (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps) was recruiting women for an all-female band. Therefore, against her mother's wishes, but with her father's support, Lamb went to Columbus, Ohio, at age twenty-four and enrolled in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), a temporary, volunteer-based civilian branch of the Army.<sup>44</sup>

The band's assignment on the base was similar to other military and WAC bands: build morale by entertaining the troops and perform martial duties. The band played weekly concerts and dances and performed for graduation and pass and reviews. Lamb remembered: "I was having a wonderful time. We gave concerts, we did parades, we did a lot of musical things, and I was very happy in the WAC Band in Daytona."<sup>45</sup> In the spring of 1943, Warrant Officer (WO) Berg informed Lamb that she would be attending the Army Music School in Fort Myer, Virginia, for three months.<sup>46</sup> She remembered he told her: "They want to train you to be a Warrant Officer so you can lead a band."<sup>47</sup> She remembered remarking that she liked her assignment in Daytona and wanted to stay, and he said, "You don't have a choice; it's an order."<sup>48</sup> She left for the school in April of 1943, shortly after receiving this order.

Once in Virginia, "every morning we were picked up by jeep in time to go to breakfast with the men, and then every afternoon, after we had dinner, we were jeeped back to the WAC barracks."<sup>49</sup> Much to Joan's surprise, she and one other woman were the

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid. Telephone conversation with Joan A. Lamb, March 30, 2007.

<sup>45</sup>Lamb interview.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.



**Figure 4.** Graduation photo of the US Army Music School, July 13, 1943. Joan Lamb is in the second row, second from the left.

second group of women to attend this school. Four WAC women had previously attended the Army Music School and graduated earlier in April of 1943, the class just before Joan's.<sup>50</sup> She remembered being amazed that the US Army was training six women to be bandleaders. She had not realized the Army planned to have more than a few WAC bands.<sup>51</sup> See Figure 4.

After approximately three months of instruction, on July 13, 1943, Lamb successfully graduated from the Army Music School. She and her female classmate were promoted to Master Sergeant, a rank lower than all of the men.<sup>52</sup>

Joan was eventually assigned to Fort Des Moines, Iowa, to direct the 400th WAC Band, a position that she had looked forward to having since graduation from the Army Music School and that she longed for after graduating from Baldwin Wallace College.<sup>53</sup> In addition to conducting and rehearsing the 400th band, she was given another important assignment when the commanding officer of Fort Des Moines, Colonel McCoskrie, gave her an order to start an all-African American women's band.<sup>54</sup> This came about

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Women were promoted to a lower rank than the men because the WAC legislation did not yet include the rank of Warrant Officer; Morden, *Women's Army Corps*, 133.

<sup>53</sup>Lamb interview.

<sup>54</sup>Sullivan, "Women's Bands in a Segregated Army."

because several of segregated African American WACs had requested an audition and membership with the 400th Band. These women were reminded of the strict Army segregation policy and were told that the “white” band could not have “black” members in it. Because of this, the black women requested to have their own band that could perform for the black troops at Fort Des Moines. Joan was pleased with the assignment and figured that she was finally getting the instrumental music teaching position she had wanted before the war.

Lamb remembered that she obtained service records for the black women and looked for anyone who had noted a music background. She found enough women who had some music training to form the nucleus of a band. They possessed a variety of performance experience: instrumental ensembles in school, singing in choirs, or playing piano or organ at church. The others chosen for the band had no music experience. She selected them based on family history and their overall probability for success. She also located a potential director for the band, a fellow music educator, Leonora Hull.

Another important contribution made by Joan as the director of the 400th Band was to prepare the ensemble for a tour in the United States and Canada during the national Fourth War Loan Drive—an event to raise money to support the war. Lamb remembered that the band accompanied vocalists, supplied music between script reading, and performed music themselves for the bond selling. Joan did much of the arranging of the musical accompaniment for the show.

Lamb shared that while on these tours they would also perform for wounded soldiers in hospitals.

The hospital itself was quite a shock. They had an auditorium, and there were practically no chairs. When it was time for the concert to begin, they started bringing in people not only in wheel chairs, but also on litters. I don't know why they didn't prepare us for what we were going to see because it was shocking! There were people with three amputees. It was a grisly sight and of course all of us were terribly shocked. And some of the girls didn't react well, so first thing you know here were a bunch of girls crying. I managed to get them all together to play our concert. When we finished a number there was practically no applause. They were all bandaged, but the nurses and doctors applauded. We managed to do a decent performance.<sup>55</sup>

Near the end of the war Lamb had another exciting assignment with the Armed Forces Radio Orchestra in Hollywood, under the direction of Meredith Willson. She sent a letter requesting to play oboe with the ensemble, and within several weeks, she received orders sending her to Hollywood California for the duration of the war. She became one of two WAC women assigned to perform in the male orchestra. She remarked, “I had the time of my life and enjoyed this assignment very much.”<sup>56</sup> She

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<sup>55</sup>Jill M. Sullivan, “Music for the Injured Soldier: A Contribution of American Women’s Military Bands during World War II,” *Journal of Music Therapy* 44, no. 3 (2007): 282–305.

<sup>56</sup>Jill M. Sullivan, “One Music Educators Contributions to WW II: Joan A. Lamb.”

not only worked with many fine musicians, but also with Hollywood stars such as Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra.

In December of 1945, four months after the end of the war, Joan decided that it was also time to seek a discharge and she made the decision to remain in Los Angeles. She went to the Los Angeles Board of Education and made an appointment with the supervisor of instrumental music hoping to secure a teaching position. She was interviewed on the spot after highlighting her musical WAC experiences and more specifically her work with the 404th WAC Band. She was offered a job the same day at Carver Junior High School teaching instrumental music and working with disabled children.<sup>57</sup> She went on to have many successes at this school serving as a principal, and eventually as an administrator in the district.

In 1956, during a yearlong sabbatical, Joan attended the University of Southern California funded by her GI Bill benefits and earned a master's degree in music education writing a music therapy thesis that was inspired by her work with disabled children in her classes.<sup>58</sup> This interest is not surprising because the Army medical department had developed a strong partnership with musicians during the war to help heal the injured soldiers, which was the impetus for the music therapy profession.<sup>59</sup>

When asked how her military work benefited her life, she gave several articulate responses: (1) "I had never done much traveling, and it was a very broadening experience to do the travel that we did." (2) "I had grown up as an only child and kinda sheltered. It was very interesting to me to be thrown into a situation where I lived with a lot of other people who came from many different walks of life. It made me a lot more tolerant. I think being tolerant is what I learned the most." (3) "My experience to go to the Army musical school was very beneficial to me."<sup>60</sup>

### *Mary Tamson Nelson Waterman, March 17, 1920–November 1, 2004*

Mary was born in Utica, New York to two amateur musicians, Gertrude and Earl Nelson.<sup>61</sup> Her parents both played piano, but her father also learned to play saxophone by ear. Mary began studying piano at age five with her parents. She was the eldest of four children, followed by three brothers. Her father was a businessman who owned a successful headstone-monument business who possessed a high school education. Her mother held a teaching degree from a state college in New

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<sup>57</sup>Lamb interview.

<sup>58</sup>Joan A. Lamb, "A Study of the Uses of Music Therapy in the Junior High School and Other Institutions" (Master's thesis, University of Southern California, July 1956).

<sup>59</sup>Sullivan, "Music for the Injured Soldier."

<sup>60</sup>Lamb interview.

<sup>61</sup>The author of this study interviewed Mary Waterman in her home in Greeley, Colorado, over two days, October 4–5, 2003. She was very weak, on oxygen, and had a home care assistant present. She asked me not to photograph her.



**Figure 5.** November 1945.

York. From Utica, her family moved to Homer, New York, where she attended elementary through high school. After graduation, at age 17 she attended the Crane Institute at the Potsdam Normal School, where she was studying to become a school music teacher. She remembered that she took private lessons in college for both voice and piano.<sup>62</sup> While there she studied secondary instruments and learned to play clarinet. Upon graduation from Crane in 1941, she was a music supervisor for one year then at age twenty-two she enlisted in the Women's Army Corps (WAC) on September 1, 1943.<sup>63</sup>

She shared that she enlisted in Syracuse after going into a recruiting office with a girlfriend just for a joke. On the way out of the recruiting office, the officer asked, "Are either of you a musician? We are recruiting for the WAC band and it's a top priority." Mary shared, "I decided to enlist right then to be in the band. If there wouldn't

<sup>62</sup>Today the name is the Crane School of Music, which is part of the State University of New York at Potsdam.

<sup>63</sup>Interview with Mary Nelson Waterman, June 1, 2007, Greeley, Colorado. Military enlistment date, September 1, 1943, found in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs BIRLS Death File, 1850-2010, ancestry.com.

have been a band I wouldn't have enlisted."<sup>64</sup> By the time she arrived home the recruiting officer had called her mother and Mary was greeted with angry questions from her family. "What do you think you're doing?" asked her brother. She reported her mother was upset because she had already signed her teaching contract for the next year and that her mother had thought all of her college schooling would become a waste. Mary had to convince her mother that enlisting to be a musician was a good opportunity because the military was offering her more money.

Mary revealed that she had been a little nervous about her enlistment because she had never played in a band. She played piano and sang in choirs. She discussed her first days in the first women's band in US history:

They were putting a band together at Ft. Des Moines, Iowa to replace the men's band; the men weren't too happy about having to give up their band jobs. We practiced with them learning to maneuver, march, play music—reveille and retreat. . . . We got assigned to barracks then we had a basic training schedule. Women in the band were 20–40 years old and I didn't mind living in the barracks because I had been in a sorority in college. We marched a lot and the shoes were terrible. We got blisters and I ended up in the hospital at one point. We had to get tetanus and smallpox shots and following one of these shots I passed out on the road when marching. The men eventually got reassigned and we took over.<sup>65</sup>

Because of Mary's prewar music education and teaching experience, she was chosen to be one of four women to be sent to the Army Music School to be trained to be a military band director ( see figure 5). She remembered, "We were bused from a WAC camp everyday outside to the Army Music School. Once there, they were all men and just the four of us women. They were all very nice and we were all working to become Warrant Officers. We spent all day at the school for at least three months. The fact that I had a bachelor's degree and transposition experience really helped me." She went on to describe the conducting she had to do. "Well, we had conducting classes and we conducted the U.S. Army Band during those classes. And, I'm telling you, the first time you get up there, you're wondering if your knees are going to hold up. We had problems to solve and of course I had done this type of thing in my degree, but this was a different level and medium. It was a wonderful experience. . . . I discovered that I loved to conduct and I was quite good."<sup>66</sup>

After her time at the Army music school she was assigned to be the director of the 400th WAC Band at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. She conducted and organized the band for martial performances on the base, but also put together choral groups. The band toured Iowa and played for many bond drives raising money for the war. At the end of the war the band was sent to Ft. Mason California where they played for troop ships returning home. The band used Edsel Ford's borrowed yacht to travel into the bay to welcome

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<sup>64</sup>Waterman interview.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

home the men. She remembered that the women's band played popular music and she sang "Sentimental Journey" countless times. When asked which performances she thought were important, she remarked playing in the hospital wards, "I was amazed how much it meant to those injured soldiers."<sup>67</sup>

After leaving the military in 1945 discharged at Fort Mason, she went back to her home state of New York and attended Teachers College at Columbia University using the GI Bill and graduated in 1947 with a master's in music education. She married after graduating and followed her husband to Greeley, Colorado, where he found employment as a college professor. Mary had a piano studio for twenty-six years with forty-four students a week and taught special-education music at University of Northern Colorado and Greeley Evans School District 6 for five years working with autistic and profoundly handicapped students. In the community, she conducted youth church choirs and handbell choirs, and was a member of several professional organizations.<sup>68</sup>

At the end of the interview I asked Mary if she thought the military experience had a lifelong impact. She shared, "I think so, first in that coming from a small town, getting a music education degree, and then in the military experiencing a cross-section of people, of individuals that I probably wouldn't ever have come across in any other way. . . . After my husband was killed, I decided to visit other cultures of the world; I was interested in other people. I think that some of the motivation for these experiences was as a result of being exposed to different people in the Army that I never would have been exposed to if I had stayed in my hometown and taught music."<sup>69</sup>

### *MaryBelle Johns Nissly, 1916–1999*

MaryBelle Nissly, born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania had blazed several important trails for women in instrumental music and the military.<sup>70</sup> As a child she played harmonica and Jew's harp.<sup>71</sup> At age nine, MaryBelle began studying the flute with a member of Sousa's band.<sup>72</sup> In high school she became the first female drum major at Lititz High

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid. "Mary Tamson Nelson Waterman," *Greeley Tribune*, April 11, 2005. Accessed through Ancestry.com. *United States Obituary Collection* [database on-line]. Ancestry.com Operations, Provo, UT, 2006.

<sup>69</sup>Waterman interview.

<sup>70</sup>MaryBelle Nissly was deceased before the author started her research in 2001. The information in this article was located in primary and secondary sources. Ancestry.com. *U.S., Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936–2007* [database on-line]. ancestry.com Operations, Provo, UT, 2015; Jill Sullivan, "MaryBelle Johns Nissly," in *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd edition, 2013, [http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/subscriber/book/omo\\_gmo](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/subscriber/book/omo_gmo).

<sup>71</sup>From Jew's Harp to Brass Band: The Sage of WO ("Miss") Nissly, unknown source, date, author.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.



**Figure 6.** Left to right, MaryBelle in her drum major uniform from Lititz High School in 1932. Major Nissly, Director of the Women in the Air Force Band, 1961.

Source: Photographs courtesy of Dixie Johnson's personal collection, a member of the WAF Band.

School, Pennsylvania, and it has been reported that she was the first female high school drum major in eastern Pennsylvania<sup>73</sup> ( see figure 6). She earned her first music education degree from West Chester State Teachers College (Bachelor of Science in Music Education) in 1937. After graduation, she became music supervisor of Lancaster Township Schools. In 1942, she enlisted in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC, later WAC) and played piccolo and flute in the 400th Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) Band at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, conducting the group until she was sent to attend the Army Music School, Fort Meyer, Virginia, to become an Army Band Leader. After graduation, she was assigned to the 400th WAC Band for one month and then reassigned to the 401st WAC Band, Fort Hamilton, New York. In 1944, she became the first woman in the Army to receive the rank of Warrant Officer.<sup>74</sup> After the war, she was an instrumental music teacher in Manheim Township Schools (Pennsylvania) and concurrently pursued a graduate degree in music education at the University of Pennsylvania earning a Master's of Science in Music Education in

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Sullivan, *Bands of Sisters*.

1949.<sup>75</sup> In 1951, because of her outstanding work as a band director during WWII, she was offered and she accepted a Captain's commission in the Air Force to organize and conduct the Women in the Air Force (WAF) Band. She directed this band for its ten-year existence.<sup>76</sup> In 1965, she moved to Little Rock Air Force base and remained in the service until 1968 eventually earning the rank of Major. Her last music position, which followed her military career was at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock, as an assistant professor of music.<sup>77</sup> She conducted a band and organized and conducted the first chamber orchestra at the school.

### *Charlotte Louise Plummer Owen, 1918–2004*

Charlotte Louise Plummer was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to musicians John and Grace Plummer.<sup>78</sup> She had an old brother who played trombone. Eventually the family moved to Eugene, Oregon. Charlotte's father was an "orchestra musician" and traveling salesman. Her mother was a pianist.<sup>79</sup> Charlotte studied piano with her mother starting at age five. She started saxophone in third grade. Once somewhat proficient, she performed weekly with the family's dance band then switched to clarinet in junior high. At Eugene High School, she studied with the University of Oregon's band director and clarinetist John Stehn, which resulted in her becoming an award-winning clarinetist. Upon graduation, she studied music education at the University of Oregon, and during this time she was hired to direct the university high school band part-time.<sup>80</sup>

After graduation in 1939,<sup>81</sup> she was an assistant band director in La Grande, Oregon, and played in an all-women's dance band in California called "Babe Egan's Hollywood Redheads."<sup>82</sup> In 1942, she moved to Commerce High School in Portland to teach

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<sup>75</sup>"Nissly," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*; D. L. Johnson: *The U.S. WAF Band Story* (Springfield, VA, 2004).

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid; Johnson, *The U.S. WAF Band Story*.

<sup>78</sup>Charlotte Owen was the inspiration for this WWII women's band research. The author met her in December of 2000 at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago, Illinois, and interviewed her in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in spring 2001.

<sup>79</sup>1930 United States Federal Census, document search for Charlotte Plummer. Social security records via ancestry.com Social Security applications and claims index. Interview with Plummer Owen, Spring 2001, Ann Arbor, MI.

<sup>80</sup>US city directory record confirming that Charlotte was a student at University of Ohio in 1939. ancestry.com; interview with Plummer.

<sup>81</sup>US Yearbooks in 1938 -1940 have Charlotte listed in the *Oregana*, the University of Oregon's yearbook, again corroborating her history as she told me in her interview. However, this conflicts with what Charlotte told me that she had graduated in 1939 from the University of Oregon. A 1940 city directory shows that she was a "student"; Jill M. Sullivan, "A History of the Marine Corps Women's Reserve Band." *Journal of Band Research* 42 (Fall 2006): 1-45.

<sup>82</sup>Sullivan, "A History of Marine Corps Reserve"; US city directory lists Charlotte in 1941 in La Grande, Oregon as a teacher, which confirms Charlotte's interview information.



**Figure 7.** Master Sergeant Plummer, 1944, photograph courtesy of Owen’s personal collection; Plummer Owen, age eighty-three in her music studio in her house in Ann Arbor Michigan.

instrumental and vocal ensembles.<sup>83</sup> She reported that one reason she quit her job as a high school band teacher during the war was because her entire male tuba section had quit school to take lucrative jobs at the shipping docks. She had also heard from her university clarinet professor that the Marines were starting an all-female band and she enlisted specifically to play in the women’s marine band.

Besides her variety of performance experience, Charlotte, uniquely, had high school conducting experience. However, she remembered that her first conducting opportunity was in kindergarten, when her teacher asked her to lead a group of children playing rhythm instruments for a scheduled school performance: “They didn’t have a boy to do it, and I’d had piano. They dressed me in a sailor’s suit and we gave a performance in front of the parents.”<sup>84</sup>

In September 1943, she enlisted in the Marine Corps Women’s Reserve (MCWR) to play clarinet in the band. After one week of training in the Marine Corps Women’s Reserve Band by the male members of The United States Marine Band, they selected Charlotte as the likely leader (see Figure 7). The Marine Band mentors finalized their recommendation for Charlotte Plummer and went back to Washington, DC. Plummer commented during her interview about the appointment as conductor of the Marine Corps Women’s Reserve Band, “There weren’t many women at that time that had had

<sup>83</sup>Commerce HS yearbook, US School Yearbooks, 1943, the *Ledger* yearbook, 65.

<sup>84</sup>Interview September 8, 2002, home of Charlotte Plummer, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

any experience directing bands. So it was [that] I was in the right place at the right time.”<sup>85</sup> Plummer led the women’s band for twenty-five months—November 1943 through December 1945—the entire period of its active duty.<sup>86</sup>

Plummer turned down opportunities to be an officer. She shared why this was the case, “As an officer, I wouldn’t be directing the band, and it was more important for me to stay in music. . . and stay with the band, and not be in a separate squad room, or a separate sealed quarters, or whatever. Because it was important that we all got along together well.”<sup>87</sup> Plummer proved to be an outstanding choice as a leader, not only for her musicianship, but for her even-keeled personality and her ability to build a strong sense of community among the band personnel.

Andrew Bodnar wrote about turning the baton over to Plummer. “When we acquired the talents of Charlotte Plummer, we knew we had no problems there because she was a thorough musician, a fine pianist, and knew music well. . . . She was definitely the potential leader. I handed the baton to her . . . the response was tremendous.”<sup>88</sup> She was appointed to the rank of Master Technical Sergeant and in this capacity, she was the first woman band director in the Marine Corps.

She lead the women’s marine band on several tours throughout the United States, on national radio broadcasts, sang in trios, and fronted the women’s swing band with her clarinet and saxophone. She was in charge of all the martial performances at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina—the marine base where the women’s band was stationed throughout the war. She was the first woman to conduct the US Marine Corps Band when the famed men’s band performed at Camp Lejeune.

In 1945, after the war ended, she married, played principal clarinet in regional orchestras, raised a family, and taught private lessons for more than sixty years. From 1986 to 2001, she conducted the Ann Arbor Civic Band. In 1997, she was invited to direct a band of women veterans at the dedication of the Women in Military Service of America Memorial in Washington, DC.<sup>89</sup>

When asked what her military experience meant, she responded as a leader: “Well, it’s just a feeling of camaraderie that has lasted over 60 years. I think when you share experiences, like we had—we did everything together for two years—it draws you close together. And, we know each others’ husbands, and kids in some cases now grandchildren and great grandchildren. . . . It’s just a nice feeling—just old friends.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>Sullivan, “A History of Marine Corps Reserve.”

<sup>89</sup>“Marine Corps Women’s Reserve Band,” *Music Educators Journal* 30, no. 1 (1943): 26, 51; P. Meid, *Marine Corps Women’s Reserve in World War II* (Washington, DC, 1968); E. Stone and B. S. Medin, “Music Women Marines: The Marine Corps Women’s Reserve Band in World War II” (unpublished manuscript, 1981).

<sup>90</sup>Plummer Owen interview in Ann Arbor.

After the war she was a significant inspiration to the women who played in the Ann Arbor Civic Band, area women band directors, and her private woodwind students.

### *Adah Straus Jaffer, 1914–2014*

Adah grew up in Richmond, Virginia, the daughter of upper-middle-class Jewish parents who were college educated.<sup>91</sup> Her father was employed as a contractor to a hospital and the 1930 census reported that he worked as a “bacteriologist” in a hospital and had served in the Army during World War I. Her mother had a degree in physics from the University of Michigan. Most in the family played an instrument. Her mother played piano and sang; brother played the flute; sister played the piano. Adah played violin and began studying when she was seven and attended Ginter Park Elementary. She played in orchestras all throughout her schooling. In 1931, she graduated from John Marshall High School in Richmond, “a segregated school.” After high school, Adah attended Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, majoring in music education and playing violin in the Evanston Orchestra. After receiving her undergraduate degree at age twenty-one, she returned to her home state where she secured a band and orchestra teaching job from 1936–1939 in Hampton at George Wythe Junior High. While teaching, she was asked to learn to play the French horn and play in a WPA all-female orchestra with a female director in Richmond. In the summers she went to Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York to study French horn. After teaching for three years, she decided to go back to school and earn a master’s degree in music education; she attended Columbia University in New York City.<sup>92</sup>

She wanted to serve her country like her father and grandfather had done and she chose the Army because “my dad had been in WW I and he was very pleased. Of course it was Army and I never considered any thing else. Also, I had dark brown hair and I figured I would look better in Army clothes.”<sup>93</sup> She enlisted on July 26, 1943, because “I wanted to do something for the Jews”<sup>94</sup> (see Figure 8).

When she entered the service she was assigned to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, where she played her French horn in the 403rd Women’s Army Corps Band and became the

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<sup>91</sup>The author interviewed Adah Straus in her home in Coconut Grove, Florida, in November 2004. Adah had mentioned that their family had a servant and a personal driver, hence my use of the word “wealthy.” The servant was corroborated on a 1930 census form accessed through ancestry.com

<sup>92</sup>Unknown author, “Northwestern University Remembrances: The War Years and NU’s Response, class of 1935” 14; Straus, Adah, interview at her home in Miami, Florida, November 19, 2004.

<sup>93</sup>Straus, interview.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.



**Figure 8.** Sergeant Adah Straus, 1943; Adah Straus age 79, member of the Greater Miami Symphonic Band.

Source: Photographs courtesy of Adah Straus's personal collection, 1943, 1993.

director of the women's swing band, fronting it with her violin. Near the end of the war, the 403rd band was reassigned to Charleston, South Carolina, where they would musically welcome home the returning soldiers from the war. To help with this assignment and because she had much more music education than all in the band, Adah was chosen to attend three months of morale school, which was schooling on how to best help soldiers re-acclimate to home life. It was a military school developed for pseudo-music therapy training. Adah learned to create musical shows for the hospital patients in the wards, how to choose music best suited for recovering soldiers, how to help soldiers learn to play musical instruments and incorporate soldiers musical talents in shows. It was a terrific education that she immediately put to use with the women band members while at Stark General Hospital in South Carolina.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>95</sup>Adah's special training was part of the Army's Morale Branch, which changed names to the Special Service Branch. Near the end of the war, all women's army military bands were placed under the Special Service Branch and were assigned to military hospitals to help rehabilitate the returning injured soldiers. For more information on this topic, see Howard C. Bronson, "Music Wartime Services," *Music Educators Journal* 29, no. 1 (1942): 45, 56–57; Jill M. Sullivan, "Music for the Injured Soldier."

After the war, Adah along with many military band women from WWII played with a touring all-female industry drum and bugle corps called the Hormel Girls.<sup>96</sup> After a year in this organization, she returned to New York City and created and starred in a solo act as a violinist/comedian. She called herself “Virginia Richmond” and performed for six years. She mentioned that she just couldn’t imagine returning to teach in a music classroom and she never did. Eventually she met her husband and they moved to Miami, Florida, where she raised a family. In time she joined the Greater Miami Symphonic Band and played horn in that musical organization for decades, into her late eighties, “as 8th horn.”<sup>97</sup>

I asked her if she benefited from the WAC, and she replied, “Physically. I think it’s one of the reasons I’m still around. . . . I remember we were all dressed in our uniforms for something and I remember passing a mirror in a drugstore or a glass reflection and I looked in and I thought, “I look good.”<sup>98</sup>

I asked her what her proudest moment was in the military and she said, “earning the rank. . . that was not only my proudest moment in the band, that was one of my proudest moments in my life. Getting that three-up and two-down and the fact that they sent it to the newspapers was really meaningful. I was very happy.”<sup>99</sup>

## Conclusions and Implications

The military gave women the opportunity to conduct professionally, and music education degrees and teaching positions prepared the women for the challenges presented during the war. The six women music educators found themselves not only directing a band, but being relied upon for diverse leadership and performing skills: performing as soloists, administering the bands, creating entertainment for the troops, creating shows for war bond tours, composing music, arranging music, performing with movie stars, performing on the radio, performing for and working with injured men in hospitals, receiving special training as the nation’s first music therapists, and helping to pay for the war by traveling the country performing for millions of Americans who bought war bonds to hear their performances. For all of this work, women received service awards and medals throughout the war and upon decommission from the military.

All the women in this study had parents who were musicians; most also had musical siblings. Several reported performing together with their family. Several of the women learned to play an instrument at age five—piano (Charlotte, Mary, Leonora), harmonica (MaryBelle). One began violin study at age seven (Adah) and another learned trumpet starting at age twelve (Joan). Most reported playing music in a school band or orchestra (Adah, violin; Charlotte, saxophone and clarinet; Joan, trumpet and cello; MaryBelle, flute and piccolo). Two had never played in a band prior to the

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<sup>96</sup>Jill M. Sullivan and Danelle D. Keck, “The Hormel Girls,” *American Music*, Fall (2007): 282–311.

<sup>97</sup>Straus interview.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid. Adah is referring to the design of the sergeant-rank insignia.

military (Leonora, Mary). A few of the women reported participating in instrumental contests via their school music programs (Adah, Charlotte, Joan, MaryBelle). All women reported taking private lessons from a young age (piano, violin, trumpet) and eventually learned to play other instruments (clarinet, cello, flute, French horn, oboe, organ, saxophone, voice). Five had undergraduate college degrees in music education, and one had a Bachelor's of Music (Leonora). Four earned graduate music education degrees before or after the war (Adah, Joan, Mary, MaryBelle).

Several had taught private lessons before the war (Charlotte, Leonora, Mary). Two had played in community, family, semiprofessional dance bands and orchestras before the war (Adah, Charlotte).

All women had taught in some full-time capacity before the war with three to five years of teaching experience. Two were music supervisors (Mary, MaryBelle). Four were band teachers (Adah, Charlotte, Joan, MaryBelle) and one also taught orchestra (Adah). One was a college piano and theory teacher (Leonora).

Five of the six left their music teaching jobs to enlist primarily to play in a military band (Adah, Charlotte, Joan, Mary, MaryBelle). One left their teaching position because they were tired of music teaching and wanted to find a new occupation (Leonora). Secondary reasons for leaving were that their jobs had become unsatisfactory in some way, loss of students to lucrative jobs, teaching subjects they felt unqualified to teach.

Once in the military, all the women went through basic training. All were automatically assigned to a military band after basic training due to their credentials and experience; none had to pass an audition to be in the band. Two women were recruited to attend Officer Candidate School (Charlotte, Joan), but both refused on the basis of wanting to be in the band and live in the same quarters as the bandswomen (being an officer would separate their housing). All women were eventually chosen to conduct a band because of their music education backgrounds and their performance experiences prior to the war. Two women had no previous experience conducting a band and had to learn on the job from senior military band officers (Leonora, Mary).

There was much to learn administratively and musically for the new role of director of a military band. The women learned the military's martial duties (uniform details, scheduling, how to march, what music to play and when, etc.) from female and male officers who were not musicians. Women learned the musical aspects of working with military music ensembles (marching, concert, dance) from male bandmen at Fort Des Moines (Joan), Fort Oglethorpe (Adah), Daytona Beach (MaryBelle), Camp Lejeune (Charlotte) with visiting US Marine Band members, or at the Army Music School in Virginia (Joan, Mary, MaryBelle).

All had to learn the administrative task of taking a band on national war-bond tours, and preparing musical programs that would arouse the public's patriotism to purchase a war bond. All women directors had to learn how to interact with and select music to perform for the injured soldiers in hospitals.

Four women earned ranks equivalent to men for conducting or assistant conducting a women's military band: Adah, Sergeant; Charlotte, Master Sergeant; Mary, Warrant Officer; MaryBelle, Warrant Officer. Two remained at lower ranks with no explanation: Joan, Master Sergeant; Leonora, Sergeant.

After the war, all had earned military-veteran benefits. Many communicated that they had used the GI Bill (Adah, Joan, Mary, MaryBelle) to pay for college tuition, and some had utilized federal housing loans, medical benefits, and civil-service test credits.<sup>100</sup>

Immediately after the war, most continued a musical life. Three continued teaching private lessons (Charlotte, Leonora, Mary). Four went back to college for graduate music education degrees (Adah, Joan, Mary, MaryBelle). Three got married (Charlotte, Leonora, Mary). Four became professional musicians (Adah, Charlotte, Joan, Leonora). Three went back to teaching in the schools (Joan, MaryBelle, Mary). Charlotte spent decades as the conductor of the Ann Arbor Civic Band. MaryBelle eventually was recruited back into the military and became a Captain when she conducted the WAF (Women's Air Force Band) until 1961. Afterwards, she became a college music professor conducting instrumental ensembles at the University of Arkansas. Two of the women became involved with music therapy (an emerging profession) in the schools working with disabled students in Greeley, Colorado, and Los Angeles, California (Mary, Joan). Several of the women spent decades teaching private lessons (Charlotte, Leonora, Mary, MaryBelle). Several had children after the war (Adah, Charlotte, Leonora, Mary).

When asked sixty years after their military service what this experience meant to their lives, most believed their military band experiences were life changing, opened doors for future employment after the war in music education, music-performance careers, education administration and music therapy. Several believed they obtained employment because of their military service (Adah, Charlotte, Joan, MaryBelle, Mary). Additionally, personal lives were affected. Two met their husbands because of their service (Charlotte, Mary). All felt they had made lifelong friendships with their band sisters and all stayed connected with them until the end of their lives. This perhaps is credit to their fine leadership having created and established a community of service, learning, music making, and strong bonds. The bonds were also likely due to the emotional turmoil they all experienced when their nation is at war. They became close and like sisters out of necessity for comfort and cohesive service to perform a job well.

All felt they developed life confidence believing they could accomplish anything after serving in the military. Several said it was the best thing that happened to them in their lives (Adah, Joan). All were very proud of their military service.

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<sup>100</sup>Women in the military during World War II were considered reservists; therefore, at the end of the war they were decommissioned. Some military bandswomen continued performing after the war with the Hormel Girls, an industry band specifically for military bandswomen. See note 97. In 1948, three years after the war, bandswomen could enlist or re-enlist to participate in the 14th Army Band, which lasted until 1976 when army bandswomen were integrated into the 14th Army Band, and women were integrated into men's Army bands. See Therese Kerbey's dissertation on the 14th Army Band cited in note 14. In 1951, the Women in the Air Force (WAF) activated the WAF Band, which lasted for a decade conducted by MaryBelle Nissly of the Women's Army Corps during WWII.

## *Implications*

In the 1940s, middle class women's instrumental performance opportunities were limited to regional women's orchestras, all-girl swing bands, local community bands, elementary, secondary school, and postsecondary school bands. It would have been a rare opportunity for a young woman to travel the country in a professional concert band, amateur marching band, or a swing band, although it was done, it was not common and perhaps not deemed acceptable for a woman—being away from their family, safety of travel, and the uncertainty of performances from day to day or week to week. The military band opportunity gave women the chance to perform in a steady position for several years while traveling the country selling war bonds and serving their country. Although they were primarily performing, women were expected to use an assortment of artistic processes, such as arranging, composing, listening, performing, and teaching facilitated by different types of ensemble experiences (bands, chamber ensembles, choirs, jazz combos, marching bands, swing bands) and solo opportunities. The lifetime capital they gained from the military was affective, cultural, and monetary. Women today have career opportunities as musicians in the military because of these trailblazing women and their exemplary musical service. Similar to World War II military bands, today women who possess diverse musical literacies will likely fare well in today's military ensembles.

The World War II women musicians perhaps inspired a new generation of women instrumental conductors, instrumental teachers, or military musicians while traveling the country performing in front of millions of people and on radio broadcasts utilizing a variety of musical styles and genres. These are the foremothers of women instrumentalists in military bands and perhaps even school instrumental music teachers in the United States. They certainly were trailblazers who opened doors to women military bandswomen, such as the Women in the Air Force Band that existed from 1951–1961 or the all-female 14th Army band that lasted until 1976. Lastly, without a doubt the impact of their usefulness to serve their troops and the nation was never questioned.

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