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Katie Marshall

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‘Life without you in the army – well, honey, I hate to even think of it.’: Esther Herbert, Marvyl Doyle and Lesbian Connection in Second World War America

KATIE MARSHALL*

University of Sussex, UK

Email: km635@sussex.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Lesbian life in the U.S. Women’s Army Corps (WAC) flourished on the bases, with intense social change and new opportunities for community bringing lesbians across the country together in previously unfathomable ways. Utilising both new primary source materials and existing scholarship on lesbian connection and experiences – specifically, Esther Herbert and Marvyl Doyle, who met in the WAC in 1943 and began a lifelong romantic relationship – this paper will discuss their relationship in the wider context of lesbian connection and culture formed as a direct result of lesbians joining the WAC.

Introduction

The period from 1930 to 1945 saw an immense level of social change that affected queer Americans more prominently than previous world events had, bridging two of these eras together; the more isolated decade of the 1930s with the sudden blossoming of a more widespread community in the 1940s. The emergence of the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) in 1942 and its subsequent transition to the Women’s Army Corps in July 1943 was the beginning of a turning point specifically for lesbians, the extent to which is seen in the writings of Esther Herbert and Marvyl Doyle, with their letters and photographs making up the base primary source material for this article. Further sources, namely Pat Bond; an actress who joined the WAC in 1945, the wartime residents of the ‘St. Elsewhere’ building in Boston, MA, and contributors to popular magazines such as *Frontiers* and *Mother Jones*, support this claim. Allan Bérubé writes that ‘the current spirit of resistance and solidarity predates

*Katie Marshall is a graduate of the M.A. in Sexual Dissidence at the University of Sussex, with a focus on LGBT+ history and popular culture in the United States. Her academic interests include lesbian life, living, and memory.

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the 1960s. It was born under fire during the Second World War,' and the solidarity he refers to emerged in the United States with the creation of the WAC – the first instance of lesbians being able to connect on a large scale in US history.¹ Utilising these individual case studies, the author puts forward the argument that the unique environments and cultures across the bases, created by the intense internal migration of enlistees in a very short period, had a tangible effect on the wider lesbian scene in the United States, and aims to build upon existing scholarship by introducing new materials into the literature. By taking a deeper look at individuals whose lives have been memorialised, a more detailed picture of lesbians in the WAC can be built, and, in turn, a better understanding of how their lives help expand our historical understanding of the time.

Community spaces and groups weren't entirely absent from the landscape before the war – wider-known bars began to spring up in major cities through the 1920s and 1930s, and small-scale community groups were formed even before then, such as the Salt Lake City Bohemian Club in Utah, an explicitly-queer space which opened to women in 1891.² The WAC wasn't the first lesbian community, however, it was the first on a national scale – clubs and bars were, by necessity, site-specific, while the earliest known widespread lesbian periodical *Vice Versa* would not see publication until shortly after the war in 1947. To define community in this context is to emphasise that it rests on a feeling of belonging, solidarity, and mutual support; it isn't necessarily a physical place, indeed, it may be composed of several physical places. Much as the contemporary queer community transcends boundaries and borders, the WAC can be viewed in a similar way. It is an atmosphere, a shared commonality, a sense of belonging and affirmation. The WAC isn't a singular, defined, physical space, but a collection of spaces, which provide a sense of belonging and community. Pat Bond, an interviewee of historian Bérubé, states 'I just knew the army was full of lesbians, so I ran off and joined the army,' – the members, reputation, and ability to be together both physically and in spirit, made the introduction of the WAC a defining change in how a lesbian community had previously existed.³ It brought lesbians together from across the country in a way no other group, location, or media had previously been able to, making it an instrumental first in the formation of the United States' lesbian community.

¹Allan Bérubé, 'Coming Out.' *Mother Jones*, February 1983.

²Maren Peterson. 'Women in the LGBTQIA+ Community: Stories of Utah Women - Utah State Archives and Records Service.

<https://archivesnews.utah.gov/2020/06/30/women-in-the-lgbtqia-community-stories-of-utah-women/>. Accessed 1 May 2023.

³Pat Bond. 'Tapioca Tapestry.' In Marcy Adelman's *Long Time Passing: Lives of Older Lesbians*, (Boston: Alyson, 1986) pp.164-175.

Bérubé is very much the core voice at this particular area of queer history, and has done extensive work on the lives, struggles, and impact of queer military members, most famously through his 1990 book *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*. Much has been discussed on the Women's Army Corps in general, with notable texts such as *Creating GI Jane* by Leisa D. Meyer, in which Meyer takes an in-depth look at sexual policing and morality, including the pervasive public rumours on lesbians, *The Women's Army Corps* by Bettie J. Morden, *The Women's Army Corps* by Mattie E. Treadwell, and site-specific works such as *Colorado Women in World War II* by Gail M. Beaton, although the scope of these texts extends far beyond lesbian WACs. While these existing works and case studies are fundamental in this article, and in this research more broadly, particularly the experiences of Pat Bond, whose recollections will be used to contextualise later writing, this article will introduce the papers of Esther Herbert and Marvyl Doyle into the scholarship of this period, with the aim of building upon the established literature and utilising their lives to contribute to the wider picture of lesbianism within the WAC. Additionally, the depth of these materials, with hundreds of letters written between 1944 and 1958, hours of recorded interviews, multiple photographic albums, and extensive collection notes, gives an incredible insight into the day-to-day of lesbian romance in wartime. The explicit nature makes for astonishing reading, with an assortment of pet names, references to romantic and sexual acts, and clear intimacy in practically every letter. Moreover, they contain significant historic value; not only do they contain an in-depth look at Esther and Marvyl's relationship, but also to their day-to-day lives on the bases, helping paint a clearer picture particularly of San Bernardino Air Force Base, later the Norton Air Force Base, where Esther would spend the majority of her enlistment.⁴

Esther and Marvyl met in the WAC in 1943, beginning a lifelong relationship that would only end with Marvyl's death in 2001. The two began a deep friendship upon meeting in their enlistment, which quickly became a romantic relationship, one that changed upon Marvyl being transferred to Patterson Field, Ohio, while Esther remained at San Bernardino, California, but remained an intense, intimate connection even during their separation.⁵ Both would find their own communities, staying in touch in what reads through a contemporary lens as a lovers-on-a-break scenario, before reuniting in 1955 and remaining partners continuously from then on. During the war, Esther would meet Roberta 'Bobbie' Behr, pursuing a relationship with her while keeping close communication with Marvyl. Between them, there are hundreds of letters describing their daily lives in great detail, as well as the evident affection between the two of them even during their break. The strength and depth of their relationship is a remarkable case study, but not one that would have been wholly unusual – they represent huge

⁴ONE Archives at the University of Southern California. Coll2013-030, 'Esther Herbert and Marvyl Doyle Papers and Photographs'. Military Records of Marvyl Doyle.
⁵Ibid.

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numbers of lesbians who were able to emerge through the more isolated years of the 1930s and flourish in the new opportunities for connection and community that the WAC provided. Esther and Marvyl's lives strongly support the existing conclusion that the Women's Army Corps was a life changing institution for many, not just for the widely-applicable reasons of wartime changes, but because it specifically facilitated the formulation of a nationwide lesbian community in a way no other organisation had managed. And it did so entirely unintentionally.

The late-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries were isolating eras for a number of reasons, societal attitudes were shifting, influenced by the rise of sexology, to become a lot more focused on singling out anyone displaying 'invert' behaviour, and source materials indicate a rising sensation of first-hand loneliness within queer people. Sexology, the study of human sexuality and sexual behaviour, saw a particular rise through the late nineteenth century into the turn of the twentieth, with sexologists such as Havelock Ellis, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing publishing materials on human sexuality, fetishism, and homosexual, or 'invert', behaviour. While many of these materials focused on male sexual behaviours, Havelock Ellis briefly touches upon what he terms 'sexual inversion in women', discussing homosexual behaviour between women with somewhat less moral or ethical judgment than many of his peers, albeit with a heavily-pathologised focus. Much of this work was happening in Europe, and the pathologisation and medicalisation of human sexuality had certainly taken root across the western world. Historian Ronald Beyer writes that 'many homosexuals who were willing to express themselves publicly welcomed the psychiatric effort to wrest control of the social definition of their lives from moral and religious authorities. Better sick than criminal, better the focus of therapeutic concern than the target of the brutal law'.⁶ As Beyer goes on to discuss, much of this view had dissipated by the late 1960s, but speaks to the desperation of queer Americans in the earlier decades. 'They [hospitals and asylums] ended up with whole wards full of homosexuals. A lot of these people had never before been with other people like themselves. Perhaps they never knew before that there were other people,' writes Bérubé in the *Chicago Reader*.⁷ Common 'treatments' within the wards included aversion therapy, in which, for example, patients were given chemicals to induce nausea and vomiting when they looked at photographs or tokens from their lovers, electroconvulsive therapy, and hypnosis.⁸ The fierce isolation queer people faced during the thirties and prior is evident in these accounts, particularly in reflections

⁶Ronald Beyer. *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981) p.9.

⁷Allan Bérubé. 'Past Times: Unearthing the History of Gay GIs', (Chicago: *Chicago Reader*, 1982)

⁸Tommy Dickinson. "Curing queers": *Mental nurses and their patients, 1935–74*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp.39-90.

where survivors looked back on psychiatric incarceration as the first glimpse into a community they'd ever had.

The 1930s in particular saw a peak of this loneliness – Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, authors of *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* wrote: 'Narrators identify the 1930s as qualitatively more difficult than any period to follow. They consider World War II the turning point in lesbian life and judge it impossible for anyone who did not live through the 1930s to imagine what they were like.'⁹ Additionally, many of the public spaces gay men had carved out for themselves were not always receptive to lesbians – many were actively hostile to them. Kennedy and Davis write 'open spaces like parks or beaches, commonly used by gay men, were too exposed for women to express interest in other women without constant male surveillance and harassment.'¹⁰ Even the tentative spaces queer Americans had begun to gather in and use for themselves disadvantaged lesbians – it was uncommon for women to be out without a male escort, and social convention remained an additional barrier to the use of private spaces. While many single gay men would have the option of using their own homes, women commonly lived in the family home until marriage; if they chose to live alone, it was often in smaller spaces with neighbours either side and heavy scrutiny. The haven of the bars was a privilege, often providing the only escape from the constant surveillance of unaccompanied and unmarried women, but queer bars were far from ideal for anybody who did not fit their typical, white-male clientele, and were difficult to find outside of major metropolitan areas.

The background of Prohibition added a layer of difficulty for any Americans looking for nightlife, but to find a lesbian-specific bar through the 1920s into the early 1930s was no mean feat; those that existed were shut down fast, and the necessity for word-of-mouth as their main method of attracting new clients meant that anybody not in certain circles would likely go through life with no idea the bars existed in the first place. A popular, and formative, lesbian bar in New York City was Eve's Hangout, run by Eva Kotchever, born Chawa Złoczower in Poland in 1891. The bar was shut down in a brutal raid in 1927, with Kotchever deported from the United States and patrons caught in the raid arrested.¹¹ Not only was this a devastating loss for the lesbian

⁹Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, (New York: Routledge, 1993) p.102.

¹⁰Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, p.98.

¹¹Emily Palmer. 'Overlooked No More: Eve Adams, Writer Who Gave Lesbians a Voice' <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/02/obituaries/eve-adams-overlooked.html> Accessed 6 November 2025; and Elizabeth Evens. 'Policewomen, Plainclothes, and Pelvic Examinations: NYPD Abortion Investigations, 1913 – 1926.'

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community within Greenwich Village, but it also sent a clear message of the way their spaces would be dealt with. Eve's Hangout existed only for two years, but even that was considered a lengthy time by those who had been burned by the closures of other bars. Even when these bars did manage to surface, the necessity for community support and patrons often restricted them to urban areas. As such, the existence of a handful of lesbian bars across the country isn't necessarily synonymous with a prominent community, nor is it representative of the landscape for the majority of lesbians across the US. The bars provided valuable spaces for those who could access them, but contextually, that was a very small percentage of the wider community – the isolation of individuals and the lack of access to a community space, while allowing lesbians to often slip under the radar in a way that afforded them protection in the anti-queer landscape, was ultimately responsible for the disconnect and separation from other lesbians that the vast majority of them faced.

The WAC would inadvertently offer a certain level of protection to its members; a degree of caution had to be exercised throughout, but, and as was also seen with male GIs, there was a degree of safety in knowing that the necessity of enlistees was the immediate priority for the higher-ups. A pamphlet entitled 'Sex Hygiene Course' from May 1945 was distributed to some WAC officers, with a four-page section on homosexuality, giving us first-hand insight into official attitudes and guidelines.¹² Immediately, it is emphasised that the role of officers is not to go searching or persecuting individuals, but to escalate only if same-sex interest or activity 'undermine[s] the efficiency of the individuals concerned and the stability of the group'.¹³ There is heavy insistence on acting only with proof of homosexual behaviour, rather than theorising or listening to hearsay, however, the booklet is clear that any woman who is found to be engaging in lesbian behaviour should be immediately discharged. Considering the emphasis on concrete proof, combined with a general historic dismissal of female sexuality and agency, it seems it would have taken a lot for a WAC to be dismissed on grounds of lesbianism – even these guidelines acknowledge that finding appropriate evidence would be difficult, and encourage officers to attempt to guide, supervise, and transfer enlistees to other bases before discharge is considered. There are even steps laid out on redirecting lesbian desire into a 'hero-worship' for officers, who were also encouraged – even reassured – that 'barracks life on the whole reduces the opportunity for such indulgence'.¹⁴ As the women in this

<https://socialhistory.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Evens-SHS-poster-updated.pdf>. Accessed 8 June 2025.

¹²*Sex Hygiene Course*, (Washington DC: United States War Department, 1945), p.24-27

¹³*Ibid.*, p.24.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p.26.

article prove, barracks life may have reduced some opportunities and privacy, but it certainly did not dissuade or eliminate lesbian activity altogether.

For many, joining the WAC would be the first time they had left their home state, for some, it would be the first time they had left their hometown, and the bases quickly became an area of opportunity for lesbians seeking connection. Some of those enlisting came from larger cities like Chicago, IL and Rochester, NY, places where the chances of encountering other lesbians were statistically higher, some came from rural towns with less than a thousand residents. By 1944 the WAC already had a reputation; Pat Bond jokingly remembers that 'it was one reason I wanted to join. It was 90 percent gay.'¹⁵ This particular statistic is, naturally, a little facetious, even bases with a higher anecdotal number of lesbians would not be reaching numbers anywhere close to ninety percent, but does provide some insight into the rumours that caught the ears of young lesbians considering a military career. Enlistees would have known, objectively, that they weren't running off to a lesbian utopia, particularly as much of this spreading reputation was designed to discredit the WAC and its enlistees, however, even a hint of community could have been enough of a promise to prompt them to join. Nicky Jones, a lesbian enlistee, jokingly said 'so what does one do when one's heart is broken? One joins the Army!' in *Frontiers* magazine, in the context of discussing a string of encounters with women in the time up to her enlistment.¹⁶ Jones makes it sound like a simple process, and indeed, the loosening of screening standards was subject of much debate throughout the war. However, as Leisa D. Meyer writes, many components of screening policy could be utilised as a kind of informal method to avoid recruiting lesbians: 'class background, education, personality, and behaviour' are all used, with WAC leaders honing in on 'masculine' women as particular targets.¹⁷ Throughout the course of the War, screening policies targeting lesbians developed further, even getting as explicit as instructing officers to look out for 'local reputations' and 'homosexual tendencies' in recruitment by the end of 1942, asking enlistees if they were seeking to 'be with other girls', and escalated throughout 1943 and 1944 in response to external slander campaigns against the WAC.¹⁸

Pat Bond's experiences diverted somewhat from the earlier 'golden age' of the WAC through to the purges that began in the later part of 1945. In her initial enlistment, her training saw her in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, which – alongside San Bernardino, where Esther and Marvyl would both be stationed – had a flourishing lesbian

¹⁵Pat Bond. Interview with Allan Bérubé for the World War Two History Project. May 1981.

¹⁶Nicky Jones. 'In The Beginning.', in *Frontiers*. 1 February 1991.

¹⁷Leisa D. Meyer. *Creating G.I. Jane: The Regulation of Sexuality and Sexual Behavior in the Women's Army Corps during World War II*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

¹⁸Meyer, 1996. p.157-158.

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community within it. Bond recalls entering the mess hall for the first time, being promptly greeted with the quote of 'good god, Elizabeth, here comes another one!'.¹⁹ Not only was a community established, but the tells, codes, and giveaways had quickly become a form of communication among enlisted servicewomen; certain clothes, attitudes, and phrases could be used as indicators of one's proclivities. Bond tells Bérubé 'there were all these dykes with their feet up on the table in fatigues, you know, with Lil' Abner boots', painting a clear picture of what she walked into the mess hall to find.²⁰ Bond also recalls that it was common for butch and otherwise-masculine lesbians to cut their hair short, above the collar, despite warnings from units to avoid this (such as the WAAC handbook at Fort Des Moines warning that 'mannish haircuts are taboo' for enlistees).²¹ Bond's desire for community and belonging had never been met on such a scale, 'I was in heaven. We understood each other exactly. And then everything was okay for a while.'²²

A particularly surprising development for Bond was not only the complacency of her straight counterparts, but the willingness of some heterosexual women to lie to cover for their colleagues. Bond would later say within the purges:

I know at one point in Japan they put an extra woman in the room in case you and your lover wanted to room together. Well, they put a straight woman in with you. Because our officers were all gay they knew who was straight and who wasn't. And there was a straight woman in with us for a while and they called her up when we were having the trial. "Did you ever see these women do anything of a lesbian nature?" (sound) "No, not ever." Ho, ho, ho. They were really nice and supportive and never said a word against me.²³

As with the rest of the WAC, this could not be relied upon as a rule of thumb; this is far too specific an anecdote to make assumptions about the wider culture of the WAC. Bond is speaking only of her own experiences, and it would be a very dangerous risk for any lesbian in the WAC to assume her heterosexual counterparts could be trusted to cover for her. Nonetheless, the establishment of a cover system was an unexpected development in Bond's life, and provides an interesting look at just how drastically

¹⁹Pat Bond. *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*. Film. United States: New Yorker Films, 1977.

²⁰Bond and Bérubé. 1981.

²¹Allan Bérubé. *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p.87; *Handbook for the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, Fort Des Moines, Iowa*, (United States War Department, 1943).

²²Bond and Bérubé, 1981.

²³Ibid.

experiences of enlistees differed. Some straight women in her life *could* be relied upon to provide alibis or help facilitate relationships, something unimaginable in the wider world outside of the WAC (or for many others within it). The combination of the difficulties faced by active service members and the complete change from the more rigid outside-world morals is a potential reasoning for this unexpected solidarity, alternatively, it is not out of the question that Bond was just spectacularly fortunate.

A WAC member known as Jean S, her name changed upon request, was assigned to the Boston Army base, and lived in Franklin Square, frequenting the South End and the safety of the nightlife within it. Numerous bars for gay men existed and were known about in a surprisingly public manner, but the hotspot for lesbians was Bernstein's, which was located a few blocks away from Franklin Square. Jean had found queer friends and her partner Louise Y, her name also changed upon request, during her time there, but in downtown Boston, the culture was a little different outside of the bases. 'You just didn't [cruise] at the time. You just wouldn't make reference to it,' Jean recalled.²⁴ Her commanding officer 'had a partner in Georgia,' a fact commonly known among their rank.²⁵ In this instance, the Square comes across as a more open space for its lesbians than the bars that accommodated them off base. Jean and Louise's recollections provide an insight into how community was forming outside of just the bars; while nightlife was indeed a key aspect, particularly in major cities, it was not the be all and end all – as written, a community is not necessarily a singular physical space. For lesbians in Boston WAC units, their lived experience of lesbian community superseded a single bar or building; for some, it was the spirit of the downtown nightlife, for others, it was a group of friends in a dorm room.

Jean and Louise were far from the only couple who found each other through the community the WAC unintentionally provided. Esther and Marvyl, the central figures of this article, joined the WAC separately in 1943, following its evolution from the WAAC in July 1943. Marvyl worked as a radio mechanic, and Esther a technical sergeant, both remaining enlisted through to the end of the War.²⁶ Esther describes Marvyl as her lesbian awakening, telling interviewer Ellie Dozier that 'I had no idea I was really romantically attracted to women until I met Marvyl.'²⁷ She explains that Marvyl knew who she was from a young age, however, the extent to which she pursued relationships in her younger years seems minimal; the strength and depth of their wartime connection was clearly a turning point for both. Esther writes on 14 October 1944, 'through our letters and readings we can keep in closer contact than most people would think possible,' and indeed, the degree of openness within the

²⁴Jean S., 'Gay Life in 1940s Boston', *Boston Spirit*, (July 2014).

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶ONE Archives. 'Military Records of Marvyl Doyle'.

²⁷*Ibid.*, Interview with Esther Herbert and Ellie Dozier, 2006.

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letters is remarkable.²⁸ Both frequently start letters with 'my darling', 'my love', 'honey', and a number of other pet names, writing to each other every day, occasionally, multiple times a day, with timestamps in the top corner indicating the hour at which each part of the letter was being written. There is very little left to the imagination between them. On 20 February 1944, Esther writes,

the answer is yes, this morning, yes - I love you - I really love you - ... there seems to be no other way to say it - we have the certain something - yes we make love well together, we play well & we talk well together ... - you and me and this wonderful something we share. This love which encompasses all things - am I getting too profound for so early in the morning? If so its [sic] because I want you & miss you.²⁹

The explicitness of Esther's writing is staggering, particularly during wartime, and leaves a major question: how is it possible for such explicit letters to have been sent, back and forth, for almost three years without consequence?

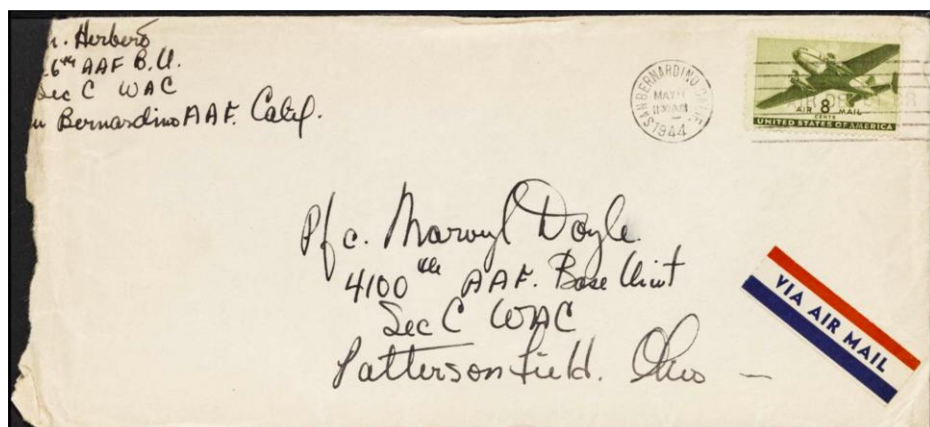


Figure 1: Letter to Marvyl, notably without a censorship stamp.³⁰

The answer to this seemingly lies in the absence of a very particular stamp. Letters coming from military personnel abroad featured an envelope stamp to show they had been approved by a censor; in a little over two years of letters between these two women, not a single envelope has any stamp indicating it has been through any kind of censoring process. Typically, one would expect to see a stamp with PASSED BY

²⁸Ibid., Letter to Marvyl Doyle, 14 October 1944.

²⁹Ibid., Letter to Marvyl Doyle, 20 February 1944.

³⁰Ibid., Letter to Marvyl Doyle, 10 May 1944.

CENSOR or PASSED BY EXAMINER to confirm that the contents had been checked and approved; mail that did not pass censorship would be withheld and queried, and anything that failed on morality grounds would have been escalated to the relevant parties.

Looking at the papers of Dorothee Gore, a lesbian who enlisted in 1945, a few assorted pieces of her incoming mail had been checked by censors, but the majority had not, creating more questions than answers. Even more interestingly Gore received a letter from overseas in May 1945, addressed from a 'Junior' in St. Germaine-en-Laye, France, which also does not feature a censor stamp despite it being sent from a soldier in the midst of the European battlefield. There are stamps from the Post Office, stamps, or occasionally handwritten notes, confirming delivery by air mail, but nothing to indicate the letter has been through any kind of censorship, as was exactly the case with Esther and Marvyl. In his influential book *Coming Out Under Fire*, Bérubé discusses that 'gay male and lesbian GIs and their loved ones befriended sympathetic censors, used their own secret codes or gay slang, or changed the gender of names and pronouns,' and of these options, the only feasible one for Esther and Marvyl is that Marvyl had befriended the censors; they haven't changed names or pronouns, and they certainly aren't encoding anything.³¹

The likelihood of this seems slim, as Marvyl would have had to go out of her comfort zone to befriend censors at several bases; there are letters in which Esther is encouraging her to befriend other lesbians, implying she was hesitant to do so. Her military records place her at San Bernardino Army Air Force Base, CA; Patterson Field, OH; and Chanute Field, IL across her enlistment. She would have had to maintain relationships in each of these places for multiple years, and this is assuming that the same people stayed in the same roles and locations and were able to intercept all her mail. Given the scale of this, with the two of them writing almost daily, combined with the fact that Esther's references to Marvyl's letters make it clear that hers are just as explicit, meaning that Esther would also have had to pull her own strings with censors, it seems drastically unlikely. Looking through both Marvyl's journals and Esther's typed collection notes sadly does not provide any clarity.

This implies that domestic mail between WACs wasn't subject to the same scrutiny that mail from or between male soldiers deployed overseas was, and therefore provided Esther and Marvyl – and potentially thousands of other lesbians, if one is to assume the lack of censor stamps is evidence of a wider lapse in censorship – with the opportunity to speak relatively freely, at least in writing. An intimacy developed in

³¹Bérubé. *Coming Out Under Fire*, p.120.

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written communications, both through use of words and the ability for their lovers to have a physical, private keepsake.³² Public opinion of female friendships had changed from prior generations, however, the belief of women having more intimate friendships than men was still wholly in effect; historian Lillian Faderman writes extensively of female friendship in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, noting in particular the idea of the 'romantic friendship', in which women 'found kindred spirits primarily in each other', something that was encouraged, and even expected.³³ As far as keeping letters, Esther and Marvyl would still most likely have had to take certain precautions, although which precautions, specifically, are unfortunately unknown with the available material; keeping the letters they received well-hidden, and potentially storing them off-base where possible are the only somewhat-solid inferences one can make. The strains of wartime significantly deepened people's need for community and connection, particularly across enlisted personnel; regular letters from a female friend would not in themselves have raised any eyebrows, but the explicitness of Esther and Marvyl's communication is astounding. In a statement that is unquestionably something written between lovers, Esther writes to Marvyl: 'your letters take my breath away. They fill me with a mixture of unendurable happiness and sadness ... all I want is to take you in my arms and keep you there, warm, safe and secure.'³⁴ Two months prior, Esther wrote 'I seem to be in love with Marvyl - the more I talk to them [others on a train], the more I realise what I have & just how precious it is - the more I meet people (bad construction, I know) the more I repeat to you - ... I want you and miss you.'³⁵

Clearly the openness of their writing was not an occasional, but a frequent event, one enabled by the lack of scrutiny their letters were under. It's impossible to say definitively whether this would have been the case on a larger scale across WAC units, due to the constraints of available materials, but both Esther and Marvyl worked at relatively large bases, and felt able to refer to others, such as Bobbie, by their real names. It can be inferred that they did not feel the need to hide at any point in their relationship – the level of openly romantic discussion remains consistent across all their letters, even during their romantic break. Esther writes on 7 April 1944, 'Hope all my letters and telegrams don't arouse too much comment,' referring to the near-daily communication between the two.³⁶ Their letters were unusually frequent and remained vividly descriptive of their relationship throughout. 'We went to Savio's and it brought back so many memories of that night when we had too much, when I knew

³²Bérubé. 'Coming Out Under Fire'. 1990. p.120.

³³Lillian Faderman. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p.6.

³⁴ONE Archives. Letter to Marvyl Doyle, 7 April 1944.

³⁵Ibid., Letter to Marvyl Doyle, 20 February 1944.

³⁶Ibid., Letter to Marvyl Doyle, 7 April 1944.

I loved you & made you kiss me there & leaned on your shoulder in the taxi going home,' Esther reminisces on April 30, 1944.³⁷

Esther and Marvyl are the perfect illustration of the WAC as a turning point, forming a bond through circumstance and emerging from the war as lifelong partners. Other communities outside of the military would continue to pop up, in the bar scene, in small-scale media publications, in covert community gatherings, but even by the mid-1940s, none of them could have hoped to achieve the level of getting people together in the way the war recruitment efforts did, they simply did not have the reach or the cross-country mobilisation. Nor could they promise what a career in the WAC could: the chance to get away from home, avoid marriage without question, a fixed salary with chances of promotion, or housing security, to name a few. 'We expect 10 more new girls in - 8 drivers - God only knows what we are going to do with them', Esther writes on 15 April 1944, shortly followed by 'I have something to tell you - I suppose it's confidential but you're me - so I'm not really telling anyone else - we got a call for 2 or 3 girls to go overseas.'³⁸ Her letter further corroborates the existing knowledge that the war recruitment calls only increased as time went on, as well as the movement between bases; earlier in the same letter, she writes 'do you suppose I could get myself transferred to Patterson & take care of you - nothing would phase me if we were together.'³⁹ Esther is never transferred, but it's an open dialogue between the two of them, particularly when the distance between their lives became more difficult to cope with than usual.

While their letters certainly reinforce the argument that the WAC was an important site of relatively open lesbianism, to refer to the WAC as a wholly open or accepting space is incorrect. However, a certain level of protection was inadvertently offered to many of the lesbians working within it, and this is precisely what allowed these new communities to flourish. An unknown author writes in an article on lesbians within the WAC that the WAC 'understood that intimacy among enlisted women helped to unite the corps - even that a significant number of women in the corps were lesbians,' and this attitude, if shared elsewhere, potentially would have been another factor in Esther and Marvyl's constant communication continuing without raising questions.⁴⁰ The separation of the two for the majority of the war, Esther in California, Marvyl in Ohio, also would have provided a certain safety, with WAC officials far more concerned with those in close physical proximity. As is laid out in the *WAC Crackdown* article and corroborated by Bond's statements, there were straight women within the WAC who were indifferent to the preferences of their lesbian colleagues, 'always the

³⁷Ibid., Letter to Marvyl Doyle, 30 April 1944.

³⁸Ibid., Letter to Marvyl Doyle, 15 April 1944.

³⁹Ibid., Letter to Marvyl Doyle, 15 April 1944.

⁴⁰Unknown Author, 'WAC Crackdown', in *Mother Jones* (February 1983).

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straight women I ran into tended to ignore us, tended to say “who cares?” It leaves all the men for us.”⁴¹ For heterosexual WAC members to be what in a modern context would be referred to as ‘allies’ would have been unusual, but not entirely impossible. Esther and Marvyl both write of heterosexual friends, and in their situation it seems that the attention to avoid was from more official positions, rather than their colleagues.

As well as having each other, both would go on to forge connections with other queer women in their respective WAC units. Esther writes of finding community on 21 October 1944, in response to Marvyl’s expression of hesitation about connecting with other lesbians in her section of the WAC: ‘doesn’t it keep to have a group of gals with whom you can exchange banter? With whom you can speak freely?’⁴² It is evident that Marvyl has found a community, whether or not she has decided to include herself as a part of it. While there is anecdotal evidence of a certain freedom within WAC units, they still had to be careful in what they said and who they said it to; Esther likely enjoyed a little more freedom than Marvyl due to her deployment location. California saw a flourishing queer community during this period, particularly in the coastal cities; San Francisco was quickly establishing itself as a hotspot, and Los Angeles, the closest major city to Esther’s location, also enjoyed an increase in gay and lesbian bar cultures, a trend in many other urban American cities.⁴³ Conversely, Marvyl found herself stationed in the Midwest, with the closest city being Dayton, Ohio, which had a significantly different atmosphere. The presence of a cohesive community within her location was certainly brought to the surface by the War, if not created by it entirely. Marvyl’s hesitation is understandable, Esther writes in the same letter: ‘I did know the meaning of the word ‘gay’, ‘cause Bobbie uses it,’ implying that even fairly commonplace terminology for the period was foreign to Marvyl, foreign enough for her to write to Esther of her discovery of the word.⁴⁴ Marvyl, having grown up in Hampton, Iowa (a city with a population of just 3,473 in 1930, when she would have been a teenager), would not have been presented with the opportunity to find other women like herself before the War.⁴⁵ Sarah Davis, an emergency services volunteer also known as ‘Sammi’, wrote of her first encounter with another woman ‘We were sitting next to each other on the couch ... eventually we got in bed together. She said that she had never related to a woman before.’⁴⁶ Without the WAC, many of these

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., Letter to Marvyl Doyle, 21 October 1944.

⁴³Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 1993. ch.2-3.

⁴⁴ONE Archives, Letter to Marvyl Doyle, 21 October 1944.

⁴⁵<https://www.iowadatabase.org/datatables/PlacesAll/plpopulationbypopsize18502006.pdf>. Accessed 5 June 2026.

⁴⁶Unknown Author, *WAC Crackdown*, in *Mother Jones* (February 1983); and Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire* 1990, p.69.

women would never have found each other, or indeed, anyone else – the impact on the ending of the decades of isolation leading up to the war is undeniable.

The creation of the WAC and the increase of women in the workforce also contributed heavily to the new freedoms for lesbians who were not enlisted. ‘The important effect of the war was to give more independence to all women, thereby making lesbians more like other women and less easy to identify,’ write Kennedy and Davis. Changing social attitudes allowed for women to wear trousers without being singled out for it, walk down the street without male companions, and gave rise to the idea of women focussing on a career instead of looking for marriage.⁴⁷ These values had been seen briefly during the First World War, but had been heavily repressed in post-war life, only seeing daylight again during the Second World War, a combination of wartime chaos and the efforts of women’s labour unions seeing a sharp increase in working women’s autonomy. Kennedy and Davis look back on the social changes as bringing these practices, both major and minor, into a much more socially-condoned arena: ‘Narrators remember World War II as having a tremendous impact on lesbian life, offering lesbians more opportunities for socializing and meeting others.’⁴⁸



Figure 2: Marvyl at work.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 1993. p.113.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹ONE Archives, Coll2013-030, ‘Esther Herbert and Marvyl Doyle Papers and Photographs’. Photograph album I 1943-1951.

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As a result of both WAC units and outside manual labour jobs, the expansion of acceptable clothing and presentation made it particularly easy for butch lesbians and other lesbians leaning away from femininity to lean into their identity without being so closely questioned. As with many of the wartime jobs that had sprung up for women – agriculture and factory work especially – it was common for WAC members to walk around in trousers and work boots. The official uniform still centred the pencil skirt and nipped-in blazer combination, but when working in the field, women had more freedom to wear loose-fitting, practical clothing. In almost all photographic evidence of Marvyl – working as a radio mechanic – she’s wearing trousers and a bomber jacket, her hair tied back and her face seemingly free of makeup. There are not explicit references to her clothing in the donated letters, but in the photographs of Marvyl taken by Esther on their days off, she still is primarily seen in trousers, implying that even off duty the preference continued.



Figures 3: Marvyl on an off-day, reading in the park.⁵⁰

Esther states that neither she nor Marvyl identified as butch or femme, and it is impossible to assign this identity to either of them retroactively; both categories extend far beyond physical appearance and clothing choices, not to mention, both categories were still shifting, and arguably less fully-realised than they became later in the century; but out of her uniform skirt, it seems that Marvyl preferred a more masculine style of dressing.⁵¹ The WAC, and in particular, her job within it, allowed

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., Interview with Esther and Ellie Dozier.

for a freedom of physical expression that she was unlikely to find back home. This freedom extended to lesbians who weren't comfortable engaging in relationships, but still wanted to experiment with their identities and presentations which they could do so without being questioned for the first time. While discussions of transgender men are beyond the scope of this project, they are still worth keeping in mind when it comes to freedom of gender expression. Just as the butches found comfort in presenting as masculine, one can safely assume that any trans men in WAC units – even if they did not have the terminology or understanding required to label themselves as such – would have had similar feelings.

Returning to Esther and Marvyl's letters, the two are as frank in their discussions of the dangers of any visible queerness as they are in their expressions of love. Later during their separation, while Esther and Bobbie are pursuing a relationship, Esther writes to Marvyl 'Bobbie and I decided against a room together ... - it's just not a good idea,' with much of the letter pertaining to living together being a step too far in arousing suspicion.⁵² There is an understanding that their written openness can only exist within their private correspondence, if Esther and Bobbie were to be caught beyond doubt, following Army policy, they would have been transferred apart or discharged, and the undertone of concern is present throughout their discussion. While some WAC officials across the country must have been aware of lesbians within the Army, particularly if the aforementioned anecdotes are taken as credible evidence of lesbians as higher-ranking officers, there were limits to how much those women could get away with, an uncited quote in the 'WAC Crackdown' article discusses the WAC discharging women who they could prove to be 'addicted to the practice', the author's wording, rather than official policy.⁵³ There is a vagueness to this sentiment, which could be hugely open to interpretation depending on the sympathies of the person responsible for it. Glances across a room, affection behind closed doors, under-the-table discussions of one's preferences could have a blind eye turned if the right person saw, but for a couple to be cohabiting, especially on Army grounds, was certainly a situation that would have been escalated.

The WAC would not in itself have been a safe space, nor an open one. To presume it was does a dangerous disservice to the women who were outed, persecuted, and dishonourably discharged; it erases the very real dangers that were still present within the military, many of which remain present in modern times. The later purges of lesbians in the WAC reinforce the key point that none of these benefits were deliberate. However, the opportunities created inadvertently by the WAC cannot be ignored. For Esther and Marvyl, the WAC was instrumental in their respective abilities

⁵²Ibid., Letter to Marvyl Doyle, October 1944.

⁵³Unknown Author, *WAC Crackdown*, in *Mother Jones*, February 1983.

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to connect - with other lesbians, with their community, and with each other. Esther wrote during their separation:

You and our life together after WAC are the 2 things I am able to project into the post-war world and know definitely - without hesitation whatsoever - that they will be there like a beacon waiting for me to come - lighting my way.⁵⁴



Figure 4: Esther (left) and Marvyl (right), 1944.⁵⁵

Esther and Marvyl are just two of the women who found connection and community within the WAC and the wider context of the War, but they are far from the only ones. The WAC may not have been the perfect solution to the isolation of the thirties and prior, but its existence certainly formed the foundations for lesbians to find each other, making it an indescribably and undeniably important institution in the progression of a lesbian community.

⁵⁴ONE Archive, Letter to Marvyl Doyle, 13 April 1944.

⁵⁵ONE Archives, Coll2013-030, 'Esther Herbert and Marvyl Doyle Papers and Photographs'. Photograph album I 1943-1951.