Unfortunately, rape and sexual assault are not new issues for our Army. One might have thought they were, given the tenor of recent congressional testimony and media attention to these topics. My wife’s late Aunt Elizabeth P. Hoisington had strong views on the subject and was inclined to speak her mind. She spoke with some authority, as she was the first general officer in the Women’s Army Corps (WAC). She had served in the armed forces when women in uniform numbered in the hundreds of thousands. As director of the WAC, her highest priority was mission accomplishment, but nested within that priority came ample attention to minimizing sexual victimization. Beyond the family connection, I enjoyed a considerable exposure to BG Hoisington and her colleagues while serving as the Army’s chief of military history and trying to get their portion of the Army’s story right. This article stems from my memory of these conversations and interviews, two years’ service as an equal opportunity staff officer in the early 1970s, and references such as those found in the recommended reading.

BG Hoisington was a veteran of the World War II campaigns in France and Germany. Many of her colleagues had seen such wartime service as well. They were fiercely dedicated soldiers but also were mindful of the darker side of soldier misconduct. In the newly published *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France*, author Mary Louise Roberts takes on this darker side. American soldiers perpetrated perhaps 3,500 rapes in France and about 12,000 in Germany. Beyond those guilty of rape, far more solicited sexual services from desperate women employing leverage we would consider discreditable. We castigate the Japanese for “comfort women” as if the underlying principles were unique to them. On balance, the behavior of our soldiers was far better than that of most contemporary armies in this regard, but our sins did besmirch an otherwise magnificent record for selflessness and sacrifice. BG Hoisington carried with her an appreciation that moral codes can disintegrate in a combat theater and of the role of effective leadership in reversing the process. A professional lifetime of further exposure to “boys in the barracks” mentalities deepened her commitment to consciously addressing potential sexual abuse.

The protective structure BG Hoisington and her colleagues erected could be described as consisting of advocacy, support, paternalism, “defensive driving” and rules of thumb.

**Advocacy**

WACs served under a female chain of command. During the day, when on operations, or when detached, they dispersed to workstations that more often than not were under male supervision at some level. At night or when work was done, they returned to the control of their WAC detachment commanders. The nature and distribution of women’s duties were such that the detachment commander routinely had access to the most senior commanders on post or in sector, including general officers. Far from accepting dismissive “boys will be boys” responses from junior leaders, the detachment commander could readily escalate up the chain to press reports of misconduct upon senior leaders. WAC first sergeants had a particular reputation for not “letting things go.” No one wanted to be on the wrong side of a WAC first sergeant. Detachment commanders could—and did—unilaterally reassign individual WACs from work situations they considered risky, either because of suspected sexual harassment or because of budding “office romances.” In cases of sexual harassment, a second report from a different and
newly assigned WAC could give the detachment commander or first sergeant the leverage needed for relentless pursuit. In cases of romance, they could at least guarantee that it did not amount to fraternization. Complaints of sexual assault were unlikely to be swept under the rug. The female chain of command was hard-nosed about such infractions. They could not guarantee punishment, but they could insist that the Uniform Code of Military Justice be exercised as designed.

Support

WACs enjoyed not only the support of their chains of command but also the support of their peers. A detachment brought scores of women together under one roof, often 100 or more. Their all-female accommodations could take on the character of a college dormitory, and the women characteristically passed more of their time “at home” than their male counterparts did in the barracks. Their billets afforded WACs a refuge from the generally male environment that surrounded them. The high concentration of women improved the odds that any given woman would fall in with kindred spirits. This afforded them strength in numbers when they set forth for recreation and entertainment. Buddy plans flowed naturally from these arrangements, and the women got into the habit of looking out for each other. Recreation at the time tended to be event-driven: a dance on post or off, a feature night at the club, a trip organized by a unit or recreation center, or a movie. In these settings, groups of women encountered groups of men in circumstances that went against isolation. When deployed or in the field, the general pattern continued. Policies forbade deployments into circumstances wherein there were not reasonable concentrations of women and reasonable expectations of privacy. The definition of reasonable was heavily influenced by the opinions of WAC first sergeants, who often enough mustered engineers and others to get facilities right and channel the flow of male traffic. Ultimately, women set out on their own to establish individual relationships outside the cocoon afforded by the WAC detachment, but they did so knowing that the cocoon was there.

Paternalism

The Women’s Army Corps, in existence from 1943 through 1978, was breathtakingly paternalistic. The stereotypical WAC was a young woman serving her country and enjoying an episode of adventure before getting on with the rest of her life. Pregnancy and motherhood, whether wed or unwed, were almost invariably a basis for dismissal through 1974. In actual practice, older women were more common in the WAC than the stereotype might suggest, but the social system was premised on the notion that junior enlisted WACs were young women entrusted to the supervision and care of the Army. More than once, BG Hoisington spoke of inspiring confidence in mothers that the WACs who were their daughters were in good care. Controls such as signing in, signing out, curfews, off-limits areas and the like varied by location but were commonplace. Young men showing up to pick up a date almost invariably encountered the charge of quarters, generally encountered a fistful of interested housemates, and often encountered an NCO. Had they preferred anonymity, it would have been stripped away.

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The Army had a role in picking your friends if you were a WAC, as it was more highly selective with respect to female volunteers than it was with male draftees. One quip had it that a WAC was a good deal because she was twice as smart and ate half as much as her male counterpart. Selection screened against present or previous pregnancy, abortion, drug use, venereal disease, alcohol abuse or other conditions then regarded as lapses in moral judgment. The idea was to gather a body of wholesome young women least likely to become trouble for themselves or others.

The WAC chain of command, generally unmarried, pyramided above the junior enlisted like a priesthood: They had no problem dispensing guidance intended to protect their charges from morally risky situations. When deployed, the paternalism was, if anything, greater. The authority and intrusiveness of the chain of command was more complete. It should perhaps be noted that such paternalism comported with the overall culture of the times. It was not unusual for young college women, for example, to go to “girls’ schools” or live in “girls’ dorms,” have curfews, have male visitors to their living areas limited in their access and screened by an adult hostess, and risk expulsion if they engaged in some litany of proscribed behaviors.

‘Defensive Driving’

BG Hoisington was not inclined to underestimate the capacity of male soldiers for bad behavior. Effective leadership could keep this under control, but the prevention of sexual abuse was seldom the top priority for male chains of command. It was not that they indulged sexual abuse, but rather, they did not think much about it.

WAC leaders took to encouraging “defensive driving” when in the presence of male soldiers. The dispersion of WACs through places of duty featured buddy plans, which were encouraged after hours as well. Appropriate dress and decorum were consciously instilled. Serious drinking in the presence of men was considered a bad idea, and being drunk in the presence of men was considered a terrible one. Male barracks and specified establishments were off-limits. The sisterhood included taking an interest in the names and units of men your friends were dating—and letting these men know you had taken such an interest. Have a good time, but be careful. WAC leaders were more than happy to discourage behaviors that, in their view, increased the risk of unwanted attention or sexual abuse.

Rules of Thumb

There were other strategies whereby the WAC headed off potential sexual abuse. One rule of thumb was for soldiers of different ranks or genders not to be alone in the same room with the door closed—unless they were willing to let people think it was what it could be. The proscription on mixing ranks in isolation applied regardless of gender. Third party witnesses protected all parties involved. WACs were reminded that it was their right to insist that male colleagues, regardless of rank, not see them alone. Clerks or others working late did so in pairs or kept a buddy with them. Office romance was discouraged and generally resulted in one soldier or the other being moved. Fraternization had a similar result, only faster. Health and welfare inspections of enlisted barracks were routine in the Army of the time. Many units had them once a week, with unscheduled inspections as well. WAC leaders could pick up on signs of risky behavior, since they knew what to look for. Counseling took on more of a moral tone than would be possible today, and admonitions to avoid undesirable company probably carried more weight. If a WAC had had an incident that she had declined to report, it might well come out during such counseling. One rule of thumb was that you don’t wait for your soldiers to come to you with their problems. You ask.

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Times change. BG Hoisington’s generation could be the grandmothers, or even great-grandmothers, of soldiers serving today. Their solutions cannot be a blueprint for today’s Army. Our female soldiers come from a different cultural milieu into an Army that has different expectations of the roles they will play. The point to be made, however, is that Hoisington and her colleagues did develop a comprehensive system addressing sexual abuse that fit into the context of their times. They knew what they were up against. They took ownership of the problem—for a professional lifetime, not for an assignment. They shaped the circumstances wherein WACs interacted with male counterparts. They prepared for foreseeable problems, large and small. They responded to infractions in a coherent fashion and with a singleness of purpose. The Army Nurse Corps of the time similarly protected its own—albeit somewhat differently, as it was more heavily populated by officers and served in a different professional context.

Do we have comprehensive approaches to sexual assault that fit the Army culture of our day? If the answer is no, we might canvass the advocacy, support, paternalism, “defensive driving” and rules of thumb of BG Hoisington’s generation to see if there are lessons in them that pertain to our own. ★