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WORLD WAR II SECRET EXPERIMENT  
TO BE DETAILED IN BOOK

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MOSCOW -- A secret experiment run during World War II on the use of women in military defense is being detailed in a book by a retired University of Idaho mathematics professor.

Working under a research and projects individual grant from the American Association of University Women, Elna Grahn is recording her military experiences during active duty from 1942 to 1946, as well as in the reserves.

Grahn, Moscow, a retired major in the U.S. Army Reserves, was from 1944-46 the top ranking woman in the 2525th Service Unit at South Post, Ft. Myer, Va. The unit had some 4,500 members, almost half of them women.

The experiment, which tested the ability of a select group of WACs to work in composite anti-aircraft batteries, was a success. "If Washington, D.C., had been attacked, women would have worked on fire control for eight of the 90mm guns," Mrs. Grahn recalls.

The women were trained in late 1942 and 1943 to handle radar, fire control, search-light and heightfinder equipment, but did not reload ammunition or actually fire the guns, she noted. When the women were trained, 46 men were freed for other duty.

"The men developed a respect for the fact that women could perform a job and do it efficiently," recalled Mrs. Grahn, who taught at Idaho from 1947 to 1969.

She said she recently learned the experiment was ordered by Gen. George C. Marshall. "It appears he directed the experiment be run after seeing the women at work in anti-aircraft batteries in England."

The experiment not only contributed to American defense preparedness, but also helped motivate the conversion of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) to the Women's Army Corps (WAC). The test got underway using WAACs, civilian women attached to the Army.

"An important principle in the Army is unity of command," Mrs. Grahn said. "But when the WAACs were trained for anti-aircraft duty, there had to be a woman in charge of the women in the battery, but also a man in command of the men."

The situation was resolved temporarily with a battery commander plus a male and a female executive officer, Mrs. Grahn recalled. "This dilemma was one contribution toward recognizing the need to make women a full part of the military."

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The WAAC, created in May of 1942, had become the WAC by 1943.

What interested Mrs. Grahn, a math teacher at Emmetsburg (Iowa) Junior College, in military service?

"My grandfather served in the Civil War, but in World War I my father was exempt because he was a chief train dispatcher for the railroad. Then in World War II my brother was exempt because he had a family. There was quite a bit of patriotic fervor then, so I guess I felt someone in the family should contribute."

She joined the WAAC in July of 1942, then went through officer candidate school (OCS) and was commissioned a 3rd officer--a 2nd lieutenant equivalent--that October. She was one of just 40 WAACs to graduate from the Army Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth, Kans.

While commanding 1,900 WACs at the 2525th, she was nicknamed "Mother Superior." Also while on active duty, she was the first woman to serve on a general court martial.

"I argued that a woman should get the same sentence as a man for a comparable offense," she recalled. "The problem at the time was a lack of facilities for female offenders. I argued the sentence should be the same, though the reviewing authority might handle implementation in a special way."

Mrs. Grahn expects to have the manuscript completed by next July.

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