Yeoman First Class Helen M. Whittaker

Hometown: Providence, Rhode Island
Entered Service: June 5, 1918
Rank: Yeoman First Class, U.S. Navy
Cemetery: Section 12C, Site 685, Indiantown Gap National Cemetery, Annville, Pennsylvania

May 13, 1898 - September 12, 1996

RESEARCHED BY ALISON BROWNING
Before the War

Helen Margaret Whittaker was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1898. Her mother, Grace, died when she was a young child. Her father, James, moved Helen and her sister between Providence, Rhode Island, and New London, Connecticut. Whittaker grew up in a time when progressive movements advocated for more rights for women.

Military Experience

The Naval Act of 1916

Whittaker was able to join the U.S. Navy due to vague language in the Naval Act of 1916. It read that “all persons who may be capable of performing special useful service for coastal defense” could join the U.S. Navy. Female yeoman were utilized as radio operators, stenographers, nurses, messengers, and chauffeurs. Enlisting on June 5, 1918, Whittaker worked as a stenographer in New London, Connecticut.

Life of a Female Yeoman

When they U.S. Navy recruited women, they faced some practical challenges. The first problem was housing. Traditionally, women did not live on base. Many yeoman were forced off base to find their own room and board. The second problem was dress. Navy uniforms were tailored for men and at the time, it was considered improper for women to wear pants. Guidelines were provided to the female yeoman on regulation dress.
The women were given a small stipend to purchase the pieces of the uniforms. Since many uniforms were bought in parts or handmade, the female yeoman uniforms tended to vary. Later the U.S. Navy created guidelines that stated the uniforms must be white or blue, have a single-breasted jacket with a skirt and the hem had to be four inches above the ankles.

The Naval Appropriation Act of 1919
While many assumed that the women would serve a full year term, the Naval Appropriation Act of 1919 placed Navy females on inactive duty. Most female yeoman were discharged by October 25, 1920. Whittaker was discharged from the U.S. Navy on June 5, 1920.

Veteran Experience

California Bound
Whittaker would have stayed in the military after World War I, but was not allowed. After Whittaker’s discharge, she headed first to Washington, D.C. There she worked in the Veterans Administration. Then she headed west for San Francisco, California, where she worked in a law office for 20 years and retired.
Commemoration

As Whittaker grew older, she reached out to her only living relative, her nephew, Dr. James O. Whittaker. In order to be closer, Whittaker moved from her current home in Rhode Island to the Veterans Administration Facility in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Whittaker wanted to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Together with her nephew, she fought to have her service honored at Arlington. However, on September 12, 1996, at the age of 98, Whittaker passed away. She was buried at Indiantown Gap National Cemetery where she rests today.
Bibliography


Helen M. Whittaker, Official Military Personnel File, Department of the Navy, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, RG 24, National Archives and Records Administration - St. Louis.


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