

The Girls They Left Behind

by Mary Wear Briggs

In the years right before World War II, I taught in a small town in northeast Iowa. It was a happy time, a carefree time, with few complications. My life was relatively simple. I made \$90 per month and ate in restaurants, along with the Bachelor Club of the town. The Bachelor Club was a group of a dozen or so single boys who had never left their hometown or who, because of the Depression, had returned. Some were college graduates who lived at home and worked in the bank or their father's law office, or hometown sons teaching in the high school. Some could only find work as soda jerks or meter readers.

At our favorite restaurant, after the supper hour, my teacher friends and I often remained to play cribbage or just talk and listen to the jukebox. It was our singles' gathering place. At times, with much ado, the boys would announce that they were going to hold a bachelors' meeting that night. To tease them, we girls would go down and bang on the locked door demanding to get in. Their "meeting" was just playing poker and drinking spiked Cokes, no doubt.

For recreation, we bicycled, ice skated in winter, played bridge, picnicked, dated, and danced. We went to every big band around, to Clear Lake, Rochester, Waterloo, Spillville—anywhere that had a big ballroom. We gathered by the stage and cheered and clapped loudly when the bands went on national radio on Saturday nights.

The bowling alley was off limits for teachers as, of course, were the pool halls and beer parlors. All female

teachers were, however, expected to belong to the Monday night women's club. When we missed a meeting, we heard, "If those teachers would stay home on Sunday night, they could get here for the meetings."

On one particular Sunday morning, I had gone to church, then crossed town with my friends, Helen and Marian, to Marian's family's restaurant. The café was in a retired railroad dining car, with an extended kitchen. There Marian's mother prepared the best Sunday dinners in town. The smell of roast chicken and dressing urged us on as we crossed the open lot to the dining car. The menu was roast beef or pork, plump country-raised roast chicken, garden-grown potatoes with gravy, a vegetable, salad, and good homemade pie piled high with glistening white meringue capped with peaks of gold—all this for 65 or 75 cents.

After we ate, we walked to where I roomed. I read the Sunday paper. The front page pictured the Japanese peace delegation bowing to President Roosevelt. I decided to take a nap, as I had a date that night.

I awakened to my landlady calling up the stairs, "Mary, turn on your radio. Japan is bombing Pearl Harbor!" It was December 7, 1941. I listened as the urgent news unfolded, not fully realizing then that my secure little world had disappeared while I napped, and I would never find it again.

Of course, we had all read in the newspapers of Hitler's Nazis, as they goose-stepped across Europe. We watched the latest newsreels in the movie theaters as thousands of Germans gave the "Heil Hitler" salute. We

hoped we would never have to fight, but deep inside us we knew someday we would have to help stop him.

My date that night was on a very low key. We spent our time driving around, talking about the war, and listening on the radio to the hysterical reports coming from Hawaii. We both knew he would be called up soon along with all of our other friends.

In January 1942, a few weeks after the war started, a boy I knew dropped out of college and came home. He called late that afternoon. "Would you like to go skating?" he asked. Although I was not especially good at it, I loved to ice skate, and I often spent many hours, after I had finished my teaching day, skating on the flooded pond across from my school.

"I would love to go, but what are you doing home?" I asked.

"I've enlisted. I'm leaving for boot camp in the morning."

We went and waltzed together around and around, alone on the pond. Darkness came. He was very quiet and I'm sure frightened inside. I, too, felt his sadness and envisioned his fear of the future. He took me home, then he went home to supper. I never saw him again. That encounter was my first experience of losing a young friend, and it still remains with me.

In the summer of 1942, four of us from northeast Iowa went down to a Tennessee camp to see the boys we knew. In that small, very southern town, we attended a canteen dance every night. Every boy from Iowa tried to show us a good time. They took us out to their camp: no fancy barracks, no mess hall, no non-commissioned officers club. Their tents covered the bluegrass hills and valleys in rows and rows. When we lined up to eat with them from huge kettles and tin plates, there in that open pasture, we learned what the mess in "mess-call" meant. Their night hours were indefinite; they told us that all they needed to do was crawl through the old farm fence and find their tent. They didn't need much; they were on their way overseas. By that November they were in battle in Africa.

Later one of the boys I had gone to see was killed in Italy. Another dancing partner, after fighting in Italy, was transferred to the Pacific and came home when the war was over with jungle rot to the knees and various rare fevers. He was hospitalized for almost a year.

By the fall of 1942, all the boys I knew had gone to war. I read every new book that came into the public library. It was a dull, dull year!

By now, the women's club had become active in the Red Cross. We attended classes in home nursing and

first aid and sewed long-sleeved, dull cotton dresses to include in "Bundles for Britain" for the children being evacuated from London. For the soldiers we knitted scarves, which were probably thrown overboard on the way to Africa or the South Pacific.

In the spring of 1943, a friend (the junior high principal) and I decided to take a more active part in the war effort. We resigned our jobs and went to Cedar Rapids to join the WAVES (Women's Naval Reserve). I didn't pass the eyesight test. Our second choice was the WACs (Women's Army Corps). We took a bus to the WAC's national headquarters in Des Moines. Hotels were taken over by the WACs and boys coming in for induction.

We arrived late in the evening. At headquarters, we picked up the slips for our "free" reserved room. We found the room, in a sleazy, lower east side hotel. Boys unable to sleep were going up and down the hall in their undershorts to the only bathroom on the floor. There were no locks on the doors. We walked into our room. There on our bed sprawled a young man sound asleep. We spent the night in an all-night breakfast bar.

In the morning, in front of the Hotel Fort Des Moines, we climbed aboard a canvas-covered truck, among a load of young men, and headed toward the induction center. I was given a short, white gown, told to strip, put it on, and get in line. Coming to the stripping room, I had passed that line—men carelessly attired in short, white gowns, with plenty of white exposed behinds.

Never having had a physical in a doctor's office, I stood pondering the gown. The safest way would be to put it on with the opening in the front—I'd have more control. I came out and took my place at the end of a long line of nervous, white-reared boys.

Finally, I reached the front.

"Mary Laretta Wear."

I opened the door. There stood three young, very bored doctors. I clutched the front of my gown with both hands!

"Oh, God, a girl, and she even has it on backwards!"

Again I was told to take it off. I stripped and climbed up on one of the unoccupied tables. Another doctor walked in, and for an eternity they stood over me, visiting back and forth while I lay there completely exposed, studying the ceiling.

My eyesight saved me. To my relief, I was rejected from the WACs. My friend signed up that night and was sent to an army air base in Texas. She worked in the flight tower for the duration.

Five of my friends and I rented a furnished upstairs apartment in a house in Des Moines in the summer of

1943. We called ourselves "The Harem." By then, women had taken over the factory jobs of the men who had gone overseas. Most were young single women or women without young children. We were told that it was the patriotic thing to do. "Help the War Effort." "Help Bring the Boys Home."

U.S. Rubber had just completed a new complex of buildings in Des Moines to produce ammunition. They were hiring. After being fingerprinted and checked by the FBI—a new experience—I was hired. I worked with .30-caliber tail-gunner ammunition, loading it into a weighing and measuring machine. The job was a long way from the soft life I had led as a teacher. I couldn't work fast enough, scooping the ammunition by hand from large carts, then sorting and rolling it into the machine. My machine often shut down for lack of cartridges. I wasn't too popular with the machinists! My back soon ached; my ankles became swollen from standing ten to twelve hours on the cement. The ends of my fingers were calloused and bleeding, my nails worn down to the quick. But I was making more money than I ever had teaching.

Work shifts at the factory alternated every six weeks. By the time my stomach and sleep pattern had adjusted, it was time to move to the next shift. Many times we worked twelve-hour days, seven days a week. Although we were almost as lonely as the boys we knew, now in training camps or somewhere overseas, we felt that we were doing something worthwhile. We felt proud when our boyfriends wrote and said they had used or seen cartridges marked "DM 43."

Probably one of my greatest shocks, in my education, involved the "street" women who came, from necessity, to work in the plant. Few men were left to patronize the bars and streetwalkers of the red-light district on the lower, shabby side of town. With the streets and bars empty, the women came to the factories in their skimpy attire, showing generous cleavage, their faces heavy with makeup, and their hair in hues of orange or red. They were rude, hardened, belligerent women, but most of all they spit out curses and gutter language like the toughest longshoremen. Some words I had never heard before, and until years later I didn't even know what they meant. They probably enjoyed the shock treatment they gave us! Our machinists were all older men. They told us the history of some of the women and advised us to stay away from them. Now I wonder if these women might have had brothers or lovers overseas. But we left them alone, so I never found out.

After work at the plant, we were usually too tired to go out, and there was little to do when we did. Sometimes, one of the girls would get out her wedding gown and dress up for us. She had purchased the gown and veil and was on her way to Louisiana to be married when her guy was shipped overseas. Another roommate had already received word that her boyfriend had been killed.

Other times, we would meet downtown in some restaurant that had a jukebox and dance together to a Benny Goodman record, or perhaps "Josephine," "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree," or "In the Mood." Frances Langford's "I'll Be Seeing You" brought tears to our eyes. These gatherings didn't drive away the yearning for our boyfriends and our past good times. To us, then, it seemed that the war would drag on forever.

During the war, Babe's was the top nightclub in Des Moines. I believe it was the only club where you could buy illegal drinks by the glass. Iowa was still dry, to the extent that you bought your bottle of liquor only at the state liquor store. One night a group of us girls decided to see what went on at Babe's. We climbed the stairs, found a table, and ordered drinks, mostly favorites of our boyfriends, whiskey sours or scotch on the rocks. We talked about our latest V-mail letters.

Most of us wrote to several boys. With some we had worked out a code to know where they were and whether they were in combat. If they wrote of hot sand and long marches, they were in the African campaign. If they told of beautiful sunsets and the moon reflecting on the water, they were in the South Pacific. Always large sections of the letters were cut out by the censors, with only small parts left for us to reread and dream over.

We left Babe's disappointed. It was filled with WACs and middle-aged couples out for a good meal. We didn't do any "swinging and swaying." As we went down the stairs, we met ten cops on the way up. Babe's was raided that night and shut down. We were relieved to be on our way home. Babe's was frequently raided, but it was always open again in a short time, and the liquor continued to flow.

In our "harem," war rationing affected us severely. As single women, we received our families' ration books only after most of the coupons had been removed. Gas and tire rationing didn't affect us directly; none of us had cars and there was no one to take us places anyway. But coffee, butter, and sugar were rationed and almost nonexistent for us. Canned goods became scarce. Fresh chickens soon left the markets. Other meat as we

knew it could not be found, unless you liked mutton. Some thought they could fool us by putting it in hamburger, but one whiff, while it was cooking, and the camouflage was known. On rare occasions of eating out, leg of lamb was delicious. A once properous meat market near us had a "Gone Fishing" sign hanging on the door most of the time.

One of the harem girls' father worked at a German POW camp in northern Iowa. Whenever she went home, she brought back a package or two of T-bone steaks and pounds of butter. We never questioned why the German prisoners ate better than we did. We just enjoyed!

One time, a teacher friend was going to Chicago to see her college sweetheart off for overseas. She had no silk stockings left for the occasion. She would either need to go bare-legged or wear cotton hose, as we all had to do. I loaned her my last precious pair. Silk stockings were very sheer and very delicate. We carefully crocheted the runs to preserve them as long as we could. I always smile when I think about what a wonderful last night my stockings must have had! When my friend returned them, they were completely blown out at the knees.

In late 1943 I was transferred to the large-caliber tail-gunner ammunition wing. Each day, I brought in my lunch, changed to coveralls, and remained locked in until the end of the shift. I was the only woman in the wing. I went from machine to machine every half-hour, gathered sample casings loaded with powder, and took them back to my glass-enclosed room and weighed them on a delicate, glass-enclosed scale. If they weighed short on powder I went back and told the operator to shut down until he brought the amount of powder up to the desired weight.

Each machine had a separate, reinforced cubicle. The cubicles stretched down both sides of the wing, probably twelve to a side. All cubicles had their own escape doors to the outside. To eliminate friction, on the half-hour the ceilings, walls, and floors of the cubicles were washed down.

One day a machine went haywire, and a bullet shot through the machinist's chest. Another man was beheaded when a machine fell from overhead. I seemed to have conditioned myself against danger.

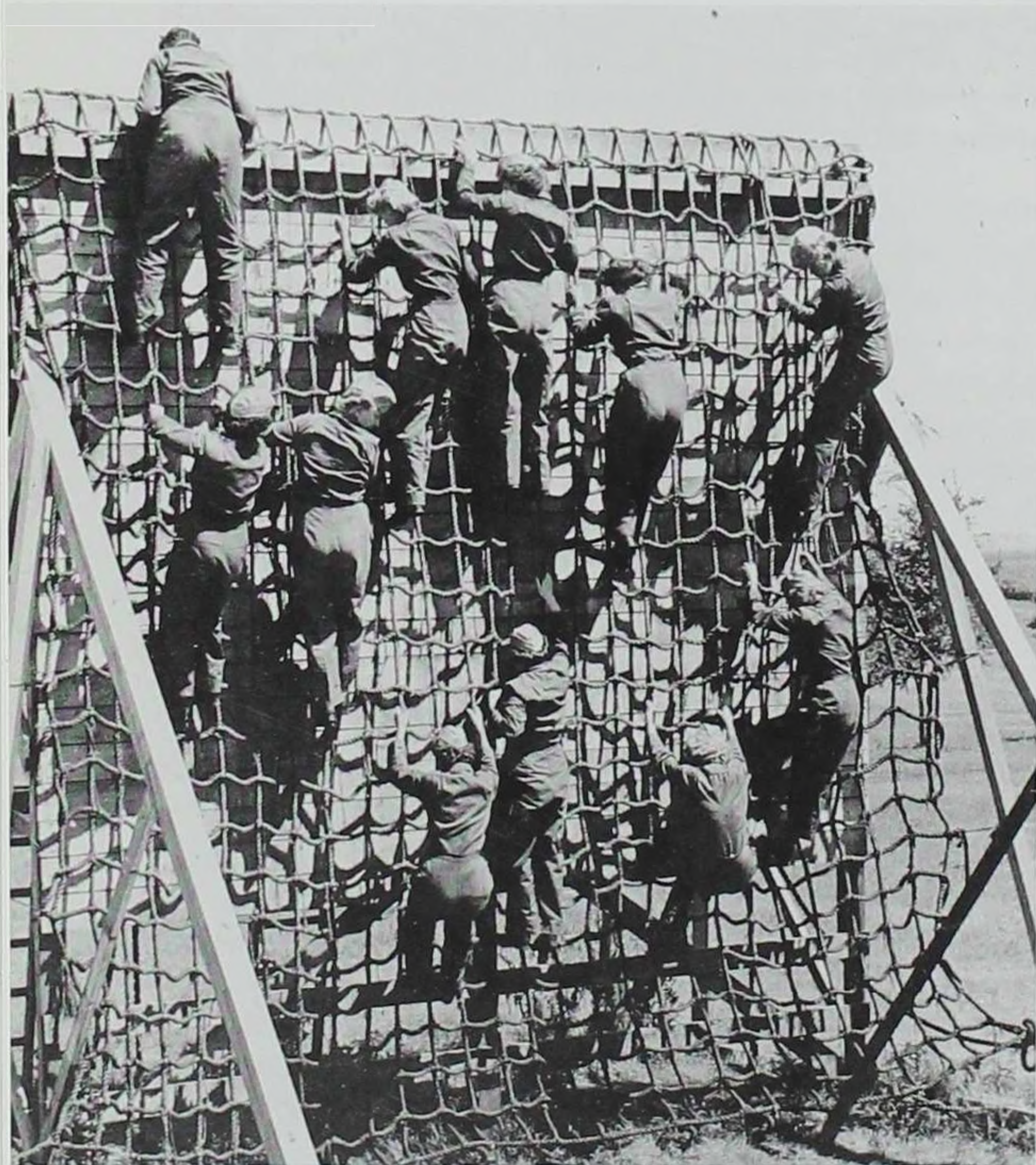
On another day, a young government inspector from back east stood behind me, checking me as I weighed and recorded the powder weight from each machine. I tapped the case, as I had previously been shown to do, to get out all the remaining powder before weighing. He turned chalky white. "Good God, girl, don't you

know that could explode!" He left quickly, and I was never checked again.

Soon after D-Day, in June 1944, the company told us that we had made enough ammunition to last for the next twenty years. We all thought the war would soon be over. The plant started to lay off personnel. Some departments started to make a new, strange, and very smelly product—large sheets of clear plastic.

One of the harem girls left to work in a German POW camp. Another went back home to pump gas in her father's gas station. As there was no work in Des Moines for the thousands of us laid off, my friend Hazel and I decided to try our luck somewhere we had never been. Neither of us had seen the mountains. In fact, we had hardly traveled out of Iowa. We boarded a fast train, the Denver Zephyr, and headed to Colorado. ❖

Mary Wear Briggs, from Missouri Valley, Iowa, wrote this reminiscence in 1988, as part of a larger memoir that she compiled in 1992 and later donated to the State Historical Society of Iowa. Her writings on her childhood home in Harrison County and on chasing chickens have appeared in earlier issues.



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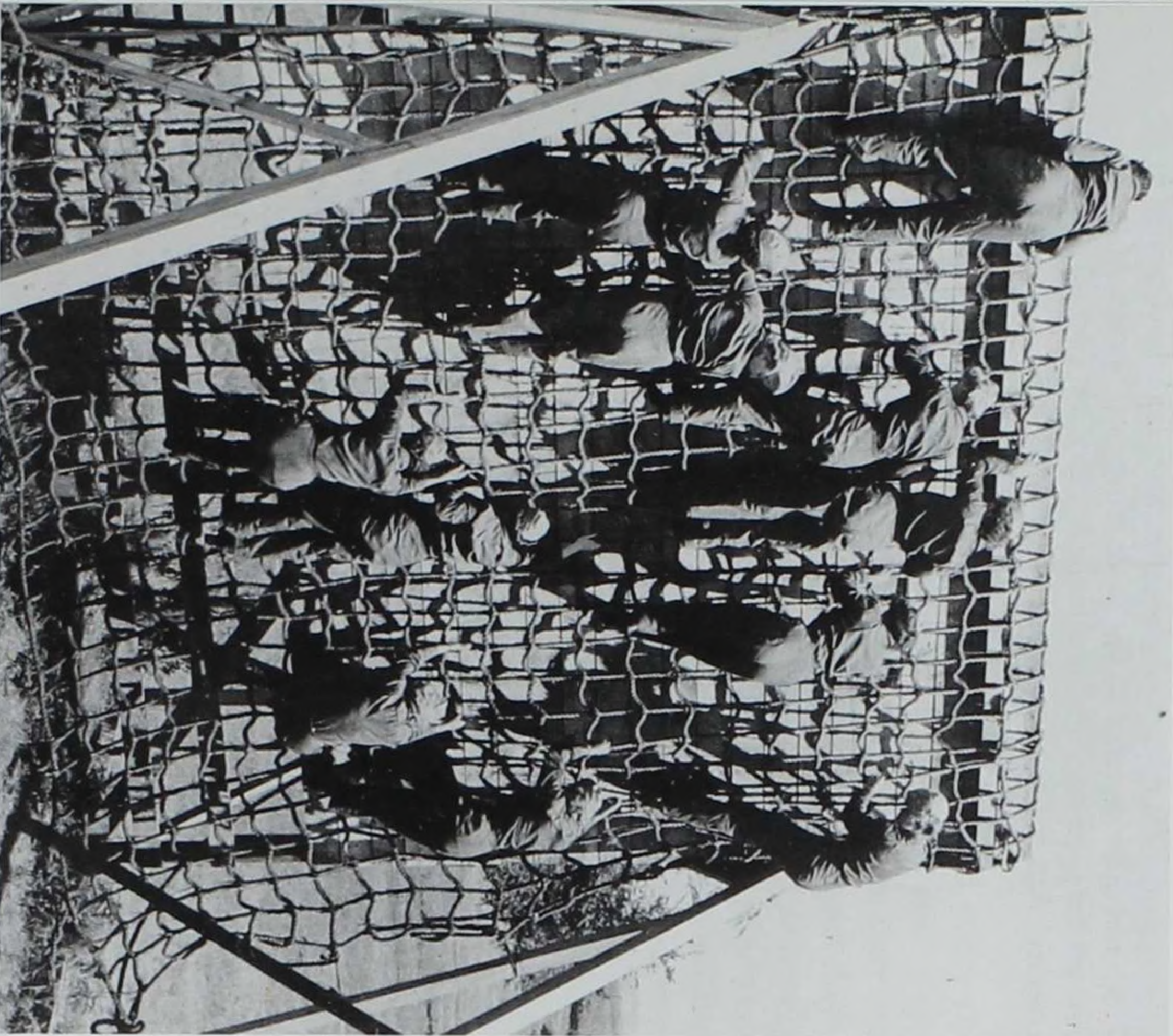
Scrambling down a cargo net, WACs at Fort Des Moines simulate a landing from a troopship (August 1945).



SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



June 1944: Women workers from the Iowa Ordnance Plant at Burlington and the Sheaffer Pen Company in Fort Madison dance with soldiers from Camp Ellis, Illinois, at a USO-operated community center in Flint Hills, a federal housing project in Burlington. First open only to ordnance workers, Flint Hills had recently started accepting wives of soldiers with children, at reduced rents, "whose allotment checks would provide only skimpy living and probably less desirable quarters elsewhere," said the *Des Moines Register*. With a population of more than 2,000, Flint Hills had its own stores, library, school, playground, and recreation center.



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Right: WACs at the Fort Des Moines training center drill with gas masks in Iowa's August heat (1945).

June 6, 1942: Saturday night in Des Moines finds these two soldiers from Fort Des Moines on a weekend furlough.



SHI (DES MOINES), DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



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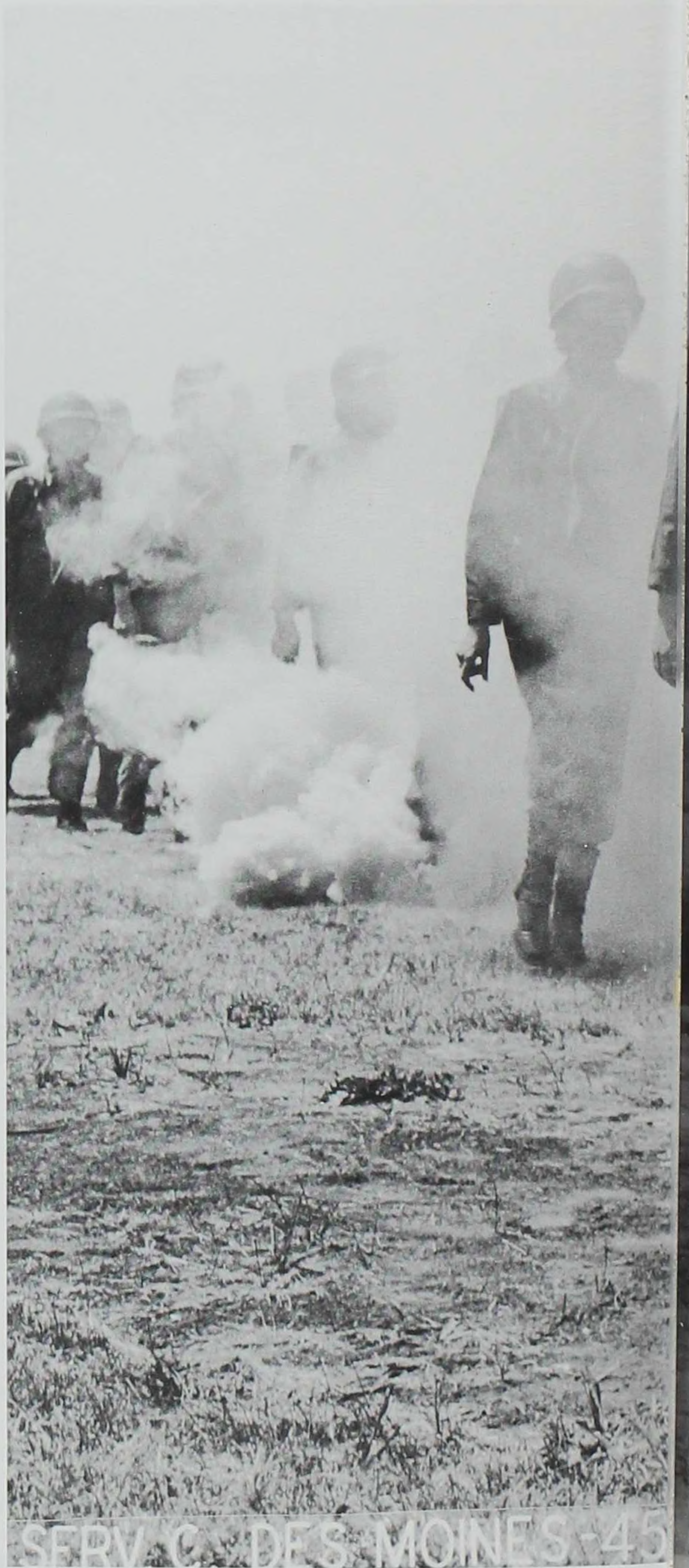


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SHSI (DES MOINES): DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



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ECKHARDT GEORGE J. ECKHOFF RAYMOND H. EDDY LE ROY HERMAN EDWARDS ARTHUR JR.
 LPHIC LE ROY ALBERT ER DEAN E. ESSLINGER M.W. ESTEP JAMES R. JR.
 VENS KENN A.
 ABER LEE RICHARD J. FIELD DELBERT D. FIELDING VER



BOTH PHOTOS: SHSI (DES MOINES); L. H. DAVIS COLLECTION

Home on furlough in August 1942, Merlin Garrison watches as R.W. Collins carefully paints the names of Franklin County men in the U.S. Armed Forces. The memorial arch in Hampton's courthouse square was sponsored by the local Civilian Defense Council.

