

WORLD WAR II *Remembered* LEADERS, BATTLES & HEROES



World War II Participants and Contemporaries

Helen Genevieve Hill
Cherokee, Oklahoma
WAC, U.S. Army, Pacific Theater

World War II Remembered is a multi-year exhibition currently on display at the Eisenhower Presidential Museum. The article that follows is a special feature of this exhibition, the fifth in a series created to honor and educate about the generation that won World War II. Featured are the stories of real people from the “World War II Participants and Contemporaries” collection, held and preserved in the archives of the Eisenhower Presidential Library.

“In view of the fact that Helen G. Hill, T/5, ASN A805726, is leaving this station for overseas duty, I wish to take advantage of the occasion to commend her most highly on her most excellent and efficient performance of duties as a member of the Security and Intelligence Division, Post Headquarters, Fort Benning, Georgia. Corporal Hill has displayed unusual ability and initiative in handling matters of importance. She is well qualified to handle classified military correspondence and matters requiring maximum protection from the standpoint of security. I recommend Corporal Hill very highly for any assignment requiring efficient performance as a confidential secretary, tact and ability to follow things through to a conclusion.”

—Director, Security and
Intelligence Division
Fort Benning, Georgia

Oklahoma native Helen Hill enlisted in the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) on March 8, 1943, a few weeks short of her 24th birthday. At the time, she was a K-12 music teacher in Alva, Oklahoma, earning a salary of \$32 a week.* By war’s

A salary of \$32.00 a week in 1943 is roughly equivalent to \$432.00 in 2013.

end, Helen would be among the 5,500 WACs who served in the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA), first in Papua, New Guinea, and, later, in the Southern Philippines. In an undated letter following Helen’s departure for the United States in November 1945, a Filipino friend, Felimo Franco, expresses his gratitude to his American friend. “Well, Helen, I thank, you very much in helping to liberate the Philippines.” He continues, “I hope God will bless the souls of those Filipinos and Americans [sic] soldier[s] who sacrificed for victory and I wish with a prayer that cooperation between our two people will last forever.”

Helen Genevieve Hill was born on March 28, 1919, in Alfalfa County, Oklahoma. Two sisters, Amy and Ruth, were born three and six years later. World War I had ended just four months before. Her father, Joseph, a veteran of the “Great War,” practiced law, and her mother, also named Helen, was a homemaker. Like her father, Helen was tall, fair of complexion and eyes, with a slight build. Helen’s formative years were spent in Cherokee, Oklahoma—a prosperous and growing agricultural, business, and transportation center in the northwest region of the state in the 1920s. Graduating from Cherokee High School in the mid-1930s, Helen went on to earn a degree in music education from the University of Oklahoma at Norman.

“I want you to know that I think you are a wonderful person, Helen. You will be an honor to your family, your country and your Church where you go.”

—Chaplain
Ft. Benning

Those who knew Helen best commented on her genuine kindness, keen intelligence, good character—and great sense of fun. She made friends easily, clearly impressed her superiors, and endeared herself to all she met. One account described her “dry sense

of humor, sharp wit, and graciousness.” For Helen, her intention to live life as an independent woman was never at odds with striving to be “a lady,” in every sense of the word.

At the time of her enlistment, Helen’s World War II Army Records reveals that, at 5’ 10”, she weighed only 115 pounds! On June 3, 1943, Helen was called to Oklahoma City to report for active duty in the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps. From there, she moved on to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, for four-weeks of basic training at the Third Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps Training Center. Before being deployed overseas, Helen served 15 months at Fort Benning, Georgia, where she held a security clearance and achieved a high level of proficiency handling classified materials as a stenographer.

Helen arrived in New Guinea on November 18, 1944, and would depart the Southwest Pacific from the Philippines on November 19, 1945. For the men and women who served there, conditions were difficult. The oppressive heat and humidity incubated chronic skin conditions like dermatitis, and there was a constant risk of contracting serious diseases like malaria. Women were disproportionately affected by the climate due to a shortage of light, and protective, summer uniforms. (Inexplicably, they had been issued heavy winter clothing, which was not only uncomfortable, but never dried in the tropical climate.) In the year she served overseas, Helen worked as a secretary and stenographer with the Signal Supply. On April 1, 1945, Helen was promoted to her final rank of sergeant. One letter written in support of a promotion, emphasized Helen’s

superior abilities and performance, noting that, early on, she should have been commissioned as an officer.

Although Helen’s wartime papers do not include a diary, journal, or letters written by her, it is still possible to extract a sense of her war experiences, particularly, through her collection of photographs and the letters written to her. Her photographic collection offers glimpses of life for WACs in World War II, tropical landscapes and indigenous people, and her wartime friendships. Places like Corregidor, Quezon City, Manila, and San Sebastian appear in her photographs.

As did many of her contemporaries, Helen had a serious wartime romance, evidenced by photographs of the couple. (Inscribed on the back of one photograph is, “Pete. Isn’t he cute?”) Letters from Helen’s Filipino friends further chronicle the relationship. One of them wrote, “I know how much your ‘Romeo’ who’s been left down here means to you Pete sits right in front of my table and all he does is dream of you the whole day. Most of the time he is absent-minded.” Another friend lamented, “If you could but see the unhappiness you have wrought on poor Pete and see him in his present run down condition because of your departure, I bet you would have cried out aloud.” For whatever reason, Helen and Pete’s relationship ended with the return to civilian life.

Helen received an honorable discharge on November 27, 1945, at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. She returned to Alva, Oklahoma, and teaching. A little more than a year later, December 27, 1946, she married Willard Boyce, superintendent of schools. As did many women of her generation, Helen retired from teaching following her marriage. In 1950, her only child, Wendell Hill Boyce, was born. Three years later, Helen suddenly became a young widow when her husband died unexpectedly. With her young son in tow, Helen returned to Cherokee and resumed her teaching career. Helen lived a long, happy, and productive life, and doted on four grandsons. Through her work and her many volunteer efforts, Helen was a force for good in her community. In January 7, 2007, Helen Hill Boyce, an exceptional woman and World War II veteran, died at the age of 88 in her beloved Oklahoma.