

# WORLD WAR II *Remembered* LEADERS, BATTLES & HEROES



## World War II Participants and Contemporaries

Jeanne Emilie Perret Betcher  
Kearny, New Jersey  
WAC, U.S. Army, European 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 fourth 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.

*“I desire to serve in the W.A.A.C. [Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps] as I feel it is my own duty to do so and believe it is absolutely necessary to do our utmost to fight to preserve the Democratic way of life in all its forms as we know it in this country and eventually to wipe out Nazism and, in that way, to give to all peoples of the world their right to live without fear, and in peace. I believe if every person of this country will put their full strength into the effort to win this devastating war, it will come to a speedy end.”*

—Jeanne E. Betcher

of military service in World War II. Within the pages of her hundreds of newsy and delightfully detailed letters, is a firsthand account of Jeanne’s military training and wartime experiences—along with an abundance of her razor-sharp personal commentary! Moreover, Jeanne’s compiled letters represent a treasure trove, rich with historical clues, which lend invaluable insights into American life and culture during the war years.

Jeanne Emilie Perret Betcher was born in Belleville, New Jersey, on June 7, 1908. Her father, William, was a Russian immigrant, arriving in the United States as a teenager in 1901. He learned a trade, eventually supporting his family as a steamfitter in Newark. Jeanne’s mother was French. Her family immigrated in 1891 when she was just a toddler. As Jeanne was named for her mother, her brother, William—two years her junior—was named for his father. By her own admission, Jeanne was a happy and indulged child, clearly raised within a warm and demonstrative family. Over the years, the Betchers lived in a number of small towns outside Newark, eventually settling down in Kearny. Though middle class, they enjoyed a Seaside Heights summer home. Growing up, Jeanne developed a fondness for gardening and tending to the family’s fruit trees. That she completed only two years of high school was not at all unusual for a young woman in the mid-1920s.

When wide-eyed, New Jersey enlistee Jeanne Betcher, arrived at the Fort Des Moines Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) Training Center on November 17, 1942, the auxiliary had been in existence just six months. Regular U.S. Army status would not be granted until January 1944.\* Armed with a high sense of duty, an enthusiastic outlook, and determined resolve, Jeanne—at 5’5” and a mere 107 pounds—would embrace more than three years

\*Eventually more than 150,000 women would serve as WACs in World War II. Jeanne was among the 8,316 who were serving in the (ETO) European Theater of Operation by July 1945.

*“Marching along together  
We’re the W.A.A.C.  
Marching along together  
U.S.A. and overseas.  
We are the Waac’s, the Army  
For all the world to see  
We’re khaki clad,  
And always glad  
We’re here to do our part  
Without a cannon, without a gun  
We’re fighting with our heart  
Marching along together  
We’re the W.A.A.C.”*

(Popular WAC song)

At the time of her enlistment, October 8, 1942, Jeanne was 34 years old, and living in Chenango, New York, where she earned a living as a stenographer and typist. By mid-November, she boarded an overnight train from Newark to Chicago, and,

then, on to Des Moines. Weary, but excited, Jeanne and her fellow WAAC recruits boarded trucks for the final leg to Fort Des Moines for basic training. When she was among the few selected for administrative school, rather than transport school or cooks and bakers school, Jeanne was thrilled—and mightily relieved. Describing her time at Fort Des Moines, Jeanne wrote, “The life here is somewhat like a vacation and work combined. We drill in the open air, which is good for us, have good food, and a variety of it. We march to the different classes, so there is no steady confinement.” The only job for which she expressed a definite distaste was K.P. duty. “Have never seen so many dishes in my life . . . . It was an unpleasant task, and I was glad when it was over.” On December 31, 1942, Jeanne was proud to graduate as an army administrative specialist.

Jeanne’s letters span a three-year period, November 1942 through October 1945. They typically focus on daily activities, the weather—always as it compares to New Jersey—army food, news from home, and the Allies’ progress in winning the war. Of particular value are Jeanne’s observations and impressions as one of the nation’s first WACs. Jeanne was frequently recognized by her superiors for carrying out her duties at a superior level. In April 1944, she was selected for an unnamed “important assignment,” as determined by the headquarters of the IX Bomber Command. What emerges very clearly from Jeanne’s letters, however, is how much she missed her family, “The only thing I desire for Christmas is to be home with you.”

Jeanne’s troop transport arrived in England in late July 1943. By the time she arrived home in October 1945, Jeanne had served in London, throughout France, and in Namur, Belgium. In letters written from each of these

locales, Jeanne always reassures her parents with a version of, “I am in the very best of health.” and “Do not worry about me.” And, in homage to her French mother, she sprinkles in expressions like, “mille fois” and “Chere Mama et Cher Papa.” Her letters often conclude with a playful “Your Wacky daughter, Jeanne.”

Jeanne faithfully records the Allies’ progress with dates, names, and events that we now associate with winning the war. Writing from England on December 29, 1943, she mentions, with great expectation, “Yesterday’s paper announced the naming of General Eisenhower as Supreme Allied Commander in readiness for the invasion of Europe from the British coast . . . .” In a letter to her cousin, Bill, Jeanne reveals, “On D-Day eve I worked very late, and when I reached the hut, I couldn’t sleep, hearing the planes droning overhead and thinking of what was soon to take place . . . .” A letter dated May 8, 1945, celebrates the arrival of V-E Day, “Am so glad it is all over—to end all the suffering and anguish.”

As the Allies moved across Europe, Jeanne regularly expressed her loathing for the Nazis, as she does in a letter dated April 12, 1945, “There should be no mercy . . . .” and, on April 18, she devotes an entire paragraph to the unfolding Nazi atrocities. “[N]ow, that the Americans have gone right into Germany and seen with their own eyes the horrors which were committed—we can know that they were true.” She continues, “There appeared in our paper of April 16, a picture of an American soldier who was freed from a German Prisoner of War Camp . . . he appears to be a living skeleton.” Writing of General Jodl’s plea for generous treatment of captured German troops, Jeanne’s outrage overflows, evoking raw emotions and righteous vengeance, “We should show them the same generosity they gave our boys, who were prisoners—and those of the Allied nations—starve and kill and torture and burn them. Imagine the nerve asking for generosity.”

Following her discharge in 1946, Jeanne returned home to 1 Madison Avenue in Kearny, New Jersey, where she resumed her prewar career as a stenographer and typist. For a number of years, she worked for the Prudential Insurance Company and, later, she was employed as a private secretary. Jeanne never married. On May 24, 1999, Jeanne Emilie Perret Betcher, World War II veteran, died at age 90. When her nation needed her, Jeanne volunteered to serve and, in doing so, established herself as a true American pioneer, something for which she undoubtedly felt a deep sense of pride her entire life.