

KATHERINE TRICKEY

A WAC FROM MAINE IN THE SOUTH

THE WORLD WAR II CORRESPONDENCE OF
KATHERINE TRICKEY

Portland, Maine,
November 16, 1943

Dear Mother,
I hated to say good-bye, but don't let yourself feel too badly because I shall be doing what I *want* to do. I'll be seeing new places and doing different things. The ride down was glorious. In the light from the bus, the trees on the edge of the road shone bright and glistening. The evergreens were loaded with snow and even the deciduous trees were coated on the bare branches....The lights in the houses shining out on the snow covered lawns made cheerful spots in the dark landscape.
Much, much love, Kay

Katherine "Kay" Trickey of Lewiston, Maine, wrote this letter to her mother as she embarked on a wartime journey. Over the course of the next two years, she would write 150 letters to her family in Maine, providing them with many details about her life as an enlisted woman in the newly established Women's Army Corps (WAC).¹

When the United States entered World War II in December 1941, the opportunities for women to serve in the military were very limited. Only registered nurses who met the requirements of the Army or Navy Nurse Corps qualified for service. However, the demands of wartime mobilization convinced a somewhat reluctant Congress of the need to create women's branches of the four military services. The first of these organizations, the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) was created by act of Congress on May 15, 1942. However, this organization gave women only partial military status. On July 1, 1943, following considerable debate, Congress abolished the WAAC and created the Women's Army Corps. This new organization provided women the

same rank, titles, and pay as their male counterparts. By the time the WAC had been created, the Women's Reserve of the Navy (WAVES), the Women's Reserve of the Coast Guard (SPARs) and the Women Marines had also been established. A total of 350,000 women served in the military during World War II. Of these, 140,000 belonged to the WAC, the largest of the women's service branches.²

Katherine Trickey was thirty-two years old when she joined the WAC. As with many other World War II WACs, she was a well-educated, mature woman when she enlisted. She had graduated from the University of Maine in 1932 and, over the next few years, had held a variety of jobs. When Dow Air Force Base opened in Bangor early in World War II, she obtained a good clerical position at the installation. In the autumn of 1943, she enlisted in the WAC with a group of Maine women who took the oath of allegiance to the service in a ceremony at the State House in Augusta as a part of a special recruiting effort. These women underwent basic training together at the Third WAC Training Center in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, five miles south of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Trickey's basic training letters are replete with information about the regimen and routine of Army life.

Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia,
[November 20, 1943]

Dear Folks:

....We had a nice swim at the YW in Cincinnati but had to march two miles each way to get it! Then had supper on the train. They could only serve 16 at a time and they were very slow so that the last of us didn't get a chance to eat until 9 o'clock. We were tired enough to go right to bed...

We got up at about 7 o'clock at Chattanooga, Tenn. and piled into army trucks. The camp must be about 12 miles from Chattanooga. After registering we had our first *mess* and learned that we must eat everything that we took on our trays....We were then assigned to barracks....The meals are fairly good....

Today we got up at 7 – had breakfast *then* made our beds for the first time – much, much struggling. Everything, of course, must be just so. I got the blanket upside down and had to make

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it over. Then we had a short talk by our commanding officer, Lt. Broadhead, telling us some of the rules and the things we will be doing the next few days....

Tomorrow we will really start in to be busy – tests – getting our clothing – interview – drills – various duties such as cleaning barracks, washrooms, and grounds

Will write you again soon. This still doesn't seem real! But I'm awfully glad I'm here. I am going to like it, I know....

Lots and lots of love, Kay

Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, November 28, 1943

Dear Folks:

....Saturday we had our first formal inspection, so Friday night we had a *GI* party [Service people refer to thorough cleanings as *GI* parties.] with scrub brushes, dust cloths, etc. trying to make our barracks the cleanest of all. Friday nights are reserved for *GI* parties! Saturday noon I got *five letters*. I know now how the boys feel when they have mail call and no letters. Those letters Sat. sure pepped me up....

My but I'm glad I'm here. I think I shall enjoy practically every minute of it during training at least. Even the work is fun when all of us are doing it together....We march everywhere, to mess, to classes, to work (even to the movies until we get our uniforms)....

Love to all, Kay

Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia,
December 13, 1943

Dear Folks:

We are attending a class on First Aid. This past week has been so busy. A week ago yesterday I had KP all day so I didn't get a chance to write any letters and I haven't been able to get caught up yet. Monday when we got home from classes in the afternoon we found that our daily inspection had been so bad that we were ordered to spend the evening cleaning the barracks. Tuesday evening I had a big washing to do and it went like that

all week. Classes this week have been interesting. We are taking up Manners for Military Women, Interior Guard Duties, Uniform Regulations and Care of Clothing, Military Sanitation, Preventative Medicine, Backgrounds of the War, Articles of War, Company Administration, Physical Training, and Drill. We've had some very interesting films....

Spaulding and I went to Chattanooga. It really seemed good to see some *civilians* again! We window shopped, bought a few things in drugstores, [and] we took a city bus ride which was very interesting. The houses around here are nearly all low, one story affairs with very low roofs. The landscaping around looks as if it would be very pretty. Nearly all the houses are white wood or stucco....

Loads of love to all of you, Kay

After completing basic training early in 1944, Katherine Trickey was transferred to Camp Wheeler, Georgia, just outside Macon, for the remainder of the war. Camp Wheeler was named for Confederate General Joseph Wheeler, and it served as a major training facility throughout World War II. More than 218,000 troops received some portion of their training at this facility. At Camp Wheeler, Private Trickey worked as a typist and file clerk. She was pleased with her assignment, commenting in a February 1, 1944 letter, "I sometimes think I'm enjoying myself too much."

Katherine Trickey, as with many women in the service, took good advantage of the opportunities to travel and visit new areas as well as to meet new people. As a Maine native stationed in Georgia, she was particularly aware of the distinctive southern atmosphere of her assignment. She took several trips to Atlanta, visited the University of Georgia at Athens, toured St. Augustine, Florida, and visited the Indian Mounds at Ocmulgee National Park located on the outskirts of Macon. In September 1945, she journeyed to an area which has since become somewhat of a shrine: Franklin D. Roosevelt's Little White House at Warm Springs, Georgia.

Not surprisingly, the sweltering heat of Georgia's summers did not go unnoticed. During one particularly hot spell in August, she wrote about a "watermelon party in the barracks day room" in which "we

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*spread papers all over the floor and about a dozen of us crowded around. Messy oh my, juice and seeds and rinds all over that paper!... More fun." Yet as delightful as Georgia watermelon parties were, she still missed summers in Maine, telling her folks that she had received "your letter written 'on a high hill in Maine.' Wouldn't I have liked to be with you there. It sounded so inviting. I bet the blueberries will taste good."*³

In the next letter, Trickey reports on a visit to Fort Valley in the midst of peach blossom time.

Camp Wheeler, Georgia,
March 6, 1944

Dear Folks,

You have heard, undoubtedly, of Georgia as the Peach State. Yesterday, I found out why. Six of us hired a car and drove to Fort Valley to see the peach blossoms. It was the Sunday when they were in full bloom and we had been told it was a sight worth seeing. It certainly was. There are acres of trees. The pink blossoms against a background of a heavenly blue sky was a sight I shall never forget. We got out of the car and walked a long ways through one orchard. We got so far in it that we could see nothing but peach trees in any direction.... We couldn't have had a better day. The weather was hot and summery but not uncomfortably so. It seemed grand to drive a car again. The OPA [Office of Price Administration in charge of rationing and price control] allows them to rent one car for 90 miles pleasure driving per individual per month. It seemed queer to have to watch the mileage so carefully. As there were six of us in the car it cost us only 2.10 a piece and we were gone over eight hours and drove the full 90 miles.....

After we had eaten dinner at Fort Valley in a small but nice restaurant there, we walked around the town to see the houses and flowers....We asked an elderly man who was out in front of one of the homes about one of his flowers and got into a conversation with him. He finally invited us into his house to meet his wife and we had quite an interesting visit with them. It was the first time any of us had been in a civilian home since we

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joined the Army....They had been planning to drive out to see a nursery of camellias which were in bloom and arranged for us to follow them in our car....I don't know whether you know what camellias are like or not. I had never seen any that I know of. They are quite a lot like roses only without any odor....

It was as you can see a very interesting day, much of it made more interesting through the friendliness of the Georgian people to those of us in service....I don't know that we would be very interested in entering strange men's homes if we weren't in uniform!!...

Love, Kay

With 16.3 million service personnel and 15 million civilians on the move during the wartime years, direct connections through telephones and telegrams were often slow and cumbersome. Telephone companies exhorted civilians to avoid making telephone calls between 7:00 and 9:00 p.m. because that was the only time that service personnel could call "the home folks." Nonetheless, long waits at telephone booths often occurred. Most service people with stateside assignments good-naturedly endured this inconvenience.

Camp Wheeler, Georgia, April 12, 1944

Dear Mother,

I guess my telephone call is not going to get through after all. I don't seem to have much luck with them, do I? I'm sorry. I had a class last night at 7 o'clock so couldn't start trying until 9. Then the operator said it would be 5 or 6 hours before the call would go through. There was a big crowd at the telephone building. Everyone decided that after Easter would be a quiet time to telephone, I guess. I went back to the barracks and put in a call for this morning but it hasn't come in and it's most time to go to work. I hope you didn't have too bad an evening sitting up for the call. I really didn't think I would be so busy or I never would have got your hopes up like that. Anyway, here is my belated Birthday Greetings, dear...

Love, dear, Kay

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Women in uniform shared a special camaraderie which they did not have the opportunity to experience as civilians. In the next letter, Katherine Trickey reminded her parents that "I still claim we've got the best possible group of girls in my wing of the barracks."

Camp Wheeler, Georgia, April 29, 1944

Dear Folks,

Wednesday I worked at the office until 10:45 trying to get somewhat caught up. It is difficult to keep ahead of the game with Minnie on furlough. She wired last night that she was sick and would need an extension....I hope I get some help before then.

Thursday night, our Detachment had a dance at the boys' Recreation Hall. We were all supposed to go and I guess nearly everyone did. I really had a pretty good time. I even danced three dances. I also got a date for next Wednesday with one of the overseas boys....Last night I was tired and just loafed. Nearly all the girls were hanging around last night so there was plenty of talk and gossip to keep things interesting. I still claim we've got the best possible group of girls in my wing of the barracks.

I must stop now and get to work.

Love, Kay

Visits by dignitaries always created a storm of activity in the barracks and on military posts. When Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, Director of the WAC, came to visit Camp Wheeler, the preparations were especially intense.

Camp Wheeler, Georgia, May 26, 1944

Dear Folks,

This is a big day here. Colonel Hobby herself is coming to inspect us. My, have we worked! Last night was a great scrubbing bee. The barracks are really clean even if cement floors, beaverboard walls, and wooden beams can't be made to shine very much. My detail had to put oil on all four of our stoves and shine them; rather messy but didn't take too long. Then of course our own areas had to be done. Floor scrubbed with

turpentine to take the tar off and then scrubbed on our hands and knees with soap and water and a brush. We had to make nice white beds which had to have an exact six inch fold and be exactly six inches between the edge of the pillow and the fold of the upper sheet....

May 27, 1944

We had quite a day yesterday. Having G.I.'d the night before we had only the last minute details to attend to. We got out of work at 3 o'clock and went to the barracks and changed into fresh uniforms and then just had to stay inside the barracks and wait. We couldn't sit down even for fear of wrinkling our skirts. At 5:15 Col. Hobby arrived. We had a formal inspection in the barracks; then we went to the mess hall where she gave us a very nice talk. I guess we all fell in love with her. She was very good looking, had a very sweet low voice, and an extremely pleasant personality...

Much love,
Kay

When they were not on duty, women in uniform often led active social lives. They traveled to nearby towns and cities, went to USO shows, danced to wartime swing music at local nightclubs, saw scores of movies, ate restaurant meals away from their duty stations, and enjoyed a variety of activities such as roller skating, canoeing, swimming, bowling, and playing tennis.

Kay Trickey wrote to her parents about going to performances of the Little Theater of Macon and the Macon Opera, attending a lecture by war correspondent Erika Mann, hearing World War I flying ace Eddie Rickenbacker speak, befriending young soldiers she met at the local USO, cheering for the Camp Wheeler WAC baseball team, and singing in the WAC glee club. She even joined the WAC basketball team. As she noted in her November 9, 1944 letter, "It seems good to be taking part in athletics again. Thought I was too old for that sort of thing, till I joined the WACs!!" In the next letter, Kay Trickey describes some of her off-duty activities for her parents.

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Camp Wheeler, Georgia, October 4, 1944

Dear Folks,

Friday evening we went to the USO camp show at the gymnasium. Fairly good, – Rather good magician's act – and one of the dancing acts was good....Sunday, I slept all the morning; then played tennis on our new court for almost 2 1/2 hours....I am much surprised to think I can hit the balls at all; it has been so long since I have played....

Love to all, Kay

On May 2, 1944, Katherine Trickey proudly reported to her parents that "you may now address me as Sergeant Trickey." With this promotion came new responsibilities, especially as more and more men were shipped to the battlefronts. In late September 1944, Trickey informed her parents that "I have more than ever to do. I expect that when we get some more WACs next week sometime, one of them will be assigned to the file section in place of the only boy left there, so it will be five of us WACs and no boys...." The challenges that she faced as the supervisor of other clerks were the subject of several letters to her parents.

Camp Wheeler, Georgia, October 19, 1944

Dear Folks,

As for my new job – it is an expansion of my old one really as I have both the decimal file and the 201 [standard Army personnel files]....The other girls are ok.... P. is a young rather uncultured girl who isn't bad to work with although she is always in trouble about something as she is very scatterbrained and has no sense of right, wrong or of responsibility apparently. She is likable, however....

Much love to all of you, Kay

As a native of the traditionally Republican state of Maine, Katherine Trickey's support for Franklin D. Roosevelt was muted. In the next letter, she offers her comments on the presidential election of November 1944.

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Camp Wheeler, Georgia, November 8, 1944

Dear Folks,

The election news is in and our friend Roosevelt won again. I really expected him to do so, but [Thomas E.] Dewey made a better showing than they expected, I guess. Maybe it's just as well at this particular time, but I still think we're crazy to give one man that much power. I don't trust his peace policies either. I'm afraid of what he will commit us to be without our knowledge and consent. Maybe I'm just pessimistic and maybe he really does have our, not his interests at heart.

Love to you all including the youngster, Kay

Throughout the wartime years, travel on buses and trains was often very crowded and difficult. This was especially true during holiday seasons. The following letter describes a tedious train trip which Katherine Trickey experienced during a 1944 Christmas furlough.

Camp Wheeler, Georgia, December 31, 1944

Dear Folks:

The trip to Washington was o.k. Not exciting and no one to talk to, but I read and slept and enjoyed myself. From Washington down, it was a beastly trip. I didn't get a seat until morning. We got on the train at 11:35 p.m. and it didn't even leave the station until 1:30, so it was two hours late in starting and it stopped every little ways and just crawled anyway so that it was four hours late reaching Atlanta. The train was just as crowded as it was in June. Soldiers and sailors sleeping in every spot of the floor and even one in our car who slept on the baggage rack.

Fortunately there was another WAC on my car who offered to take turns with me in her seat which was very decent of her. So she, I and a soldier took turns about an hour at a time....Of course, I missed my bus to Macon and had to buy a train ticket. That train was also late so I reached Camp just an hour late. The girls who made up the Morning Reports fixed it up for me as if I'd gotten in on time, however, apparently with the approval of the officers so I haven't heard any more from it....

Loads of love to all, Kay

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Katherine Trickey served in the segregated military. Moreover, she was stationed in the deep South where segregation was a way of life. Consequently, she had only limited contact with African Americans. Her letters contain occasional references to the social and economic hardships experienced by southern blacks. Yet she felt that these hardships were more rooted in economic than in racial circumstances. After a bus trip through Fort Hill, the black section of Macon, she wrote the following letter to her parents.

Camp Wheeler, Georgia, April 29, 1945

Dear Folks,

....We took a bus that said Fort Hill and it turned out to be a ride practically entirely through the Negro section. Honestly, I don't understand why there are not horrible epidemics here in the South. The condition as far as sanitation is concerned is appalling in the poor and Negro sections. The houses we saw today for the most part had no screens at all either in the doors or the windows. The yards are cluttered and many had cows and chickens in out buildings near the house. The toilet facilities are obviously the outhouse variety and this in a city that has running water. And in even the best sections of town there are alley ways of Negro homes that are nothing but shacks.

The poorer class of whites live in homes almost as bad. Many of the presumably nice homes are little better than our summer cottages! The wealthier homes, however, are lovely....

Love to all, Kay

On April 12, 1945 American citizens learned of President Roosevelt's sudden death. Katherine Trickey's response was more cautious than many, but it does reflect her immense feeling of loss.

Camp Wheeler, Georgia, April 14, 1945

Dear Folks,

We have all been rather stunned at the news of the President's death. It was so unexpected to most of us, although, of course, his last newsreel pictures showed his condition. There were memorial parades for some of the battalions this morning and

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short memorial services near the offices. Many of the girls are quite broken up over the news as they really worshipped him. I *do* feel that this is a very unfortunate thing to have happened right now, but, of course, I believe that there are other Americans capable of running the country....

Love, Kay

The end of the war in Europe in early May 1945 was a time for pause and thanksgiving. However, as Trickey noted in the following letter, "the War is only half over."

Camp Wheeler, Georgia, May 8, 1945

Dear Folks,

This is quite a day isn't it? Have you been excited at home? It has been quiet here but we've had special speeches etc. The announcement came through at 9 this morning that was officially V-E Day as we had expected it would....

This afternoon we marched to the parade ground with the Headquarters Company of Men and the Trainees of the 1st and 3rd Regiments. That is about half of the Camp. We listened to the President's speech from a recording and then to a speech by our General Hearn. He gave a good talk, stressing, of course, the fact that War is only half over and that we must still continue to work until the Japs are also beaten.

Love to all of you, Kay

With the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945, the end of the war came quickly. Most military personnel marked the events with thoughts of going home, and thanks that they had been spared from the casualty lists. Yet they also noted, as did Kay Trickey in her victory letter, that "the war is over for the civilians - not for the Armed Forces!"

Camp Wheeler, Georgia, August 14, 1945

Dear Folks,

This is certainly one great day. It doesn't seem possible that it is true. I was in the movies in Macon when the President's

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announcement came tonight. I was alone and although I had just gone in – the movie no longer interested me, [and] I took the first bus back to camp. Macon was beginning to be noisy when I left it. People were standing in front of the stores under the awnings (it was raining hard!) – and all of the cars and buses were blowing their horns.

About halfway back to camp the sun came out and there was a gorgeous rainbow which seemed so fitting. About 9 o'clock, Lt. Kennedy came round and invited us to raid the mess hall for an impromptu snack.....I just wish it meant we'd be going home soon – but I'm afraid it will be Easter *at least* before we're through. There are many to be discharged and someone is going to have to do all the paper work. I expect we're the ones who are going to do it.

Of course, the war is over for the civilians – not for the Armed Forces! All the broadcasts tonight kept emphasizing – 2 day holidays for whom – the *civilians*. Military personnel report to work as *usual!!! Who won the war, anyway* –... oh, well we should worry, so long as it is over.

Much love to *all* of you, Kay

At the end of the Second World War, Katherine Trickey began to give serious consideration to her postwar plans. Like many World War II veterans, she intended on furthering her education with the use of funds from the G.I. Bill.

Camp Wheeler, Georgia, October 10, 1945

Dear Folks,

....I'm ready to move. It seems queer with people leaving all the time. Something like the Junior year at school with the Seniors leaving!! One of the girls who got out in June couldn't stay away and has been down here visiting for the last two weeks. Living in the barracks and even helping at her old job in the office. Seems almost unbelievable, but tis true!!

I'm still as vague as ever as to what I want to do when I get out. I wrote Simmons Library School [in Boston] and got a

catalogue – could do that next year maybe if I could find some way to live on fifty dollars a month. Tuition would be covered o.k....

Love, Kay

In a November 13, 1945 letter, written shortly before her discharge, Kay Trickey reflected on the meaning of her two years in the WAC and confided to her parents that “for all I’m anxious to get home, I still feel sad about leaving.” Her service in the Women’s Army Corps had been filled with challenges and adventures. She had predicted in her first letter to her mother that “I shall be doing what I want to do. I’ll be seeing new places and doing different things.” Katherine Trickey had not been disappointed. She had traveled the highways and byways of Georgia, met new people from across the United States, witnessed the poverty which was prevalent throughout much of the segregated South, mastered the regimen and routine of military life, taken on the responsibility of managing a large office staff, shared the camaraderie of women in uniform, and participated in many additional activities that had not been a part of her life in Maine.

Life would never be the same for Katherine Trickey and the other 350,000 young women who joined the WACs, WAVES, SPARs, and Women Marines during World War II. For many, it was the defining event in their lives. Drawing upon their wartime experiences, these women were better equipped to meet the challenges of the postwar world.

In the last letter she penned to her family before returning to civilian life, Katherine Trickey made it clear, with typical Maine taciturnity, that she had been transformed by her two years in the Women’s Army Corps and that she was now ready for new adventures.

Fort Dix, New Jersey, November 30, 1945

Dear Folks,

Well, this is it. I arrived at Ft. Dix at 3:00 yesterday afternoon and am scheduled to leave tomorrow afternoon...It still doesn’t seem possible.

Mother, I hope you won’t mind if I spend a couple of weeks getting home. There are several things I may never get a chance

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to do again, and some of the girls who have already moved from Cp. Wheeler whom I want to see. I expect now to get home 2 weeks from today for sure....

Love, Kay

Following her discharge from the WAC in November 1945, Katherine Trickey returned to Maine where she used the G.I. Bill to earn two master's degrees: one in teaching, and another in library science. She worked for a short time as a librarian at an annex of the University of Maine. She then spent the next twenty-three years working in the Swampscott, Massachusetts, school system, retiring as Head of Media Services for that school district. After retiring, she returned to Maine to live. She has worked extensively as a volunteer for the Hampden Historical Society. Katherine Trickey's World War II story, as revealed in her correspondence to her parents, provides a missing piece to the complicated puzzle of how United States women themselves perceived and experienced the wartime era.

Judy Barrett Litoff, Bryant College
David C. Smith, University of Maine

NOTES

¹For information on the home-front letters of civilian women in the United States, see Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters From American Women on the Home Front* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); *Dear Boys: World War II Letters From a Woman Back Home* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); and *Miss You: The World War II Letters of Barbara Wooddall Taylor and Charles E. Taylor* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990). For the letters of women in uniform, see Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, *We're In This War Too: World War II Letters from American Women in Uniform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²For an introduction to the history of women in the military during World War II, see D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War With America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), chapters 2 and 3. The standard history of the WAC is Mattie E. Treadwell, *United States Army in World War II, Special Studies, The Women's Army Corps* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1954). This may be supplemented with Anne Bosanko Green, *One Woman's War: Letters Home from the Women's Army Corps, 1944-1946* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1989); Catherine Bell Chrisman, *My War, W.W. II - As Experienced by One Woman Soldier* (Denver, Colorado: Maverick Publications, 1989); Dorothy R. Spratley, *Women Go To War: Answering the First Call in World War II* (Columbus, Ohio: Hazelnut Publishing, 1992); Nancy Dammann, *A WAC's Story: From Brisbane to Manila* (Sun City, Arizona: Social Change Press, 1992).

³Katherine Trickey to her parents, August 7, 9, 1944.