

CHAPTER XX

The North African and Mediterranean Theaters

The North African Theater of Operations was the pioneer in employment of Waacs overseas.¹ The experiment owed its impetus to the first theater commander, Lt. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had been impressed with the efficiency of British servicewomen, and to his deputy, Maj. Gen. Everett S. Hughes, who fifteen years before had prepared the General Staff study, *Participation of Women in War*. On most lower echelons there was a less favorable general attitude, ranging from mild skepticism in headquarters offices to bitter opposition in the great majority of soldiers' letters.²

The theater received its first five WAAC officers on 22 December 1942, some six weeks after the invasion of North Africa. The women, qualified as secretaries, were assigned by the War Department to England, but upon General Eisenhower's request were immediately placed by the London headquarters on a ship bound for North Africa. A day out of port, the ship was torpedoed, and the women came into port aboard a British destroyer, which had taken two from the burning ship and three from a lifeboat. The day in the lifeboat was remembered by the Waac participants as a hectic interval in which they lost all their equipment, the only crewman aboard became violently seasick, and the

women fished five or six men, one badly injured, from the water. When the Waacs arrived in port, dirty and bedraggled, they were greeted by anxious dignitaries who contributed oranges, toothbrushes, and other emergency items. General Matejka offered half a jar of hand cream, while Maj. Gen. Walter Bedell Smith procured small-sized men's trousers, which the women found they could not get into. General Smith immediately chose as his assistant one particularly filthy member who had lost hairpins and hat and been vomited on; he confided to her later that he "picked the worst-looking so her feelings wouldn't be hurt." The greatest con-

¹ No official WAC history was discovered in theater files. This chapter draws upon: (1) The sections concerning NATO in SPWA 320.2, WAAC classified files, DRB AGO. (2) WAC policy file, in possession of Lt Col Dorothea A. Coleman. Hereafter cited as Coleman file. (3) Intervs with, and written comments from, Lt Col Dorothea A. Coleman, 21 Jan and 8 Feb 46; Lt Col Cora M. Foster, 8 Mar 50; Maj Hortense M. Boutell, 8 Mar 50 and 6 Mar 51; Maj Ruth M. Briggs, 6 Mar 51; Maj Aline Drezmal, 6 Mar 51. (4) Memo, WAC PRO, Hq MTOUSA, for WAC Gp, WDBPR, 12 Sep 45, sub: WAC Redeployment. WDWAC 000.7. Hereafter cited as Redeployment Summary. (5) Clippings and publicity material, cited by name and envelope. DRB AGO. (6) Interv and written comments from Dr. Sidney T. Mathews. OCMH. (7) Review of this chapter by Col Westray Battle Boyce Leslie.

² For all excerpts from mail, see NATO AG files 319.1 Morale, Vols. II-V.