

## THE WAY WE WERE

# World War I saw first female Marines

By Lillian Cox

**C**AMP PENDLETON — Lucy Brewer, according to legend, became the first female Marine when she enlisted as George Baker during the War of 1812.

Disguised as a man, Brewer was a sharpshooter aboard the Constitution in some of the bloodiest battles against the British.

Women were barred from the Marine Corps until 1918, when the need for additional combat troops in World War I prompted the Secretary of the Navy to reverse the policy.

“Women, motivated by patriotism, flooded recruitment offices,” said retired Sgt. Maj. Eleanor Judge.

Judge is a board member of the Women Marines Association.

Female recruits had to be 20 years old and were restricted to performing clerical duties.

Opha Mae Johnson officially became the first female Marine when she enlisted on Aug. 13, 1918.

The organization was formally called the Marine Reserve, and, informally, the Marinettes. In total, 305 women enlisted as privates for a four-year commitment that ended in September 1922.

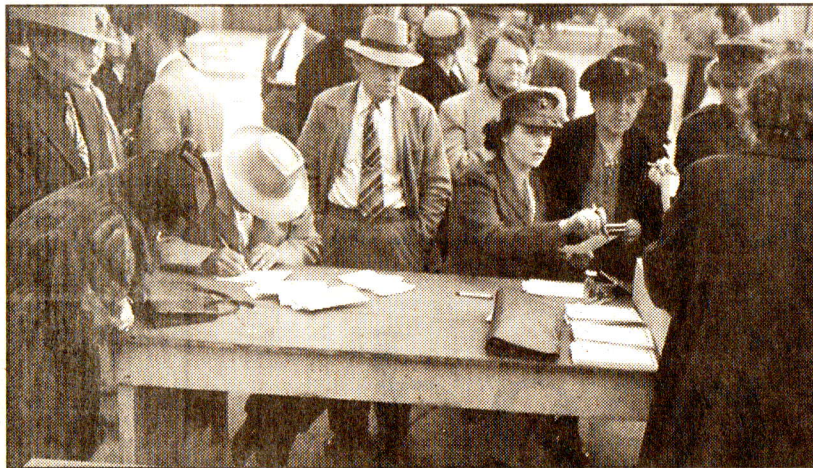
The need for more combat Marines during World War II led to the formation of the Women’s Reserve on Feb. 13, 1943.

“Our motto became ‘Free a Marine to Fight,’” Judge said.

Unlike their predecessors, who only performed clerical functions, Women’s Reserve members were trained as parachute riggers, mechanics, radio operators, map makers, motor transport support



Women’s Reserve members marched through downtown Oceanside during a parade in the 1950s.



Members of Camp Pendleton’s Women’s Reserve sold war bonds at the Oceanside Pier during World War II. *Oceanside Historical Society photos*

and welders.

Last fall, the Women’s Reserve celebrated its 60th anniversary with a ceremony at Camp Pendleton.

“In his remarks, Maj. Gen. Bowden referred to *The Scout*, dated Nov. 1, 1943,” Judge said. “The newspaper reported that 93 enlisted women and two officers passed through the Pendleton entrance on Tuesday, Oct. 26, 1943,

to a rousing welcome given by male leathernecks.”

Judge said that after World War II, the Reserve was disbanded except for 100 women who were assigned to U.S. Marine Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C.

But on June 12, 1948, in response to the Korean conflict, Congress passed the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act, making women a permanent part

of the Corps.

“I joined in 1949 with three other girls whose boyfriends were in the Marines,” Judge said. “I really didn’t know what I was getting into.”

Judge said the Reserve met for three hours on Thursday nights. She was paid \$10 a month.

“On July 29, 1950, I was called up for active duty. I reported on Aug. 7 and was sent by troop train on Aug. 14 from Boston to Camp Lejeune, (N.C.)” she said.

“I was in culture shock. I went from living in a loving home, where I was the only girl, to a barracks with 143 women.”

Judge became a recruiter, drill instructor and a battalion major. On Aug. 31, 1980, she retired as a base sergeant major for Camp Pendleton, the highest position an enlisted person can hold.

The 23rd Biennial Convention of the Women Marines Association will be in San Diego Sept. 4-8. For information, visit [www.womenmarines.org](http://www.womenmarines.org), e-mail [sgtmajjudge@cox.net](mailto:sgtmajjudge@cox.net) or call (760) 439-1447.

Lillian Cox is a freelance writer from Encinitas.