

A Veterans Day Reflection

As we remember those who have offered themselves in service and made sacrifices for their country on this Veteran's Day I find myself thinking about Mildred (McAfee) Horton, our neighbor when my family lived in Randolph, New Hampshire, and our church colleague in the Gorham Congregational Church.

I guess you could say Mildred grew up in a religious household; her father was the Rev. Dr. Cleland McAfee, a leading theologian and activist in the Presbyterian Church. Her parents ensured that she received a good education including a degree from Vassar where she graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1920. In 1934 she became dean of women at Oberlin College and in 1936 was named the seventh president of Wellesley College.

In our many conversations Mildred shared receiving a call in 1942 from Eleanor Roosevelt. The war effort needed someone to organize and lead a women's auxiliary. It probably wouldn't surprise anyone that the traditionalist congressmen of the time feared for "the future of the family and Western civilization" by calling women into service. But their fears were allayed when Mildred was appointed as the new director of the U.S. Women's Reserve and the special assistant to the director of the Bureau of Personnel given her professional style and gentle spirit. She was sworn in at the rank of lieutenant commander on 3 August 1942, a service attended by both the Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, and the chief of Naval Operations, Ernest King.

Mildred spent the war years touring the country, inspecting facilities and making speeches appealing to parents to allow their daughters to join the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) in the name of patriotism so that they could release a man for sea duty. In all 150,000 women joined; at the peak there were 86,300 WAVES. In November 1943, Mildred was promoted to captain. One of her claims to fame as the Director of the WAVES was to support the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, in forcing the Navy to accept a few dozen black WAVES. In March 1945, Mildred's portrait appeared on the cover of Time magazine.

Mildred returned to Wellesley in 1945 and in August of that year married the Reverend Douglas Horton who later became the dean of the Harvard Divinity School. You may also know that he was the religious leader who facilitated the creation of what became known as the United Church of Christ (UCC).

In her retirement speech when she left Wellesley, Mildred denounced the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which had demanded the reading lists for all social science courses at 107 elite colleges. She said its action was one of the symptoms of "the fear which permeates our modern age" (*New York Times*, 14 June 1949). When President Dwight Eisenhower appointed her to a UN commission in 1953, HUAC's friends had their revenge by mysteriously losing the paperwork in the State Department.

After retirement, Mrs. Horton was active in charitable and educational projects in Boston, as well as national and international church activities. She also served as a vice president of the National Council of Churches. In a major breakthrough for women, leading New York corporations added her to their boards, including the New York Life Insurance Company, Radio Corporation of America, and National Broadcasting Company. When her husband retired from Harvard in 1959, they settled in Randolph, New Hampshire, and started a retreat center which is where I attended summer camp and also where my church youth group went on winter retreats. She later served as a long-standing trustee of the University of New Hampshire, becoming the first woman to chair its board.

Like the leaders of other women's services, Mildred McAfee Horton had an ambiguous relationship with the military. She repeatedly characterized the navy as "a man's world" and expressed relief when it shut down its training facilities at Wellesley. On the other hand, patriotic duty was important to her. In February 1951 when American forces were in retreat in the Korean War, she called for drafting women for noncombat roles. She criticized the "folly of a national policy of discussing manpower in a national emergency as though it were only male power," complaining that such an attitude "put women in the category of a national luxury instead of a national asset." She argued that "the skills needed behind the fighting lines of all the armed

services are not distributed on sex lines. They are shared by men and women" (*New York Times*, 11 Feb. 1951). It was the women serving in the field, not at headquarters, who made an impression on key military leaders such as Dwight Eisenhower and Omar Bradley. After the war, they teamed up with the senator Margaret Chase Smith to secure a permanent place for women in the U.S. military.

We owe Mildred McAfee Horton a major debt of gratitude not only for her service and leadership during WWII, but for her academic leadership, her challenge to traditional male models of authority in society, and to a deep spiritual devotion that led her to work for justice and become a major contributor to society.

Mildred, we remember you on this Veteran's Day and thank you for all of your effort and perseverance to make this world a better place.

*Sources include the American National Biography, Naval History & Heritage Command, www.military.com/navy, Wikipedia, and family.