

# JOHNNIE PHELPS

b. April 4, 1922

d. December 30, 1997

## DECORATED WWII VETERAN

*“It would be unfair of me not to tell you,  
my name is going to head the list.”*

**She was a member  
of the U.S. Women’s  
Army Corps and a  
lesbian rights activist.**

Nell Louise “Johnnie” Phelps was a decorated World War II veteran and a lesbian rights activist. She dissuaded General Dwight D. Eisenhower from “ferreting out” the lesbians in her army detachment. “There were almost 900 women in the battalion,” Phelps later reported, “I could honestly say that 95% of them were lesbians.”

Phelps was born in North Carolina and raised by adoptive parents who abused her. She spent much of her youth in trouble with the law and eventually married a sailor. In

1943 she joined the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) to escape her marriage. The WAC, created during World War II, allowed women to serve in the military in non-combat positions. Phelps became a medic and earned the rank of sergeant.

While stationed in the South Pacific, Phelps met a lover in the corps, but lost her in 1944 when she was killed in a bombing. In 1945, after being wounded herself, Phelps received a Purple Heart and was honorably discharged. She reenlisted in the WAC a year later.

The second time, Phelps served in the post-war occupation of Germany under General Eisenhower, whom she greatly admired. He reportedly told Phelps he heard there were lesbians in the WAC and ordered her to “ferret” them out. Her response became military legend.

Phelps famously told Eisenhower she would be happy to oblige, but her name would be first on the list. Eisenhower’s secretary chimed in that her own name would come first.

Phelps explained that lesbians were serving in every role and rank in the corps. What’s more, they were not only the most decorated members but also were without any misconduct charges or pregnancies.

Eisenhower withdrew the order.

After a second honorable discharge, Phelps started her own printing business. In the early ’70s, she moved to Southern California, where she met her life partner, Grace Bukowski. Phelps joined the National Organization for Women (NOW), and in 1979 started NOW’s Whittier, California, chapter.

Phelps served as chair of the Lesbian Rights Task Force and was appointed to the Los Angeles Commission on Veterans’ Affairs. She helped lead the March for Gay Rights in Sacramento and advocated for women charged with homosexual misconduct. As a recovering alcoholic, she also became president of the Alcoholism Center for Women.

Phelps appeared in several documentaries, including “Trailblazers: Unsung Military Heroines of WWII.” In 1993 the Veterans for Human Rights hosted the Sgt. Johnnie Phelps Annual Awards Banquet in her honor.

Phelps died in 1997 in Barstow, California. Her partner donated her papers and effects to the ONE Gay and Lesbian Archives.



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