World War II: Women Who Served

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In writing about women's history, most authors neglect the role played by American women in the United States' Armed Services from 1941 through 1945. Most concentrate on the "home-front", those women who remained in the United States and kept our country functioning while the men fought, and died, in the war. This paper, however, will focus on those women who left their homes and their families in order to join the Army, the Navy and the Coast Guard to dedicate their lives to an ideal which is part of the "American Way". World War II afforded women the opportunity to participate in a traditionally all male sphere of influence and was instrumental in women's history and in women's motivation for present day equal rights.

World War I and the Depression

From the time of the American Revolution, women have served as nurses, cooks, seamstresses, laundresses, etc. In the Revolution and every war thereafter, women served as unpaid volunteers, as civilian employees of the services, or as volunteers in temporary or quasi-military bodies. Before and during World War I, women's patriotic duty was linked to motherhood. Scores of nationalistic mothers were described and pictured bravely sending their "boys" off to war. These mothers were viewed

as the backbone of America. They hid their emotions for the betterment of the nation and for the morale of their sons.

After World War I and on the eve of World War II, the Depression had limited the feminist movement—women had not been as active in feminist programs as they had been before the Depression.[1] Basically, the reason for this was that more and more women had been released from work and they were unable to obtain substantial, professional jobs because employers gave available jobs to men. Women had always had the patriotic spirit but two elements were new to women's military service in the 1940's: they were utilized in nearly every activity short of combat, and they achieved permanent, regular status in the military establishment.[2]

The 1940's and World War II

The momentous events of the 1940's patterned women's lives in many ways—as they did those of men. Although women were not susceptible to conscription (the Draft), World War II provided women with their first opportunity to serve as regular members of the United States Armed Forces. During the time period from December 7, 1941 through December 1945, 350,000 women volunteered for military service.[3] These women totaled two percent of all military personnel during this time frame and provided vital labor resources to the United States war effort. Why would women choose to leave the comfort of their homes to join the traditionally all male military?

The women surveyed for this article mentioned that their motivation for enlisting in the military service was for patriotism, adventure and/or the

opportunity to travel:

> I was a very strong supporter of this country's military services, a belief I still hold today. I felt I was obligated and qualified to take a more active part in the war effort.[4]

> I was working in an aircraft factory in Hartford, Connecticut and thought it would be a nice way to see the country and serve my country.[5]

> My husband had been in the South Pacific for two years and I wanted to be in the service too.[6]

Many women stated that they joined because of their desire to go overseas. However, at the start of war, the only military organization that approved women to serve overseas in war zones (Europe and Africa) was the United States Army. The Navy and other branches of the service restricted the areas of the globe in which women could actively serve.

Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACS/WACS)

Numerous members of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (later known as the Women's Army Corps) served as telephone operators and clerical workers in North Africa and moved with the Army combat troops on to the invasion of Italy. Enduring many bombing raids, not one of these brave women requested a transfer home. Kay Flynn was a postal clerk in Africa and later, in Italy:

> After much theory and practice, many formations and parades, we were finally alerted to finish packing and be ready to leave the next morning. We were taken by troop train to the port of embarkation—up the gang plank with a band playing and with coffee and doughnuts being offered. (All the while wondering where we were headed!) Standing at the

stern, it finally dawned on me that we were actually on our way...what exotic sights would we be seeing? What new places and adventures awaited us?

We landed in Casablanca. We were herded into 6 x 6's and brought to a large barn, issued mattress covers and told to fill them with hay. Well, the hay had a lot of life (bugs!) in it and no one got much sleep that night!

Next morning, another ship. We passed the Rock of Gibraltar on the way to Oran where we were put into cattle cars with no benches or seats so one had to sit on the floor or lie on their barracks bag. There was no toilet, only a hole in one end of the train.

Finally, Algiers (Africa):

For about a week after we got to Algiers, we all looked as if we'd never seen a shower. And when we finally got showers, they were open with no doors. But one gets used to anything if need be—the awful waiting for the latrines when everyone had diarrhea and we stood in line in various suffering positions; the children—scabbed, one arm or leg gone, begging for food. We were not allowed to have seconds because the 'powers that be' knew we were feeding these small urchins.

And on to Italy:

My biggest thrill was an audience with the Pope. It was the most awe-inspiring moment of my life. Pope Pius was very short and slight, but when he spoke to you there was the feeling that he was with you and you alone. He was 'His Holiness' and he blessed this Protestant's medals and the elephant with the trunk raised, and asked me if I was Catholic. I replied that I was not, and his answer was "Whatever church you go to my dear, you must go every Sunday." He

didn't just dismiss this Protestant girl. I still marvel at his remark—it made a deep and lasting impression.[7]

WACS were also sent to England in preparation for D-Day. At the height of the war in Europe, on September 9, 1944, *the Saturday Evening Post* reports that WACS interpreted combat films to determine the success of bombing missions, they made maps, struggled with codes and ciphers and did prisoner-of-war work. WACS plotted the missions of Allied as well as hostile aircraft in the secret plotting rooms of Air Force bases.[8] And after the D-Day invasion, these women—nurses, clerical help, and drivers—traveled with the army into Europe and all the way to Germany.

Army Nurse Corps (ANC) and Navy Nurse Corps (NNC)

Another example of the dedication and bravery of women concerned the women of the Army and Navy Nurse Corps.

> We were supervisors or head nurses and trained corpsmen to care for the wounded. Seeing all of the badly injured young men was heartbreaking.
>
> I joined in February 1941 and served in the South Pacific, New Zealand and the New Hepides to name a few. I wanted to travel and meet people from all walks of life. I did meet Eleanor Roosevelt and Admiral Halsey.
>
> It's very hot in the tropics. We lived in Quonset huts and washed our clothes in buckets. There were lots of bugs, ants and little lizards crawling up the walls! We had beans for breakfast on Christmas Day in New Caledonia. The South Pacific is very beautiful,

but after eighteen months we were happy to get back to the States.[9]

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, many regular Navy nurses were already stationed there and on various Pacific Islands. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese took five Navy nurses prisoner in Guam and, not knowing what to do with them, sent them to the Zentusji Military Prison in Japan. The Japanese very promptly arranged an exchange of prisoners with the United States. However, while these prisoners were being repatriated to the States, the Japanese took eleven more nurses prisoner. These nurses were sent to Los Banos Prisoner of War Camp in Manila. Shortly thereafter, sixty-six women of the Army Nurse Corps were captured by the Japanese on the Island of Corrigedor. They were sent to Los Banos to join the Navy nurses and, even though there was little food, almost no medicine, and contaminated water, these women proved to be a paragon of strength and bravery.[10]

The nurses continued their work by tending to the injured and the ill and were a Godsend to their fellow prisoners. As the war went on, they were "reduced to eating anything they could find—dogs, frogs, even rats."[11] Suffering from malnutrition and dysentery, their bodies weakening and their mental state slowly deteriorating, they resolved to survive. And survive they did. Not one of the seventy-seven prisoners died during captivity.

Freed by American Forces on February 3, 1945, these women were decorated for bravery in the splendor of a White House summer reception. Ironically, just prior to their release, in January 1945, President Franklin Roosevelt asked for legislation

to draft nurses. The Nurses Selective Service Bill was introduced on March 7, 1945, "passed the House, and cleared the Senate Committee on March 28, but was never enacted because the war's termination in Europe in May eliminated the shortage of nurses."[12]

Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES)

> I, along with a lot of girls from the Midwest, was put on a troop train to go to boot camp at Hunter College (New York). From there I was sent for officer training to Iowa State Teachers College in Cedar Falls. And after that, I spent the next twenty-two months in Chicago at the Headquarters of all aviation ground crew training. In October, 1945 the office—people, furniture, everything—were sent to the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida.[13]

As previously noted, Navy women were usually restricted in their travel opportunities. Some, who were members of the nurse corps, served aboard hospital ships in the Pacific and still others (again nurses) were able to serve in Hawaii, New Zealand, the Philippines and the South Pacific but were allowed in these areas only after the region was secured by American Forces. Restrictions to their travel opportunities did not stop these women from giving their all to the war effort. Liane Galvin joined the WAVES in 1943:

> I was attending U.C.L.A. at the time and decided that I should get involved in the war effort. I was sworn into the Navy on March 17, 1943 and was congratulated as a "Physically Perfect Seaman"—of course before my first year of service was up, I broke

three fingers and had an appendectomy! Then a kidney infection that took two months of hospitalization to cure! This has become a family joke—Physically Perfect Seaman!

At U.S. Navy Weather Central in Washington, DC, I entered coded weather information on weather maps. When the forecast was made by the aerologist, I encoded this forecast which was then sent to the U.S. ship convoys crossing the Atlantic Ocean to the European Theater of Operation.

My training at the intensive Meteorology School at the Naval Air Station at Lakehurst, New Jersey, led me to some interesting jobs in that field, most notably at the California Institute of Technology in the Meteorology Department.[14]

From personal interviews, a few more WAVES related their experiences during the War:

It was so great being in uniform—most of my veteran friends still talk of their service as one of the peak experiences of their lives.[15]

We took buses and ambulances to the piers in San Francisco to meet the hospital ships. One of my jobs was to go aboard and pin identification tags on each patient before he went down the ramp. Also, our hospital was one of ten selected to use a new medicine, Penicillin. Records were kept and sent to Washington for more study.[16]

Women of the U.S. Coast Guard (SPARS-Semper Paratus)

The job of the United States Coast Guard is to patrol and protect the coastline of the United States and her territories. But during World War II, when

every ship and every man was needed for service overseas, women became a valuable commodity for Coast Guard service. Pauline Riley was one of these women:

> I went to training school in Palm Beach (Florida). We learned store-keeping and post office skills. One day, we were being inspected during a parade and we were at Parade Rest in a huge field. We were supposed to remain perfectly still...I felt something crawling up my leg and looked down to see I was standing on an ant hill! I very quietly stepped back but couldn't push the ants off my leg. I went in the SPARS as an Apprentice Seaman and worked my way up to Chief Storekeeper (acting).[17]

Other members of the SPARS described their duties and responsibilities:

> I was assigned to Special Services and my particular job was clerical—receiving and sending educational materials to men at sea and others who would further their education. When the war was over, I transferred to the Separation Center where service people were processed back to civilian status. The work at the Separation Center was the most enjoyable and the most satisfying.[18]

> I joined for patriotism, adventure and I wanted to benefit from the G.I. Bill. (I did earn my teaching credentials and retired after 35 years!) I worked in the office of the Coast Guard Reserve. I was the only regular Coast Guard—the others were civilian volunteers who did the shore work that the Coast Guard did during peacetime. I had to know all the regulations and advise the volunteers. I gave out awards, logged volunteer time, etc. My service in the Coast Guard helped me mature.[19]

"The Little Woman" aka The Subordinate

One obstacle endured by women in the military service was the under utilization of their skills. A few examples include:

> WACS in California were used as babysitters and personal servants; a former journalist who had covered the invasion of China was assigned the job of "chief cook"; Mary McMillan, who held the women's world altitude record for parachuting...packed parachutes for male trainees.[20]

> Added to this very cruel insult, women traditionally held a lower rank than their male counterparts. As historian Doris Weatherford writes, "Chief nurses in the Philippines, who held monumental responsibility under horrible conditions, were only lieutenants. In comparison, Army Air Corps member Ronald Reagan spent the war making movies as a captain."[21]

Redemption

Despite this stereotypical treatment of women, by the end of the war women were serving in every major theater of operation. Commanding officers, who had previously hesitated to request female help for fear of disciplinary problems, soon found their apprehensions groundless. Although it was true that some male soldiers hadn't seen American women in years, it was also true that the women were treated with the respect and dignity that was due their important work. Also, the presence of women became a benefit to morale, not a liability.[22] Of the women surveyed for this paper, a few related their experiences:

> The worst treatment we received was from civilian

personnel and other civilians who resented any favoritism shown to those in the military.[23]

We were treated fine by the people we came in direct contact with but the rest of the men had very bad opinions of us. They thought that we had very bad morals because we were in the service. They were wrong.[24]

Of course the men resented us. We took their jobs and they had to go to sea. I asked one to help me with something at one time and he told me to do it myself—I was supposed to be doing a man's job.[25]

All in all, however, the women of the military were treated as equal co-workers or even as family:

The guys teased us a lot but in our outfit we were pretty much treated as "shipmates"—sort of like kid sisters.[26]

I never was harassed or put down by fellow sailors. I was proud to serve.[27]

We were like a big family. We were all working to end the war. I was never treated other than as an equal.[28]

Volunteers

Besides working their military jobs, many women of the Armed Forces volunteered while off-duty, usually heading for the hospitals to help out the women of the Nurse Corps. One WAC noted that her most heartbreaking experience was visiting a hospital:

...seeing blind, limbless boys. Boys who'd really given our country their all. Until then, the excitement, fun, and yes, fear(!) were part of our experi-

> ences.[We believed] nothing would really ever hurt us and the air raids would end shortly— but the actuality of illness, blindness, loss of limbs and despondency shocked us into the realization that not everyone was having an "interesting" experience.[29]

A WAVE stationed in Washington, DC stated that "visiting military hospitals in the Washington area where very badly injured servicemen were brought for treatment and recuperation" was her most unnerving experience.[30] Still another WAVE mentioned that the hospital in Oakland, California (where she was stationed) grew from 600 beds at the start of the war to over 6,000 by the end of the war. "Seeing patients in full body casts like huge cocoons, weighed down by huge chunks of iron, showed that their courage was irrepressible for they were determined to leave the hospital under their own power."[31]

Victory

With the end of the war came celebrations. Parades in every U.S. city welcomed home the victorious men and women of the armed forces. Jubilant crowds greeted them at every turn.

> I remember marching down Market Street in San Francisco with our small hospital band. (We were fortunately in back of the great Marine Band and in FRONT of the mounted posse.)[32]

> We're home to a cheering crowd, fountains of water from a fireboat, the Statue of Liberty (isn't she something!). I think we all got sick on bacon, eggs and milk (REAL eggs and REAL milk)![33]

> The happiest day of my life was when I answered the phone and it was my husband. He had been dis-

charged and was home. I hadn't seen or talked to him in over four years. The next day he came to Virginia to be with me until I got my discharge.[34]

Conclusion

Thanks to the pioneering efforts of women during the 1940's, the female role in the military service of the United States has changed dramatically. The women highlighted in this paper were the beginning of a long and rewarding experience for women in military service. Because of these women, and others who joined the United States' Armed Services, women are appointed to various military academies and emerge as officers in their respective branches of service. Also, women enlist every day at the numerous recruiting stations throughout the United States. Many join for patriotic reasons, many to take advantage of the G.I. Bill, education after service, and still others enlist to learn a trade that will help them later in civilian life.

Women have served officially in peacetime and in every war since these brave women served during World War II: Korea, Vietnam, Granada, Panama and Desert Storm (the largest deployment of military women ever). Most recently military women have been sent to Bosnia. All of these women, and those of us who have chosen not to serve, owe the 'Women of World War II' our gratitude and our highest respect.

A Final Thought

Groundbreaking ceremonies were held in June 1995 for a memorial to the "Women In Military Service for America" (WIMSA). This memorial is currently

under construction at the main gate of Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. The memorial will be the first major national memorial to honor military women, paying tribute to the nearly 1.8 million women who have served in the United States military throughout American history. The memorial is designed to have a reflecting pool encircled by glass tablets inscribed with quotations by and about women who have served in the military. An education center will feature exhibits of women's military service. The heart and soul of the memorial will be a computerized data base which will store the name, photograph, and personal recollection of every servicewoman who is registered. This will be a fine historical perspective of women's military service throughout American history...and a fine tribute to the brave women who served.

The Memorial was authorized by Congress and is supported by the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Monies, however, must be raised through private donations...federal funding is not authorized for the Memorial.[35]

NOTES

1. Higonnet, Margaret, R., "Stories." *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars.* Ed. Margaret Randolph Higonnet, et al. New Haven, CT. Yale University Press. 1987. Page 43.

2. Hartman, Susan. *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940's.* Twayne Publishers. 1982. Page 31.

3. Ibid. Page 25.

4. Blackwood, Laura. Wheaton, Illinois. WAVE. Personal Interview.

5. Riley, Pauline. Needham, Massachusetts. SPAR. Personal Interview.

6. D., Mary (Name withheld by request). Mishawaka, Indiana. WAC. Personal Interview.

7. Flynn, Kay. Naples, Florida. WAC. Personal Interview.

8. Hauser, Ernest. "Those Wonderful G.I. Janes." Saturday Evening Post. Volume 217. September 9, 1944. Page 27.

9. Brennan, Ruth. South Bend, Indiana. NNC. Personal Interview.

10. Weatherford, Doris. "American Women and World War II." *Facts on File*. 1990. New York, New York. Page 6.

11. Ibid.

12. "Navy Women: A Pictorial History." *WAVES National*. Volume 1, First Edition. 1990. Page 11.

13. Wilson, Mary C. (Ramenda). South Bend, Indiana. WAVE. Personal Interview.

14. Galvin, Liane. North Hills, California. WAVE. Personal Interview.

15. Wingo, Josette Dermody. Santa Monica, California. WAVE. Personal Interview.

16. Alsmeyer, Marie. Tyler, Texas. WAVE. Personal Interview.

17. Riley, Pauline.

18. H., Clare (Name withheld by request). Indianapolis, Indiana. SPAR. Personal Interview.

19. Senterfitt, Ann. San Diego, California. SPAR. Personal Interview.

20. Weatherford, Doris. "American Women and World War II." *Facts On File*. 1990. New York, New York. Page 81.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Blackwood, Laura.

24. D., Mary.

25. Wilson, Mary.
26. Wingo, Josette Dermody.
27. Galvin, Liane.
28. Riley, Pauline.
29. Flynn, Kay.
30. Blackwood, Laura.
31. Alsmeyer, Marie.
32. Ibid.
33. Flynn, Kay.
34. D., Mary.
35. Information and statistics received from WIMSA National, Washington, D.C. For more information, or to make a donation, write: WIMSA, Department 560, Washington, D.C. 20042-0569 or call: (800) 222-2294.