

## Women and World War II

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The war widened the horizons of American women. Nearly all of those interviewed in this project shared in the patriotism of the war, but the devastation in Europe, the unleashing of [atomic weapons](#) on Japan, the deaths of loved ones, and the emotional difficulties many men faced in coming home, made women question war as a means of solving international problems. Although many knew the war had opened new opportunities to them and their loved ones, it also brought abiding sorrow and a sense that the world had entered a new phase of its history. Nancy Potter described the effect of the war in dramatic terms, "I think for girls and women, and perhaps boys and men, of my generation the war forced them to grow up prematurely. It made them far more serious about the bare realities of life: life, death, values. It robbed them, in a sense, of some childhood."

In 1939 the Depression was still very much on everyone's mind. Nearly one third of all Americans had been out of work in 1933. Many of those who were working were working part time or at a reduced pay. Mildred Chatalian described her situation, "At the time, because of the Depression, I worked as a maid on the East Side. I had one day off a week, and my pay for the entire week was \$2.00."

Most Americans knew the world was about to change forever. "I think all of us were terrified of Hitler. I mean he'd gone booming through all of Europe, just doing whatever he wanted to do," said Barbara Gwynne, who was 26 years old at that time. Nancy Potter, who was just 16, recalled her fears, "I was standing on the stairs when the [Pearl Harbor](#) announcement was made... I can remember looking down at the carpet, and thinking my life would never be the same again." When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the United States found itself unprepared for war. Nearly all of its battleship fleet had been destroyed, and as the Japanese began to conquer the Pacific Islands, the American home front geared up for a complete, all out effort to rush into war production and draft men into combat.. American society would experience dramatic changes over the next few years.

Government intervention during the Depression had mainly given jobs to men. There was a lot of overt discrimination against women, especially in the "better" jobs like teaching, civil service, and secretarial work. Men and women had different types of jobs. Men worked in manufacturing and dominated the professions. Women did clerical work, or worked on the lower scale in a factory, or worked as domestics in other people's homes. Overall, more married women were at work in the 1930's than in the 1920's, but they were concentrated in the lowest paying jobs. Rhode Island, with its textile mills, jewelry shops, and factories, had always been a place where married women worked.

The war brought a tremendous shortage of labor. Not only was there great demand for labor to build up the war machines necessary to fight, but the men were leaving civilian employment for military service in huge numbers. To fill the shortage, society could have gone back to child labor as in the preceding century. Instead, society asked women to fill the jobs (See [Rosie the Riveter](#)), and they rushed to take them. Was it patriotism and propaganda that made women find war jobs? Or was it money, independence, companionship, and pride in learning new skills that motivated them? "Women did change. They had gotten the feeling of their own money. Making it themselves. Not asking anybody how to spend it," said Naomi Craig, who was finally able to get a decent job because of the war when industry needed workers, regardless of their sex or color.

It was an emotional time to say the least. There was concern about women taking soldiers' jobs; worry about the effect on the family and anxiety about the breakdown of social values. War and full employment was incredibly liberating for women, but represented deep and provocative change in their traditional roles. The movies reflected this duality. War films like *Since You Went Away* and *Mrs. Miniver* showed faithful women doing volunteer work to support the war effort, keeping home fires burning, waiting for their men to return. But shortly after peace time, films like *Double Indemnity* and *Gilda* implied that the war had allowed women to "get out of hand," and that the "liberated woman" might be undermining traditional marriage and family.

Certainly during the war the women obligingly did their "duty" -- they wrote [letters](#) to their husbands, brothers, and friends; they attended USO dances and talked to lonely soldiers. But there is no denying that there was a new sense of freedom. "I would come home from college on weekends and spend the whole time at the USO. You weren't supposed to leave the building with men, so we would leave alone and meet them around the corner. There are always ways of getting around thing like that," laughed Catherine Ott of her youthful adventures.

Poverty during the Depression had entailed much personal suffering. Many young adults postponed marriage, or couldn't marry at all. Couples couldn't afford to support a family, and the birth rate fell. Homes were crowded with families who lived together to pool scarce resources. The war changed everything. The deprivation of the 30's was followed by war time indulgence, and anticipation of an even better life when the war was over. Marriages were common during the war. Men married quickly before being shipped out. And when they returned, they expected to get their jobs back, buy homes, and raise their families. Barbara Gwynne explained her situation, "Now that the war was over, my plans for the future were just to survive. I got married, and my husband and I had a baby. We just did what was in front of us."

Although there was still crowding during the war, there was a difference. There was a sense of excitement and a feeling that everyone was joining together against the common enemy. Sacrifice was expected. It was for many a happy and even thrilling time. "Looking back on it now, I was fairly young, and the war was exciting. There's no getting way from it. It was an exciting time. But it was a scary time too," said Helen Osley of those years.

As the war began, black people in the United States still faced systematic racism. On the West Coast actual hysteria developed when war broke out. Thousands of Japanese Americans were rounded up and [interned in camps](#). Even as far away as South Kingstown, Rhode Island, prejudice against Asians was clearly visible. "Letters began to appear in the paper that perhaps we had a disloyal person in our midst. There were really nasty letters about Mary. She was the only Japanese in our midst," recalled Rachel Higgins about an unpleasant episode at the high school in South Kingstown.

The Depression had been especially hard on Blacks. As a rule, they were the last hired, and the first fired. The majority of black women worked as domestics before the war. Domestic service isolated women from other workers and encouraged exploitation. "Slave wages" were the rule. Of 1,100 black women employed in Rhode Island in 1940, 831 were in domestic service.

War offered military service as a way out of poverty. And once in the service, Blacks were exposed to experiences far beyond their pre-war horizons. Although they were still [segregated](#) in the military services and often given menial labor jobs, such as cooks, stewards, and clerks, many Blacks returned to a post-war America with raised expectations, fired up to bring about major changes. Many white women, formerly sheltered from the effects of racism in their hometowns, saw segregation in the South and racism in the service. Many, whether Jewish or Christian, saw connections between Nazi ideas about white supremacy and racism at home. Judith Cohen explained, "There was the feeling that the kinds of slurs, insults, and jokes that people make about minorities had helped lead to Hitler...I think there was a very strong feeling after the war that there wasn't going to be that kind of discrimination again." Segregation began to break down, and the Civil Rights movement started up.

Pent-up demand exploded in the post-war boom. Prices sky-rocketed with the removal of price controls, forcing many women to stay on the job to help buy things their families needed. The "American dream," so long dormant during the Depression and war, now became a reality as many families found it possible to buy a home in the suburbs, a car, a refrigerator, a washing machine, and to have children and to give them everything their parents had been deprived of for so long. Although many young women temporarily left the work force to begin families, overall, married women's labor force participation continued to rise after the war, and has been rising ever since. The genie was out of the bottle and couldn't be put back in.

### Women at War

The history of women who served in or with the US military during World War II is a complex story of policy development, cultural expectations, social norms, race relationships, and citizenship. While this may be stated for almost any era, the sheer numbers of women in the military and the global significance of World War II reinforce the impact of the event. The war changed women's expectations and gave impetus to movement for greater gender equality—even though postwar society expected women to leave the workplace and focus on their roles as wives and mothers. The information in this section summarizes articles from *In Defense of a Nation: Servicewomen in World War II*, edited by Major General Jeanne M. Holm, USAF (Ret.) and Judith Bellafaire, Ph.D., Chief Historian of the Women's Memorial Foundation (Arlington, Virginia: Vandamere Press, 1998).

More than any other event in this century, World War II transformed the United States from an isolationist country with a small military establishment designed primarily for self-defense into a leading military power with forces stationed

around the globe. In the process, the US Armed Forces were transformed from essentially all-male to mixed-gender forces.

Almost 400,000 women served the armed forces—a number that exceeded total male troop strength in 1939. They enlisted “for the duration plus six months” to free male soldiers for combat by filling jobs that matched women’s “natural” abilities—clerical work and jobs requiring rote attention to detail and small motor skills. The Congressional debate that preceded their authorization also addressed the appropriateness of allowing women to exercise their rights and responsibilities as American citizens.

The Army was segregated. In 1945, the all-black 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion arrived in England and performed its duties with distinction. Accustomed to discrimination at home, the women were accepted socially by British and French people.

They served in the Army and Navy Nurse Corps, Women’s Army Corps (WAC), Army Air Forces, the Navy’s Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), in the Marine Corps Women’s Reserve, and in the Coast Guard (SPARs). Although not officially members of the armed forces, Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) provided critical support for the war effort. Other women worked with the military through service with organizations such as the American Red Cross, the United Service Organizations (USO), and the Civil Air Patrol.

By the end of the war, there were few noncombatant jobs in which women did not serve, including positions that hadn’t even existed when the war began—positions promulgated by scientific and technological advances to aid the war effort. They were in every service branch and were assigned to every combat theater. (Nurses and WACs served overseas throughout the war. WAVES, SPARs, and Women Marines were restricted from overseas assignments until near the end of the war when they were sent to the territories of Hawaii and Alaska—then considered overseas duty because they were not yet states.) Women earned Purple Hearts, Bronze Stars and Legions of Merit. Some were prisoners of war and some died in the service of their country.

Women’s participation in the US Armed Forces during World War II was a major turning point in the relationship of women to the military. The initial response to the idea of enlisting women met enormous resistance. As the war escalated and the national pool of qualified male draftees dwindled, it became clear that for every woman recruited, one less man had to be drafted. Women volunteers came to be viewed not just as a source of women’s skills, but as a valuable source of high-quality personnel to meet overall manpower requirements for the massive military buildup. On more than one occasion, the Army became so desperate for women that its leaders seriously considered requesting Congressional approval to draft them.

Commanders who had once stated that they would accept women “over my dead body” soon welcomed them and asked for more. General Eisenhower told Congress after the war, that when the formation of women’s units was first proposed, “I was violently against it.” Then he added, “Every phase of the record they compiled during the war convinced me of the error of my first reaction.” Eisenhower went on to fight for a permanent place for women in the US Armed Forces.