

American Women in a World at War

Early in 1943, Max Lerner, the well-known author and journalist, writing for the New York newspaper *PM*, predicted that “when the classic work on the history of women comes to be written, the biggest force for change in their lives will turned out to have been war.” With the renewed interest in American women’s history that has occurred over the last quarter century, most historians interested in women and World War II have addressed the implication of Lerner’s statement by asking the question “Did World War II serve as a major force for change in the lives of American women?” Our reading of approximately thirty thousand letters written by more than fifteen hundred women representing a broad cross-section of the wartime population has led us to conclude that the events of World War II did indeed have a dramatic and far-reaching effect on the lives of American women.

For more than a decade, we have been engaged in a nationwide effort to locate, collect, and publish the wartime correspondence of American women. Our search began in the late 1980s as we were making the final revisions for a book, *Miss You: The World War II Letters of Barbara Wooddall Taylor and Charles E. Taylor* (1990), which was based on thousands of pages of correspondence between a young war bride and her soldier husband. We found the Taylors’ letters to be extremely powerful documents, chronicling a grand story of romance, making do, and “growing up” during wartime.

We were convinced that Taylor’s story was similar to those of other women during the war. But how could we be sure? While conducting the research for *Miss You*, we learned that the letters written by men in combat had often been carefully preserved by loved ones, donated to military and university archives, and made into many books. But what had happened to the billions of letters written by American women? No one seemed to have an adequate answer to this question.

During the early stages of our search for the missing letters, many of our colleagues and friends discouraged us from taking on this challenge because of the perceived wisdom that few, if any,

letters written by American women had survived the vicissitudes of the war and the postwar years. After all, it was well known that men in combat were under orders not to keep personal materials such as diaries and letters. Moreover, we were repeatedly warned that should we locate letters written by women, they would include little, if any, significant commentary because of strict wartime censorship regulations. Others discounted our effort, arguing that women’s letters would contain only trivial bits of information about the war years. Yet the historical detective in each of us was not persuaded by these arguments.

In the spring of 1988, we intensified our search for women’s wartime correspondence by devising a brief author’s query requesting information from anyone who had knowledge about letters written by American women during the Second World War. We sent the query to every daily newspaper in the United States—about fifteen hundred newspapers in all—and requested that the query be printed on the letters-to-the-editor page. Much to our delight, newspapers throughout the United States complied. Very shortly thereafter, wartime letters from across the United States began to pour into our offices. We soon realized that we had struck a gold mine of information.

We supplemented our author’s query to the nation’s newspapers with more than five hundred letters of inquiry to magazines and newsletters specializing in issues of concern to women, World War II veterans, and minorities. We wrote letters about our search to every state historical society and to dozens of research and university libraries. In an effort to locate the correspondence of African American women, we solicited the advice of prominent black historians, surveyed archives specializing in African American history, and sent out a special appeal to five hundred predominantly black churches around the nation. In total, we have written more than twenty five hundred letters of inquiry. We often

Continues on page 9 ■

wonder if this might qualify us for inclusion in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

Today, some thirty thousand letters and seven books later, we can state, without question, that the perceived wisdom about women's wartime correspondence was wrong. The thirty thousand letters we have collected were written by more than fifteen hundred women representing diverse social, economic, ethnic, and geographic circumstances from all fifty states. We have collected letters written by grade-school dropouts, but we also have letters composed by college graduates. Our archive includes letters by women from rural and small-town America, as well as large metropolitan areas. The letters of sweethearts, wives, mothers, stepmothers, mothers-in-law, grandmothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, nieces, the "girl next door," and just plain friends of men in the military have been donated to us. Moreover, we have letters written by representatives of the four hundred thousand pioneering women who joined one of the women's branches of the army, navy, marines, and coast guards, as well as from those extraordinary women who flew military aircraft of all types for the Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs). In addition, we have powerful letters written by women who served overseas with the American Red Cross and the Army and Navy Nurse Corps.

Many of the women who have donated materials to our archive have included the note that they doubt there is anything of value in their letters because they were careful to follow the dictates of strict wartime censorship regulations. Others have apologized for the allegedly cheery, upbeat quality of their letters, noting that they did not want to cause the recipients, who were often family members, undue worry and stress. Yet these same letter collections contain commentary about the stresses of balancing a war job with raising young children alone, the difficulties of "making do" on meager allotment checks, the fear of losing a loved one to battle, the challenges of performing emergency surgery in evacuation hospitals near the front lines, what it was like to provide aid and comfort for returning prisoners of war who had been incarcerated by the Japanese, and the caring for the survivors of German concentration camps. We have come to realize that what is most extraordinary about the letters in our archive is how *much*—rather than how *little*—frank and detailed discussion they contain.

These letters are honest accounts, written "at the scene" and "from the heart" for a limited audience and with little idea that historians such as ourselves would one day be interested in their



Riveter at Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, Burbank, California, ca. 1940-1945. (NARA 86-WWT-3-67)

content. They offer perceptive insights, untempered by the successive events of the past fifty years, into heretofore unexplored but fundamental aspects of the war. Indeed, they provide us with the first significant opportunity to incorporate the actual wartime voices of American women into our accounts of the Second World War.

One of the most striking themes expressed in the letters is the new sense of self experienced by wartime women. Whether the writer was a stepmother from rural South Dakota reassuring her recently departed stepson that "you've always been a model son whether you're my blood or not" or a Mexican American migrant worker from Kansas discussing with her combat-decorated sweetheart whether she should go to Denver in search of a new job, the challenges of

the war necessitated that women develop a new sense of who they were and of their capabilities.

Young war wives frequently wrote of how they were becoming more self-reliant individuals as they traveled across the country to distant places to be with their husbands, learned how to live on meager allotment checks, coped with raising young children alone, grappled with worry, loneliness, and despair, and shared their experiences with what *The New York Times* described as those "wandering members of [that] huge unorganized club" of war brides.

Early in 1945, war bride Frances Zulauf wrote to her husband in the Army Air Force and discussed how the events of the war had contributed to her growing sense of self:

Personally, I think there's no doubt that this sacrifice we're making will force us to be bigger, more tolerant, better citizens than we would have been otherwise. If it hadn't been for all this upset in my life, I would still be a rattle brained . . . spoiled 'little' girl in college, having dates and playing most of my way thru school . . . I'm learning—in this pause in my life—just what I want for happiness later on—so much different than what I wanted two years ago.

With more than 16 million men serving in the military, the need for new war workers was unprecedented. Responding to this need, some 6.5 million women entered the workforce, increasing the female labor force by more than 50 percent. In fact, Rosie the Riveter became a national heroine. In their letters to loved ones, women expressed pride in their war work and often commented, with enthusiasm, about the new sense of responsibility and independence they were achieving.

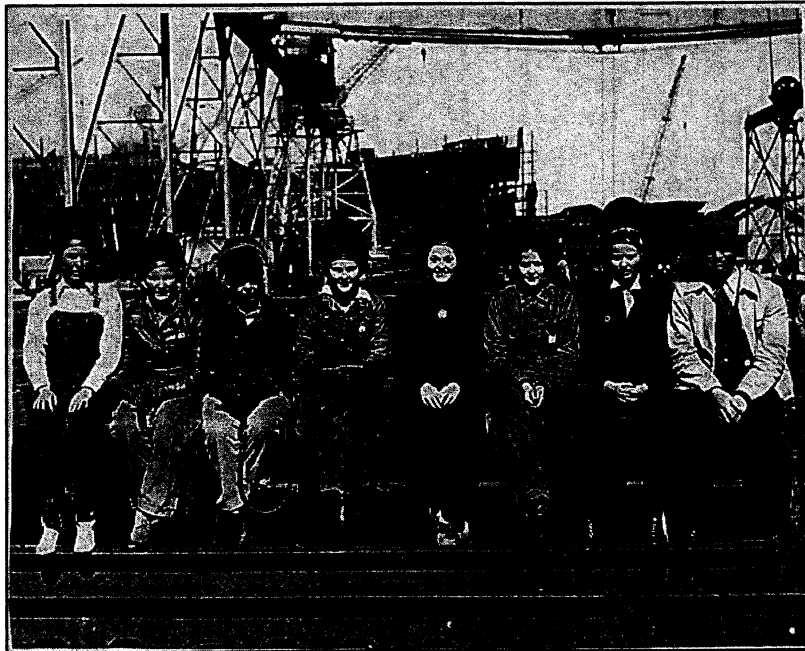
Polly Crow, a young mother living with her parents in Louisville, Kentucky, for the duration, explained in a June 1944 letter to her army husband why she wanted a war job. She also highlighted the advantages of swing shift work for working mothers:

I'm thinking seriously of going to work in some defense plant . . . on the swing shift so I can be at home during the day with Bill [their young son] as he needs me. . . . Of course, I'd much rather have an office job but I couldn't be with Bill whereas I could if I worked at nite which I have decided is the best plan as I cain't save anything by not working and I want to have something for us when you get home.

After securing a job at the Jefferson Boat and Machine Company in nearby Anderson, Indiana, Polly Crow wrote a letter in which she proudly proclaimed, "You are now the husband of a career woman—just call me your little Ship Yard Babe!" Her letters describe the "grand and glorious feeling" of opening her own checking account for the first time, gas rationing, the challenges of automobile maintenance, and what it was like to join a union. Late in 1944, upon learning that the work of building landing ship tanks at the shipyard would be completed within the next few months, she wrote a letter in which she bemoaned the fact that "my greatly enjoyed working career will [soon] come to an end."

Betty Bleakmore, a nineteen-year-old blueprint supervisor at Douglas Aircraft Company in Tulsa, Oklahoma, wrote to her sweetheart and husband-to-be, a marine corps pilot, and reported that she was responsible for keeping "all [blue]prints up to date so that the [workers] in the factory can build the planes perfectly for people like you to fly." She then continued: "Imagine, [me], little Betty, the youngest in her department with seventeen people older than her . . . under her. Of course, I too, have higher ups to report to—but I am the big fish in my own little pond—and I love it."

In the fall of 1945, with the war finally over, Edith Speert, a supervisor at a federally funded day care center in Cleveland, Ohio, took the opportunity to tell her husband that she had received a great deal of satisfaction from her war work. On 21 October 1945, she commented:



Women welders, including the women's welding champion, of Ingalls Shipbuilding Corporation in Pascagoula, Mississippi, ca. 1943 (NARA NWDNS-86-WWT-85-35).

Last night [we] were talking about some of the adjustments we'll have to make to our husbands' return. I must admit I'm not exactly the same girl you left—I'm twice as independent as I used to be and to top it off, I sometimes think I've become "hard as nails"—hardly anyone can evoke any sympathy from me.

Three weeks later, she reiterated:

Sweetie, I want to make sure I make myself clear about how I've changed. I want you to know *now* that you are not married to a girl that's interested solely in a home—I shall

definitely have to work all my life—I get emotional satisfaction out of working and I don't doubt that many a night you will cook the supper while I'm at a meeting. Also dearest—I shall never wash and iron—there are laundries for that! Do you think you'll be able to bear living with me?

World War II also brought about significant changes in the lives of farm women as 6 million agricultural workers departed from rural America to don military uniforms or seek more lucrative work in war industries. The crucial role played by American women in the planting and harvesting of the nation's wartime crops is demonstrated by the fact that the proportion of women engaged in agricultural work increased from 8 percent in 1940 to 22.4 percent in 1945. Of particular significance were the 3 million women who came "to the rescue of the nation's crops" and joined the federal Women's Land Army. One young farm woman wrote to a friend in the service and proudly announced, "I'm quite the farmer, Jack. You should see me—I ride the horse after the cows, drive hay trucks, and yesterday I even learned to drive the tractor."

The correspondence of the four hundred thousand American women who exchanged their civilian clothes for military uniforms is replete with examples of how their wartime experiences opened up new, and heretofore, unimaginable opportunities for women. In choosing to support the war effort by joining one of the newly created women's branches of the military, these trailblazers challenged fundamental assumptions about the "proper" role of women in American society. For many women in uniform, World War II was *the* defining event in their lives.

The letters of women in uniform contain telling accounts of the courage of African American women as they combated racism at home and fascism abroad; the agony and isolation experienced by the only Jewish servicewoman at her duty station; glimpses of the stress and strain that lesbians in the military encountered; the blossoming of heterosexual love in the face of battle; establishing Red Cross clubs in remote areas around the world; dodging “buzz bombs” in England; helping to perform emergency surgery in evacuation hospitals near the front; and the intense camaraderie that women in uniform shared as they faced new and challenging responsibilities for the sake of the war effort.

Entrance into the military presented many new job opportunities for women. Although a large percentage of women in uniform performed traditional “women’s jobs,” such as administrative and clerical work, many other employment possibilities existed, especially in the field of aviation where women served as metalsmiths, aircraft mechanics, parachute-riggers, air traffic controllers, link trainer instructors, and flight orderlies.

One of the most unusual and exciting of the new jobs for women was that of ferrying military aircraft of all types throughout the United States for the WASPs, a quasi-military organization affiliated with the Army Air Forces. From September 1942 until December 1944, when the WASPs were disbanded after not being accorded full military status, approximately one thousand women had the distinction of flying military aircraft throughout the United States. The WASPs gloried in their work, and their wartime letters are filled with details of their love of flying. In a 24 April 1943 letter to her mother, Marion Stegeman of Athens, Georgia, recounted her joy of flying:

The gods must envy me! This is just too, *too* good to be true. (By now you realize I had a good day as regards flying. Nothing is such a gauge to the spirits as how well or how poorly one has flown.) . . . I’m far too happy. The law of compensation must be waiting to catch up with me somewhere. Oh, god, how I love it! Honestly, Mother, you haven’t *lived* until you get way *up* there—all alone—just you and that big, beautiful plane humming under your control.

While uniformed women from the United States did not participate in organized combat during World War II, they were regularly assigned to postings that brought them up to or near the front lines of battle. Army nurse June Wandrey served in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, and Germany, where her work as a combat surgical nurse brought her close to the front lines of action. Writing from “Poor Sicily” in August 1943, she bluntly informed her parents:

We were so close to the [front] lines we could see our artillery fire and also that of the Germans . . . Working in the shock wards, giving transfusions, was a rewarding, but sad experience. Many wounded soldiers’ faces still haunt my memory. I recall one eighteen year old who had just been brought in

from the ambulance to the shock ward. I went to him immediately. He looked up at me trustingly, sighed and asked, “How am I doing, Nurse?” I was standing at the head of the litter. I put my hands around his face, kissed his forehead and said, “You are doing just fine soldier.” He smiled sweetly and said, “I was just checking up.” Then he died. Many of us shed tears in private. Otherwise, we try to be cheerful and reassuring.

By the time of the 6 June 1944 D-Day invasion of France, almost two million American troops were stationed in England. To help provide for these service personnel, the American Red Cross opened service clubs and operated one hundred and fifty clubmobiles throughout Great Britain where Red Cross “doughnut girls” distributed coffee and doughnuts to the troops.

Four days after D-Day, on 10 June 1944, army nurses and Red Cross hospital workers arrived in France to set up field and evacuation hospitals. Army nurse Ruth Hess arrived in France in late June 1944. In a long retrospective letter, written to friends and colleagues at the Louisville, Kentucky, General Hospital, Hess described her first days as a combat nurse in Europe:

We embarked by way of a small landing craft with our pants rolled up—wading onto the beach a short distance . . . We marched up those high cliffs . . . about a mile and a half under full packs, hot as ‘blue blazes’—till finally a jeep . . . picked us up and took us to our area . . . For nine days we never stopped [working]. 880 patients operated; small debridement of gun shot and shrapnel wounds, numerous amputations, fractures galore, perforated guts, livers, spleens, kidneys, lungs, . . . everything imaginable . . . It’s really been an experience . . . At nite—those d—d German planes make rounds and tuck us all into a fox hole—ack ack in the field right beside us, machine guns all around—whiz—there goes a bullet—it really doesn’t spare you—you’re too busy—but these patients need a rest from that sort of stuff.

As the Second World War drew to a close in the late summer of 1945, letter writers both at home and abroad turned their attention to the larger meaning of the conflict and how the experience of four years of total war had changed their lives. Writing from Snoqualmie Falls, Washington, on 14 August 1945, war wife Rose McClain spoke for many women when she expressed the hope that World War II would mark “the end of war for all time,” and “that our children will learn, the kindness, patience, honesty, and the depth of love and trust we have learned, from all of this, without the tragedy of war.”

From her duty station in the Southwest Pacific, Jane Warren, a member of the Women’s Army Corps, forthrightly asserted in a letter, “You know, Mother, my life has really changed. I’ve learned in these past two years that I can really do things and make a difference as a woman . . . I truly think that this war and

opportunity it has provided for women like me (and women at home in the war effort) is going to make a profound difference in the way a lot of women think and do after the war is over.”

Writing to her parents from Germany in late August 1945, army nurse Marjorie LaPalme explained how the experience of war had dramatically transformed her life:

One thing is sure—we will never be the naïve innocents we were . . . none of us . . . It was a wonderful experience—no doubt the greatest of my entire life. I am sure nothing can surpass the comradeship and friendship we shared with so many wonderful men and women from all over our country—the good and the bad, suffering death and destruction falling from the skies, but perhaps most of all I will remember the quiet courage of common, ordinary people.

The lives of American women were dramatically changed by the experience of war. The war transformed the way women thought about themselves and the world in which they lived, expanding their horizons and affording them a clearer sense of their capabilities.

Although the postwar decade witnessed a renewed interest in motherhood and the family, which resulted in a return to a more conventional way of life for many women—what Betty Friedan would label as “the feminine mystique”—the immense changes wrought by World War II were not forgotten. A generation later, these changes provided the foundation for the rejuvenation of the contemporary women’s movement. Indeed, the legacy of World War II inspired a new generation of women—the daughters of our World War II foremothers—to demand greater equality for women in the workplace and in society at large.

Life would never be the same for the women who lived through World War II. With fortitude and ingenuity, they had surmounted the challenges posed by total war. As the women of the wartime generation are quick to acknowledge, “We knew that if we could overcome the trials and tribulations of the war years, we could do anything.” What better legacy to leave to us as we face the challenges and the opportunities of the twenty-first century. □

Suggestions for Further Reading

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Army nurses assigned to a field hospital arrive in France on 12 August 1944. (National Archives)

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Judy Barrett Litoff, Professor of History at Bryant College in Smithfield, Rhode Island, is the author or coauthor of ten books on U.S. women’s history. She and David C. Smith, Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Maine, have coauthored six books and dozens of articles on U.S. women and World War II.