

AMERICAN WOMEN IN WORLD WAR II

On the Home Front and Beyond



American women played important roles during World War II, both at home and in uniform. Not only did they give their sons, husbands, fathers, and brothers to the war effort, they gave their time, energy, and some even gave their lives.

Reluctant to enter the war when it erupted in 1939, the United States quickly committed itself to total war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. That commitment included utilizing all of America's assets—women included. The Axis powers, on the other hand, were slow to employ women in their war industries. Hitler derided Americans as degenerate for putting their women to work. The role of German women, he said, was to be good wives and mothers and to have more babies for the Third Reich.

When the war began, quickie marriages became the norm, as teenagers married their sweethearts before their men went overseas. As the men fought abroad, women on the Home Front worked in defense plants and volunteered for war-related organizations, in addition to managing their households. In New Orleans, as the demand for public transportation grew, women even became streetcar “conductorettes” for the first time. When men left, women “became proficient cooks and housekeepers, managed the finances, learned to fix the car, worked in a defense plant, and wrote letters to their soldier husbands that were consistently upbeat.” (Stephen Ambrose, *D-Day*, 488) *Rosie the Riveter* helped assure that the Allies would have the war materials they needed to defeat the Axis.

Nearly 350,000 American women served in uniform, both at home and abroad, volunteering for the newly formed Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACs, later renamed the Women's Army Corps), the Navy Women's Reserve (WAVES), the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, the Coast Guard Women's Reserve (SPARS), the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), the Army Nurses Corps, and the Navy Nurse Corps. General Eisenhower felt that he could not win the war without the aid of the women in uniform. “The contribution of the women of America, whether on the farm or in the factory or in uniform, to D-Day was a *sine qua non* of the invasion effort.” (Ambrose, *D-Day*, 489)

Women in uniform took office and clerical jobs in the armed forces in order to free men to fight. They also drove trucks, repaired airplanes, worked as laboratory technicians, rigged parachutes, served as radio operators, analyzed photographs, flew military aircraft across the country, test-flew newly repaired planes, and even trained anti-aircraft artillery gunners by acting as flying targets. Some women served near the front lines in the Army Nurse Corps, where 16 were killed as a result of direct enemy fire. Sixty-eight American service women were captured as POWs in the Philippines. More than 1,600 nurses were decorated for bravery under fire and meritorious service, and 565 WACs in the Pacific Theater won combat decorations. Nurses were in Normandy on D-plus-four.

At the war's end, even though a majority of women surveyed reported wanted to keep their jobs, many were forced out by men returning home and by the downturn in demand for war materials. Women veterans encountered roadblocks when they tried to take advantage of benefit programs for veterans, like the G.I. Bill. The nation that needed their help in a time of crisis, it seems, was not yet ready for the greater social equality that would slowly come in the decades to follow.

The National WWII Museum recognizes the contribution that women played in the success of the Allied victory in World War II and explores that contribution in depth in its Home Front gallery.

