

FEMALES UNDER FIRE:  
WORKING IN DANGER DURING  
WORLD WAR II

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In many cultures all over the world, women are ascribed a subservient and subordinate role in patriarchal societies, and thus have had substantial restrictions placed on their choices and opportunities. This is true for women in the American culture as well. Throughout United States history women have been expected to adhere to strict behavior guidelines in most aspects of their lives including politics, marriage, children, business, society, and work. Over time, as brave and daring women have begun to challenge these prescribed gender roles, American society has slowly become more accepting of women's independence.

Many events occurred throughout the twentieth century that began to change the way that both men and women viewed sexual differences and women's capabilities. After American women won the right to vote, the women's movement progressed slowly for several decades culminating in the massive women's rights movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Many significant events occurred during this fifty-year period that had both positive and negative effects for the rights of women. There were both political and social occurrences that advanced the fight for female equality. One such event that propelled women to actively cross

gender lines was World War II and the various ways in which women actively and physically participated in this war. Women during World War II crossed gender lines by entering both the industrial workforce and dangerous military situations that were usually dominated by men. In doing so, they significantly contributed to the war effort and also challenged existing gender theologies.

World War II presented opportunities for women to step out of accepted gender roles both on the home front and overseas as they entered a variety of occupations formerly unattainable to them. For instance women experienced significant changes as they became accepted into the industrial workforce, and received equal pay for replacing the men who had left for the war as the symbolic Rosie the Riveter. This acceptance of women was not however, due to a realization that men and women were abruptly considered equal, but rather it was due to the American economy and the need for a labor force to continue to manufacture products during the war. With the Depression only a few years in the past, the fear of a stagnant economy frightened the government as well as most Americans.

Although the women who worked as 'Rosie's' during this era significantly contributed to the war effort on the home front, some women further crossed established gender boundaries and placed themselves in dangerous military situations. Women's active and dangerous involvement in World War II as combat nurses, Army air force pilots, and secret agents will be the focus of this research. These women actively participated in occupations that were outside of those that they had normally been assigned, and they left their wartime experience with a newfound sense of their capabilities.

## NURSES

Combat nurses who served in the military were exposed to life threatening situations during World War II. Female nurses

were a valued necessity during any battle situation in order to care for the injured soldiers. An increased recruitment for thousands of nurses to join the ranks of the military and serve their country occurred early during the Second World War. These nurses became part of both the Army and the Navy and traveled throughout the world to care for injured soldiers.

Nurses were given the rank of an officer in the military. A chief nurse ranked as a First Lieutenant, assistant superintendent carried the rank of Captain, and a superintendent was a Major.<sup>1</sup> Due to this military rank, nurses received substantial pay and benefits as well as status, something that was uncommon for women in this era. Military nursing also offered women the opportunity to travel abroad. During this era women often lived under the guardianship of a male and did not often live independently, so to travel without a male escort, and earn their own substantial income was not a concept that many women had ever envisioned for themselves. Both the monetary compensation and the promise of seeing the world, in addition to helping with the war effort were very appealing for the thousands of women who enlisted.

In 1940, before the United States was officially involved in the war, only about 1,600 women enlisted in both the Army and Navy Nurse Corps. These numbers were inadequate to the amount of nurses required for the upcoming military conflicts. As the United States became increasingly involved in the war effort, recruitment intensified and this number grew to over 40,000 active military nurses in just three years.<sup>2</sup> This recruitment came from many places including advertisements in the media, schools, government programs and the Red Cross. For example, "The national Nursing Council for War Service, in cooperation with women's magazines, tried to locate and retain the 100,000 women

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1 Collett D Wadge, *Women in Uniform* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., LTD, 1946), 353.

2 Ibid, 352.

who had graduated from nursing school...<sup>3</sup> Quotas for nurses continued to be insufficient throughout the war and nurses were in high demand.<sup>4</sup> Many programs were developed to encourage women to join this campaign. Congress unanimously passed a 1943 bill providing federal aid for young women graduating high school to enter nursing programs.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Congress allotted \$5 million in Public Health Service grants to nursing schools throughout 1941-42.<sup>6</sup>

These new recruits were generally middle class, unmarried, with differing levels of education and varying ages. Many nurses were required to be a registered nurse with a college degree or a certificate from an accredited nursing school and also needed work experience to enter the field and receive a rank of officer.<sup>7</sup> However due to shortages many young women received training as aids to assist the nurses with more menial tasks and basic first aid. The aide training included a minimum eighty-hour training course developed and provided by the American Red Cross.

While a majority of the women came from Caucasian ancestry, the Army Nurse Corp did accept African Americans and other ethnic minorities. Approximately 500 black nurses were serving at the end of the war.<sup>8</sup> It is important to mention, however, that the era of World War II was also the time of Jim Crow laws, racial segregation and racist ideologies. The military was segregated during the war and for these reasons African American nurses were often segregated to care for African American sol-

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3 Doris Weatherford, *American Women and World War II* (New York: Facts on File, 1990), 16.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid, 17.

6 Ibid.

7 Judy Barrett Litoff, and David C Smith, *We're in this War, Too: World War II Letters From American Women in Uniform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7.

8 Ibid, 65.

diers and prisoners of war.<sup>9</sup> In a series of letters, African American nurses expressed their interest and excitement at the possibility of joining the nursing campaign to Judge William H Hastie in hopes of being admitted. They received that opportunity.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of these racial divisions, all nurses had to travel closely behind the soldiers in order to provide adequate health care. This not only placed nurses within proximity to battles and bombings, but it also meant that they were constantly setting up and taking down makeshift hospitals that needed to accommodate up to 500 soldiers.<sup>11</sup> This was physically demanding and the women needed to be at their strongest. Fortunately they had been adequately prepared for this process during a physical training program. During this training the women went on twenty mile hikes while fully equipped with their gear that could weigh up to thirty-four pounds. Their training also included the rigors of a 75-yard obstacle course complete with barbed wire and trenches that they had to complete while being fired upon by bullets and dynamite explosions.<sup>12</sup>

Once recruitment and training was complete the women were often sent overseas to be near the front lines. Regardless of the fact that women were stationed at hospitals, this circumstance did not keep them safe from the dangers of the war. In September 1944 nurse Reba Z. Little became wounded when her air- evacuation plane crashed. She was captured by the Germans and held prisoner for five months.<sup>13</sup> In addition, a large group of nurses escaped an attack on Bataan to the island of Corregidor. Here the women hid underground, but were eventually captured by the Japanese. Sixty-six nurses were taken to a Manila prison camp

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9 Ibid., 65.

10 Ibid., 68-69.

11 Weatherford, *American Women and World War II*, 7.

12 Ibid., 7.

13 Francine D'Amico and Laurie Weinstein, *Gender Camouflage: Women and the U.S. Military* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 19.

where they remained until the war ended three years later.<sup>14</sup>

Many of the nurses who served in World War II documented their experiences to share with others. Lieutenant Juanita Redmond was an American nurse stationed in Bataan during World War II who experienced the horrors of the front lines. On March 30, 1940 the hospital where she worked endured a series of severe bombing attacks.<sup>15</sup> Fear and chaos were immediate and she states, "In my ward several of the men became hysterical; I would have joined them if I could."<sup>16</sup> Redmond explains her own peril after a bomb struck nearby, "I heard myself gasping. My eyes were being gouged out of my sockets; my whole body was swollen and torn apart by the violent pressure. This is the end, I thought."<sup>17</sup> Redmond did not sustain any major injuries and was safely evacuated.<sup>18</sup> Redmond's story is not infrequent. Letters and memoirs show that nurses experienced similar attacks and danger during their wartime work.<sup>19</sup>

A young Army Corps Nurse, June Waundrey, wrote dozens of letters home to her family from her posts in various parts of North Africa, Tunisia, Munich, and Sicily. She explained the horrors of the war and the fatigue that she endured regularly. She summed up her days by writing, "Working like slaves. Too tired to write and its always too dark to see when I get off duty. We were so close to the lines we could see our artillery fire and also that of the Germans."<sup>20</sup> Although Waundrey began her letter with a

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14 Weatherford, *American Women and World War II*, 5. Several groups of nurses were taken prisoner throughout the war; despite adequate research a total number of POW's was not located.

15 *100 Best True Stories of World War II* (New York: WM. H. Wise & Co., Inc., 1945), 51.

16 *Ibid.*, 51.

17 *Ibid.*, 51.

18 *Ibid.*, 54.

19 Barrett Litoff, and Smith, *We're in this War, Too*. See June Waundrey, Marjorie LaPalme, Gysella Simon, Ruth Hess, etc.

20 *Ibid.*, 127.

melancholy tone, the letter turned to more cheerful subjects. She also explained, "I'm well and as happy as one could be in this set up...there are many dedicated people here giving their all."<sup>21</sup> Many other women expressed similar sentiments in their letters home. Second Lieutenant Mary Mixsell wrote home, "I wouldn't trade my present job here with anyone else on earth and I hope they don't send me home until the war is over for good."<sup>22</sup> This assessment shows that although the war was emotionally and physically difficult, these women believed in what they were doing and knew they were capable.

201 female nurses in the Army Nurse Corps were killed during World War II.<sup>23</sup> Many who survived were honored for their bravery. Lieutenant Mary Anne Sullivan was awarded the Legion of Merit for successfully implementing the evacuation of her hospital without care for herself.<sup>24</sup> Two hundred Army nurses landed at Anzio in January 1944 with the invasion force. Four received the Silver Star - one posthumously - for evacuating patients ...six nurses died."<sup>25</sup> Additionally, according to James R. Power's study of wartime decorations, approximately 980 nurses were celebrated with a medal or award of some type for their services, bravery, and those who had been deemed as significantly contributing to the war.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, as ranked officers, after the war nurses received veteran's pay and a G.I. Bill for college. As a result of their bravery and success during World War II the Army and Navy Nursing Corps became a permanent part of the military.<sup>27</sup>

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21 Ibid., 127.

22 Ibid., 181.

23 Barrett Litoff, and Smith, *We're in this War, Too*, 170.

24 Collett D Wadge, *Women in Uniform* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., LTD, 1946), 353.

25 D'Amico and Weinstein, *Gender Camouflage*, 19.

26 James R. Power, *Brave Women and their Wartime Decorations* (New York: Vantage Press, 1959), 64-67.

27 D'Amico and Weinstein, *Gender Camouflage*, 20.

Another significant change for the women who served as nurses was the newfound independence and a sense of their capabilities. Journalist Eileen Hurst wrote an article about the World War II experience of Katherine Tierney Leahy. She claims that, Leahy “believes that her military experience broadened her life, gave her the opportunity to travel and to meet many interesting people. “Erna Mass, also a nurse claimed, “ In my wildest dreams I never thought I’d be seeing as much of the world as I am... Wouldn’t have missed this experience for the world... I’m growing up and much more tolerant and understanding than I used to be.”<sup>28</sup> At a time when women did not often live independently, earn decent pay, or travel alone, serving in the war provided women with these opportunities and an increased sense of confidence.<sup>29</sup>

### SECRET AGENTS

One of the very dynamic ways in which women crossed gender lines during World War II was as secret agents conducting espionage. The United States had utilized female spies informally since the Civil War, so the concept and implementation of them during World War II was not completely new to American warfare. There are however several aspects to female espionage during World War II that differed from that of previous wars. One of these differences was the formal organization of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II. This organization directed the intelligence activities for the United States during World War II. Between 1942 and 1945 the OSS utilized secret agents to perform espionage activities, which included investigations, sabotage, transmission of messages, interrogations and other secret missions.

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28 Barrett Litoff, and Smith, *We’re in this War, Too*, 226-7.

29 Eileen Hurst, “Voices of Connecticut Veterans: Katherine Teirney Leahy and a Nurses Efforts in World War II,”

*Connecticut History* 45 no. 2 (Fall 2006): 269.

Women were slowly introduced into this type of work but their success soon became apparent. The OSS had particularly good success with female agents in Germany, some of them being their best recruits. It was soon apparent that females had many advantages over their male colleague's.<sup>30</sup> Several reasons why using female agent was beneficial to the OSS include less paperwork, less suspicion, and the notion that women were often underestimated during this era. When addressing the advantages of using female secret agents, political author Joseph E. Persico claims in his book *Piercing the Reich* that, "A woman did not have to explain why she was not in military service. She did not need a sheaf of passes that a working male or soldier had to carry. That a woman might be involved in secret military intelligence simply seemed less likely on the face of it."<sup>31</sup> This statement supports the gender norms of the era in which women were often underestimated both intellectually and physically, and therefore were not suspected to be secret agents. For this reason and the fact that women were not required to carry the identification documents that men in Europe were required, they were easier to position and pass through secured areas and situations undetected. In the beginning of this process there was no clear recruitment policy, a friend or acquaintance involved with the OSS recognized that a women had particular skills and traits that would deem them a candidate for espionage often brought women into the OSS.

The women who entered the war as secret agents were very often white, middle or upper class women. Due to the need to speak a foreign language and a keen intelligence, they were often highly educated and therefore from families that had the resources for a good education. Agent Jane Foster Zlatovski spoke five lan-

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30 Patrick K. O'Donnel, *Operatives, Spies, and Saboteurs: The Unknown Story of the Men and Women of World War II's*

OSS (New York: Free Press, 2004), 251.

31 Joseph E. Persico, *Piercing the Reich* (New York: The Viking Press, 1979), 261.

guages in addition to English, which included French, German, Dutch, Malay and some Spanish.<sup>32</sup> American spy Virginia Hall was born in Baltimore attended Radcliffe and Barnard Colleges and then later studied at Strasbourg, Toulouse and Grenoble universities in Europe to perfect her French.<sup>33</sup> Hall was from a wealthy family whose grandfather had made a fortune in the shipping business.<sup>34</sup> Another allied, agent Christine Granville was born a Polish countess whose father was an aristocrat was also highly educated.<sup>35</sup> Many of these women did not need to work, but chose to work for the OSS out of either the desire to partake in dangerous activity, or out of a sense of patriotic duty. "To serve behind enemy lines required courage and commitment... the quality that unites women who became agents was a steely determination to play an active role in inflicting real damage on the enemy."<sup>36</sup> It is evident that the women who chose to participate in this facet of the war did not make that choice based on monetary motivations, but on a desire to assist the war effort in an active and involved way.

In addition to being upper middle class, these secret agents were usually of European ethnic backgrounds. Due to the high level of education required, and the need look European and blend into European society, African American women were not involved in the OSS as secret agents. Women of color did not receive the same opportunities for education and advancement in the 1940s and therefore, for reasons of race and class, not considered acceptable candidates for secret agents.

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32 Maureen Mahoney, *Women in Espionage: A Biographical Dictionary* (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 1993), 237.

33 Marcus Binney, *The Women Who Lived For Danger* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002), 112.

34 Ibid., 112.

35 Ronald Seth, *Encyclopedia of Espionage* (Great Britain: New English Library, 1972), 278-279.

36 Binney, *The Women Who Lived For Danger*, 2.

The last characteristic prevalent among female secret agents was youth. The women were generally in their early and mid twenties.<sup>37</sup> Their youth complimented the necessity that agents be physically fit. The women trained in parachute jumping, sabotage, handling weapons, raid tactics, silent killing, self-defense, security and so forth.<sup>38</sup> Agents were often dropped behind enemy lines and placed in perilous situations, therefore, these types of training were vital to their survival. In addition, due to the need for travel documents and frequent train raids by the Germans, agents usually walked or rode their bikes to travel.<sup>39</sup> A keen mind and physical stamina assisted a young female agent in being successful.

The OSS and its agents played an instrumental role in World War II for its contributions of espionage and obtaining or passing on important secret information. Secret agents were often placed in enemy territories to participate in various types of sabotage and surveillance. In addition to espionage, spies were also responsible for secretly getting supplies to allied supporters and troops and running rescue missions. "To underground movements in 16 countries OSS dropped 27,000 tons of weapons and supplies and thousands of agents. Other agents rescued more than 5000 American airmen. OSS casualties totaled about 100..."<sup>40</sup> The OSS and the men and women involved played a pivotal role in assisting in the war effort on many levels.

There are remarkable stories from the women who worked for the OSS and they have documented their experiences. Secret agent Betty Lussier who was raised on a farm in Maryland documented her experiences in an autobiography *Intrepid Women*. Lussier expresses her experiences in her own words, "There was a lot of action in Paris. We found ourselves racing down streets

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37 Ibid., 3.

38 Ibid., 15.

39 Binney, *The Women Who Lived For Danger*, 35.

40 *Secrets and Spies: Behind-the-Scenes Stories of World War II* (New York: The Readers Digest Association, 1964), 568- 569.

and we frequently passed truckloads of German troops in vehicles going in all directions.”<sup>41</sup> Lussier also discusses her experiences as an interrogator when enemy spies were intercepted and captured. She claims, “The first moments of capturing an active enemy spy are extremely delicate...the spy must be isolated immediately from family and friends. This isolation erodes his self-confidence, and sets him to wondering what has happened to them and what information they might be divulging.”<sup>42</sup> Lussier’s experiences serve as an example of the type of work and contributions provided by the female agents of the OSS.

Josefina (Joey) Guererro who became a spy for the Filipino underground in Manila in 1941, passed important information to the Americans and completed several dangerous missions. In one such mission in 1945 she traveled 40 miles on foot to pass a map of a Japanese military site to the allied forces. When crossing the border, “The first day a Japanese officer halted her, approached as if to search her. The map taped between her shoulder blades seemed to burn.”<sup>43</sup> If captured Joey’s fate would have probably been torture or immediate execution; however she was successful in her mission and provided valuable assistance to the Allied forces.

For female secret agents, beauty and charm could be a substantial asset in the field. Many female secret agents found it necessary to compromise their ethics and morals and use their sexuality in order to achieve the desired results of their mission. Paddy O’Sullivan used her sexual desirability and flirting to her advantage as a secret agent. A fellow agent claimed, “Red-headed Paddy O’Sullivan chatted up a German Officer for half an hour and

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41 Patrick K. O’Donnel, *Operatives, Spies, and Saboteurs: The Unknown Story of the Men and Women of World War II’s*

OSS (New York: Free Press, 2004), 204.

42 Betty Lussier, *Intrepid Woman: Betty Lussier’s Secret War, 1942-1945* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010), 191.

43 *Secrets and Spies*, 185.

ended up making a date with him to distract him from looking in her suitcase.”<sup>44</sup> Another agent described spy Christina Granville, “The almost mesmeric attraction she had was a blend of vivacity, flirtatiousness, charm and sheer personality. She could switch that personality on and off like a searchlight...”<sup>45</sup> These women often took advantage of the sexual desire of male officers by seducing high-ranking military officials in order to extricate themselves from a dangerous situation or to gain access to secret information.

One woman who used her sexuality for information was Amy Elizabeth Thorpe Brousse, code named Cynthia. Brousse had sexual liaisons with three separate men in order to gain secure information. Her most important seduction was of an Italian admiral/naval attaché of the Italian Embassy. The admiral was so taken with Brousse that she easily manipulated him and he handed over Italian naval codes.<sup>46</sup> “Of her willingness to grant sexual favors for information she remarked, ‘After all, wars are not won by respectable means!’” The third man she attempted to seduce was sympathetic to the United States and joined her to help her gain French Vichy naval codes.<sup>47</sup> They later married and lived out their lives together after the war. Sometimes espionage situations necessitated sexual seductions and flirtations in order to complete an assigned mission. In an era of sexual conservatism and a strict double standard for men and women with regards to sexuality, female agents like Brousse, who embraced their sexuality during this era felt empowered by their ability to control how they used it.

Although many women endured safe and successful careers as spies, others faced capture and punishment. American Mildred Fish-Harnack became involved in espionage activities with her German born husband. They joined a group called The

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44 Binney, *The Women Who Lived For Danger*, 6.

45 Ibid., 49.

46 Mahoney, *Women in Espionage*, 29.

47 Ibid.

Red Orchestra, Soviet intelligence agents conducting espionage in Germany.<sup>48</sup> Members of their group were arrested and executed for treason to Germany. Among their number were Fish-Harnack and one other woman. The two women had originally avoided execution and received prison sentences because of their sex, however Hitler himself overturned their sentence and demanded their execution since they were just as dangerous to his regime as the men.<sup>49</sup> Mildred Fish-Harnack died on February 16, 1943. She was the only American woman during World War II executed for treason during her attempts to aid American forces.<sup>50</sup>

Female spies during World War II crossed gender lines and placed themselves in dangerous and unknown situations in order to help their country. Some female secret agents were recognized and honored for their efforts during World War II while others secretly returned to live ordinary and quiet lives, and many continued to serve as secret agents during the Cold War. Jane McCarthy was awarded the American Medal of Freedom for her efforts as a spy during the German occupation of Paris.<sup>51</sup> Virginia Hall was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, which after the Medal of Honor was the Army's highest military decoration, the first woman to receive this honor. Although many other secret agents received the Distinguished Service Medal, there is very little documented information due to the secret and confidential nature of their work.<sup>52</sup> It is significant that the work these women performed was seen as important, and they were respected and honored by their country.

The women who were secret agents for the OSS are excel-

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48 Ronald Seth, *Encyclopedia of Espionage* (Great Britain: New English Library, 1972), 512.

49 Ibid., 518.

50 George Duncan's Women of the Third Reich, <http://members.iinet.net.au/~gduncan/women.html> (accessed March 18, 2012).

51 Power, *Brave Women and their Wartime Decorations*, 29.

52 Ibid., 62-63.

lent examples of women who crossed gender boundaries and chose to live outside of normal female expectations. For example, when Betty Lussier reported for training, four male agents had already arrived and looked at her expectantly. They assumed that even though she was there for the same training as they were, that she would take care of their secretarial needs. She later recounted that she promptly informed them, "I did not type, I did not make tea, and the only pencils I sharpened were my own."<sup>53</sup> Thus, Lussier rejected the gender stereotype assigned to her and joined the other men in her work for the war.

### AVIATORS

Another way that women crossed gender barriers was in the field of aviation. In the early decades of the twentieth century women such as Amelia Earhart, who took her first flying lesson in 1921, led the way for females in aviation. As the century progressed, increasing numbers of women were following her example and attaining their pilot's license. When the United States joined World War II in 1941, the concept that these women could use their flight experience and serve as pilots began to evolve. The demand came in 1942 when more and more male military pilots were being sent overseas to fight in overseas. At the beginning of the war many male pilots were needed to fight in combat while some remained in the United States in order to transport the newly built aircrafts from factories to their final destinations where they would be put to use. This method was effective until higher than expected casualties overseas required more men to leave these ferrying and transportation posts for active combat.

The Army Air Force decided as an experiment to try and use women pilots in this previously male-only occupation. Under the direction of Jacqueline Cochran, and General Henry H. Arnold, a division of female pilots known as the Women's Air Force

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53 Lussier, *Intrepid Woman*, 171.

Service Pilots (WASP's) was established in 1942. The military received an overwhelming amount of interested candidates whom already needed to have already procured a pilot's license<sup>54</sup>. Newspapers began to run ads and the response was tremendous. Over 25,000 women applied for the WASP's. From this number 1,830 were selected for instruction and 1,074 completed their training.<sup>55</sup> It is evident from this response that women were hoping for an opportunity to fly planes, and were ready to take on a role in the military that had been previously reserved for men only.<sup>56</sup>

The women selected as WASPs came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. They were not required to have specific high school or college credentials. The prerequisite of a pilot's license required a considerable amount of money. Some of the women did come from middle class families with the means to pay for flying lessons. Others came from lesser means, belonging to working class families such as Maggie Yee who always had to work to help her family.<sup>57</sup> The women were generally in their twenties, however later in the war the age minimum was lowered to eighteen. The majority of the women were Caucasian however the WASPs accepted a few women of color including Native American women and Asian Americans such as Maggie Gee.<sup>58</sup> Although some women of color were chosen as WASPS, African American women were completely excluded from the WASP program. As discussed earlier, America in the 1940s was segregated, and racist concepts excluded African American women from consideration as pilots.

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54 Barrett Litoff, and Smith, *We're in this War, Too*, 7.

55 Mark C Bonn (director), "Wings of Silver: The Vi Cowden Story." 2010. [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B006R0AGLA/ref=cm\\_cr\\_asin\\_lnk](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B006R0AGLA/ref=cm_cr_asin_lnk).

56 Jean Hascall Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), ix.

57 D'Amico and Weinstein, *Gender Camouflage*, 200-202.

58 Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of Berkeley Press, 1995), 257.

As with race, an apparent gender double standard existed for the women who entered this new program with regards to the amount of training required as compared to men. There was a substantially more stringent training requirement for female pilots versus what was required for male pilots. The education requirement for males was three years of high school, whereas women needed to be a high school graduate. In addition male pilots only needed to complete 200 total hours of flight time, in contrast to female pilots who had to complete more than twice that amount for a total of 500 hours. This information provides evidence of a stark double standard with regards to the military and concepts of gender.<sup>59</sup> Women in the era were considered less capable and less qualified, and therefore the military regarded women as needing more training. During the 1940s doubts regarding the abilities and intellect of women circulated widely, and therefore more stringent training was often deemed necessary for some occupations.

The women selected to be a WASP experienced a rigorous training program. This training included in-flight instruction, learning instruments, navigation, maintenance and physical training. Marion Stegeman wrote dozens of letters home highlighting this experience. On April 2, 1943 she described her training experience, "Everyday we have the same routine: mess inspection, ground school, drill or calisthenics, mess, flight line, mess, then study until 10 at night. So there's not much to add from day to day except to tell you again what a wonderful training I'm getting."<sup>60</sup> Madge Rutherford also wrote home about her passion for being a WASP, "Let me sing again the praises of the situation. Honestly, I truly love it here."<sup>61</sup> Similar sentiments echoed in the

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59 Deborah G. Douglas, *American Women and Flight Since 1940* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004), 81.

60 Barrett Litoff, and Smith, *We're in this War, Too*, 114.

61 *Ibid.*, 55.

letters and words of fellow WASPs Yvonne Pateman, Cornelia Fort, Margaret Gee and Vi Cowden. These women were working hard, but also enjoying a new experience and doing something that they loved.

Despite the adequate training, female military pilots still experienced resistance and sexism from men who did not want them involved in this male dominated sector. Societal norms of this era often relegated that women remain in the home, or at least to work in gender appropriate occupations. When women ventured out to male dominated occupations, men felt threatened by the new competition for jobs, or that a mere woman may do the job better than them. In 1943 a select group of Cochran's finest recruits were taken to Camp Davis, NC on a special mission to serve as target towers for live artillery training. When rumors of the women's arrival spread throughout the 50,000 men stationed there, not all were welcoming. For example, "...a group of enlisted men went to the tow-target squadron commanding officer, Major L.L. Stevenson, and requested transfers. 'I'm not going to serve any powder puff pilots,' grumbled one mechanic." Stevenson calmed the men and told them to give the women a chance and if they were still unsatisfied he would grant their transfer request.<sup>62</sup> Despite this kind of discrimination the women persevered and continued to challenge gender notions and the boundaries with which they were faced.

Although most WASP's survived their historic wartime experience, there were some fatalities. Thirty-eight women died in the line of duty while serving as a WASP. One such woman was Mabel Rawlinson who was killed after her plane tipped some trees and crashed. Marion Hanrahan was flying behind her and witnessed the entire episode. Sally VanWagenen Keil wrote of

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62 Sally VanWagenen Keil, *Those Wonderful Women in their Flying Machines: The Unknown Heroines of World War II* (New York: Rawson Wade Publishers Inc., 1979), 195.

Hanrahan's experience saying, "Marion helplessly moving forward, was by this time flying almost directly over the wreckage, eerily ablaze in the dark. Above the roar of her engine, she heard Mabel screaming."<sup>63</sup> This sacrifice was significant in that if these women had not taken on these tasks and placed themselves in danger, fewer male pilots would have been able to go overseas and fight in combat. In addition, the assistance of female pilots in helping to train the officers who would be fighting in combat situations aided in providing thoroughly qualified pilots for the war.

Marion Stegeman also wrote home about her passion for flying and the danger that she experienced. The passion she felt for flying is apparent in every letter she wrote home. In one she states, "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."<sup>64</sup> Another WASP, Mary Ellen explains her love flying especially at night stating, "It was just a wonderful experience. We both remembered it as one of the highlights of our lives because it was so beautiful."<sup>65</sup> Vi Cowden also repeatedly expressed her love of flying and relished in the contentment of it.<sup>66</sup> These sentiments are repeated in letters and autobiographies of many WASPs and it is clear that women like Stegeman, Ellen and Cowden were comfortable in the planes and enjoyed in their jobs.

Cornelia Fort was in the air giving a flying lesson when she saw the attack on Pearl Harbor in Oahu Hawaii on December 7, 1941. Later recruited to be a military pilot, Fort assumed she would be flying overseas. She wrote home a letter saying goodbye to her family and telling of the impending danger that she may encounter in case of her death. Fort stated, "In writing this letter,

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63 Ibid., 203.

64 Barrett Litoff, and Smith, *We're in this War, Too*, 115.

65 Jean Hascall Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 89.

66 Bonn, "Wings of Silver.

which if delivered will be my last, ... the ocean voyage I will be making shortly has elements of danger and if I lose my life before seeing you again, dearest, I wanted to say aloha and send you my love forever and forever.”<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, during WASP training in 1943, the wing Cornelia’s plane was clipped in midair in by another training plane and she crashed. Fort was the first female pilot in the history of the United States to die in service.<sup>68</sup>

Violet (Vi) Cowden was twenty-six years old when she applied to join the war effort as a pilot. Cowden took part in a documentary film *Wings of Silver: The Vi Cowden Story* released in 2010, in which she orally chronicles her experience as a pilot and then a WASP from first time she took a lesson. At the time of the film Cowden was ninety-two years old and reminisces on her war-time experiences. Cowden discusses the significance that women’s roles as pilots had on those around her. She stated that at the time the women were just doing their jobs, it was not until later that she realized how much they encouraged others.

The WASP’s were disbanded rather abruptly as the war began to come to an end in 1944 due to an increasing number of available male pilots.<sup>69</sup> A newspaper article that ran in the *Williamsburg Shopper* announced the termination of the WASP’s. “Wednesday...1,000 women air force pilots (WASP) step from army planes for the last time.”<sup>70</sup> They had accomplished much in their short stint as a military division and had a significant impact on the outcome of the war. The WASP’s flew more than seventy-five million miles during the war.<sup>71</sup> The casualty ratio between

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67 Lisa Grundwald and Stephen Alder, eds. *Womens Letters: America from the Revolutionary War to the Present* (New York: The Dial Press, 2005), 549.

68 Ibid., 549.

69 Hascall Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II* ix.

70 Editorial, *The Williamsburg Shopper*. “1000 WASPS End Flying Service on Wednesday.” December 21, 1944, 19.

71 Bonn (director), “Wings of Silver.

the WASPs and the men who held the same job is equivalent.<sup>72</sup> This statistic demonstrates that the women were equals to men in their ability to fly planes and to handle the rigors of this occupation.

General Arnold who supervised Cochran and her WASP division had this to say on their disbandment, "We will no longer look upon a women's flying organization as experimental. We will know that they can handle our fastest fighters, our heaviest bombers; we will know that they are capable of ferrying, target towing, flying training, test flying, and the countless other activities which you have proved you can do."<sup>73</sup> This recognition from a high-ranking military official validated the efforts and the success of the eighteen hundred WASPS who risked their lives for their country. The women also received some favorable acknowledgment from the public and the media.

*The Williamsburg Shopper* called the WASPs a "Colorful chapter without precedent in the nation's military history."<sup>74</sup> Additionally through the letters written home from the women it is apparent that most of their families supported their actions and they communicated regularly with each other.

Other than the verbal recognition from General Arnold and other minimal acknowledgment, WASPs did not receive the many benefits or awards that were provided to the Army and Navy Nurse Corps. Sadly, the women who gave their lives in the WASP program for the service of their country were sent home and buried without any military honors or escort, no GI benefits, or in-

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72 Hascall Cole, *Women Pilots of World WarII*, 1. Exact documentation of male transport pilot deaths could not be located. Dependence on secondary source for information.

73 Ibid., 4.

74 *The Williamsburg Shopper*. "1000 WASPS End Flying Service on Wednesday." 19.

surance, and without any commendations for their families.<sup>75</sup> This lack of recognition by their nation's leaders and military officials was difficult for the women who served and for the families who lost their women in this program.

When the WASP program disbanded, they went home, and keeping with the accepted gender norms of the 1940s, they were expected to return to more gender acceptable occupations. This often meant teaching jobs, office and clerical work, and domestic occupations. General Arnold who had supervised the program since its inception, fought to gain the veterans status for WASPs and after his death his son continued the campaign. Finally, thirty-three years later on March 8, 1979, "The U.S. Secretary of Defense announced that the service of the WASP had been determined 'active military service' for the purposes of all laws administered by the Veterans Administration."<sup>76</sup> The Wasps were now formally acknowledged as official personnel of the United States military and received all applicable benefits. The timing of this recognition falls on the heels of the women's movement of the 1970s. An era when women's equality became an important concept and women, such as the WASPs were recognized.

Although this recognition came decades after it was due, it is still significant that these women were eventually recognized for their valued service and sacrifice during World War II. Letters and memoirs written by women in the military relate to their friends and families that they were fundamentally changed by their experiences. They crossed established and acknowledged gender boundaries and entered a world new to women. As a result WASP Maggie Gee exclaimed, "I returned to Berkeley, California, with a lot more self confidence...My Horizon had broadened..."<sup>77</sup> The most significant recognition that these women received was from

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75 Hascall Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 1.

76 Ibid.

77 Yung, *Unbound Feet*, 257.

themselves.

The women who worked as secret agents for the OSS, traveled abroad as military nurses, and flew airplane bombers, crossed gender boundaries, challenged perceived gender notions and took on the challenges that a war delivers. In the evidence presented, it is clear that the women involved, proved themselves capable of the jobs that they undertook and the challenges they encountered. Thus they debunked gender stereotypes that had before deemed women less capable than men.

The personal accomplishments that brave women achieved during World War II, and how those achievements altered their sense of themselves must not be forgotten. It was often women's conceptions of themselves that changed the most throughout these wartime experiences. Women overwhelmingly stated that their experiences in these occupations during the war opened their eyes to a new sense of who they were, and what they could accomplish. Nurse Faye Anderson was also significantly impacted by her experiences, "...I'll never cease to be amazed at the things we have done over here...but I guess you know by now that I love this sort of work and it has been a priceless experience..."<sup>78</sup> These experiences enabled women to become more independent and confident. Gaining the knowledge and experience that women could and should do something outside of the stereotypical gender norms changed the ideas that women had about themselves. Whether they returned home to marry and have children, go to college, or pursue another avenue, something innate in these women changed and gave them a newfound sense of self and identity as women. This is possibly the most important idea that comes of women's wartime experience, her ability to successfully do what had been denied to her before.