

Essential Roles of United States Women During World War II

Matthew Grant

Senior, History and Education

Introduction

The United States entered World War II on December 11th, 1941. At that time the United States was still suffering from the Great Depression meaning both men and women were struggling to find jobs. For most jobs during this period, men would be hired over women. However, when men started to be sent overseas to fight in World War II, women saw dramatic rises in gender equality. In many cases women were able to get equal opportunities for jobs that were usually reserved for men. This equally did not just occur in the job market but also in the military as well. During World War II, women were given much more opportunity to join the military. Women were also able to help the military by working as nurses

overseas on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific. Some women joined the work force, some joined the military and went overseas, but women who stayed at home also helped the United States during the war. Housewives during World War II also helped the United States to win the war in several ways.

There is not much dispute over whether or not women's contributions to World War II were important. There is, however, dispute over just how important women's role during World War II were on the outcome of the war. This is dispute is illustrated by the lack of coverage and credit that women were given both after World War II and by historians. After World War II had ended, women were laid off from their jobs, not given military credit, and told to go back to their simple roles as housewives. They were made to believe that their efforts during the war were not essential to the victory. Many historians

choose to focus on the contributions of soldiers on the battle fields and of men behind the scenes pulling the strings as the only important factors in the United States' victory. As many of the articles in this essay illustrate the idea that women's roles were not respected after World War II. This essay will illustrate that women's roles during World War II were not just important but were essential to the United States winning World War II. Women in the United States were essential to the victory of World War II by acting as a labor force, housewives, battlefield nurses, and military women. These four groups of women were essential factors in the United States winning World War II.

Women in the Work Force

Arguably the most important role that women played during World War II was joining the wartime labor force. A large

portion of women were attracted to the work force during this time because of the large wages and equal opportunity to secure jobs. In many cases women's shift in the job market caused shortages in areas that were usually women dominated positions, such as librarians, secretaries, and restaurant workers.¹ Others were drawn to the work force by their sense of patriotism, sparked by wartime propaganda. The most famous of these propagandas being "Rosie the Riveter". Regardless of why these women joined the labor force, it is undeniable that they played an essential role in sustaining the wartime economy in the United States and helping the United States to win World War II. Women in the United States during World War II filled several important roles in factories, shipyards, accounting firms, and several other positions.

¹ Mary M. Schweitzer, "World War II and Female Labor Force Participation Rates," *The Journal of Economic History* 40, no. 1 (1980): 90.

Women's work in wartime factories is regarded as the most important role that U.S. women played during World War II. From 1940 to 1945 the number of women in factories rose one hundred and twelve percent.² Around 4.5 million women were working in factories in 1945.³ These women worked in munition, airplane, or vehicle manufacturing factories that helped support the war effort. These vehicles would then be sent overseas for the allied armies to use against the Axis Powers. For example, women made up twenty-five percent of Ford's factory labor force.⁴ Without women filling these positions, there would have been a major shortage in factories. These shortages would have led to shortages on the battlefield. It is well known that the United States' ability to mobilize the war economy was an essential part of their victory in

World War II. Without the women who filled the positions in factories the United States would not have been able to mobilize the war economy as they did. These women were essential to the United States' victory as they built vehicles, airplanes, and munitions for the war effort along with filling positions in the wartime economy.

Many women also moved into shipyard during the war. This is another field that was dominated by men prior to World War II, but women had to join because of labor shortages and wanted to join because of high pay. These women filled several important positions in shipyards such as welders, secretaries, blueprint developers, and electricians.⁵ These positions were essential to shipyards abilities to build ships and build ships quickly. At the height the war, there were

² Schweitzer, "World War II and Female Labor Force Participation Rates," 90.

³ Schweitzer, "World War II and Female Labor Force Participation Rates," 90.

⁴ Schweitzer, "World War II and Female Labor Force Participation Rates," 92.

⁵ Diane Simmons, "Rejection, Reception, and Rejection Again: Women in Oregon's World War II Shipyards." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* (2018): 105.

about forty thousand women employed in shipyards across the United States.⁶ These women again filled an essential labor force that the United States needed to win the war. Closer to the end of the war the United States government cancelled many of their contracts to have new ships built.⁷ Women were the first to go after the war had ended and the shipyards no longer needed such a large number of workers. This again illustrates how women's work was looked over as they were let go after the war to make room for returning servicemen and because the shipyards no longer needed a large work force.⁸ Instead of getting seniority over the returning men, they were laid off.

American women also began to take on other jobs that were normally dominated by men. One such job was accounting. Men who were already accountants began to join the war effort while men who were attending college to become accountants started to be drafted by the military.⁹ This left only one group to fill these vacant positions: women. Prior to the war accounting firms would only hire women for secretary positions.¹⁰ As the war continued accounting firms lost more and more employees. They were hesitant to start hiring women until about 1943. After women started to get hired at accounting firms, reports showed that women were successful accountants. Firms reported that women performed very well, and customers had positive reactions to

⁶ Simmons, "Rejection, Reception, and Rejection Again: Women in Oregon's World War II Shipyards." (2018): 105.

⁷ Simmons, "Rejection, Reception, and Rejection Again: Women in Oregon's World War II Shipyards." (2018): 115.

⁸ Simmons, "Rejection, Reception, and Rejection Again: Women in Oregon's World War II Shipyards." (2018): 112.

⁹ Charles W. Wootton, "The Role Of Women In Major Public Accounting Firms In The United States During World War II." *Business and Economic History* 23, no. 1 (1994): 244.

¹⁰ Wootton, "The Role Of Women In Major Public Accounting Firms In The United States During World War II." (1994): 242.

having a woman accountant.¹¹ These women filled a field that was in dire need of workers. Because these women joined accounting firms, firms were able to keep accurate bookkeeping that helped the rest of the United States labor force. Unlike other labor forces, women accountants were able to keep their jobs after the war had ended.¹² Women who filled accountant positions were essential to the wartime economy as they added to the wartime labor force but also keep books for other labor forces during the war.

These are just three examples of normally male dominated positions that were filled by women, but there are many more. All of the positions that women filled when they joined the wartime labor force were essential to the United States' victory during World War II. Women who worked in factories made tanks, airplanes, vehicles,

and ammunition that were essential for the United States' military to fight the Axis Powers. Women who worked in shipyards built ships for the United States military and joined a workforce that was essential for the United States' war effort. The women who joined accounting firms helped the wartime economy by bookkeeping for other labor forces during the war. Women who joined the labor force during World War II were essential to the United States' victory.

Housewives

During this time, women also acted as the only household supporters. Many households send son, husbands, and fathers overseas to fight in World War II. Some felt useless being stuck at home, while their brothers, sons, husbands and fathers are contributing to the war effort. The United States government started to make war time propaganda posters that promoted the

¹¹ Wootton, "The Role Of Women In Major Public Accounting Firms In The United States During World War II." (1994): 246.

¹² Wootton, "The Role Of Women In Major Public Accounting Firms In The United States During World War II." (1994): 248.

importance of domestic labor.¹³ The purpose of this was to try to make housewives feel more connected to the war happening in Europe. As Sara Harrington describes in her article “Women’s Work: Domestic Labor in American World War II Posters,” the United States government advocated for housewives to help the war effort. Harrington says, “Such images encouraged women to plant gardens, can food, conserve, and ration foodstuffs, to write letters to those serving in the war, and to recycle household goods and wastes.”¹⁴ This further illustrates the way that housewives’ domestic labor helped contribute to the war effort. If women saved the grease and fats from their cooking, the United States could use it to create bombs for the war.¹⁵ Housewives could also recycle cans and other wastes that could be used by the United States military

to make both bombs and bullets.¹⁶ These propagandas were used to show housewives that their domestic labor was essential to the war effort and to make them feel closer to the battlefield.

Housewives also had to deal with the difficulties brought on by the war. The war made it difficult for many housewives to get food and take care of the household and their children. For many housewives whose husbands went off to war there was only two options; move in with relatives or find a job. For women with children who had to find jobs it became incredibly hard to balance work with domestic labor. According to Mary M. Schweitzer’s article “Women’s Work: Domestic Labor Force Participation Rates,” a survey by the Women’s Bureau during World War II found that, “...one-fourth of working wives had husbands away

¹³ Sara Harrington, “Women’s Work: Domestic Labor in American World War II Posters,” *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 22, no. 2 (2003): 41.

¹⁴ Harrington, “Women’s Work: Domestic Labor in American World War II Posters,” 41

¹⁵ Harrington, “Women’s Work: Domestic Labor in American World War II Posters,” 43

¹⁶ Harrington, “Women’s Work: Domestic Labor in American World War II Posters,” 43.

in the service.”¹⁷ This means at least one-fourth of women had no other choice than to balance their work and home lives with no spousal support. If these women could not find relatives to watch their children during the day, that had to bring their children to work with them.¹⁸ In some cases, these women had to bring their children and either tie them to a post or leave them in their cars.¹⁹ In other cases, women left their young children at home alone.²⁰ For many factories and other job sites, the owners of the companies would have to set up a day care for these mothers to leave their children in.²¹ These women also faced the trouble of balancing work with household labor such as cooking, shopping, and cleaning. The United States had to ration foodstuffs during the war and because of this, food shopping became more difficult and time

consuming.²² Although housewives faced these difficulties, they were able to overcome them. In many ways, doing this helped to advance the war effort. These mothers were able to successfully balance working for the war economy as well as taking care of their children and doing domestic labor.

Although some housewives stayed at home and some flooded the job market, they all played an essential role in the United States’ victory during World War II. Their work at home helped supply the military with resources to build bombs and make bullets. They were also able to take on the difficulties that the war had put on their home lives. These difficulties included taking care of children, food shopping, household chores, and balancing home and work. These housewives were essential in

¹⁷ Schweitzer, “World War II and Female Labor Force Participation Rates,” 92.

¹⁸ Schweitzer, “World War II and Female Labor Force Participation Rates,” 93.

¹⁹ Schweitzer, “World War II and Female Labor Force Participation Rates,” 93.

²⁰ Schweitzer, “World War II and Female Labor Force Participation Rates,” 93.

²¹ Schweitzer, “World War II and Female Labor Force Participation Rates,” 93-94.

²² Schweitzer, “World War II and Female Labor Force Participation Rates,” 92.

the United States winning the war. While many of their husbands and sons fought the war on the battlefield, these women fought the war on the home front.

Nurses

Women also served an important role overseas, working as nurses in Europe. These United States women who acted as nurses near the battlefield were another essential factor in the United States winning World War II. Many women became nurses by joining the Army's Cadet Nurse Corps. While these women were technically part of the United States military, their roles are distinctly different from those of women in other military units and because of this their efforts should be looked at separately from the efforts of military women. Nurses served in both the European and Pacific theaters of the war. Prior to Pearl Harbor the United

States army had a little over seven thousand nurses.²³ By the end of the war, fifty-seven thousand nurses served throughout the different theaters of war.²⁴ According to Wendy Bonifazi in her article, "Pure Grit: Telling the Story of World War II Military Nurses to a New Generation," not many nurses who went overseas had battlefield experience. She states, "Only a few of the 102 American military nurses serving in the Pacific in the 1940s had any combat training, experience or expectations, until the surprise attacks on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines put them on the front lines."²⁵ Odds are that women in the European theater suffered from the same inexperience. These women had to learn to treat thousands of injuries and casualties in battlefield hospitals that lacked the supplies necessary for the treatment of soldiers.²⁶ These

²³ Francie Bernier, "'We did the best we could'--the United States Army Nurses of Ie Shima," *Urologic Nursing*, (2013)

²⁴ Bernier, "'We did the best we could'--the United States Army Nurses of Ie Shima," (2013).

²⁵ Wendy Bonifazi, "Pure Grit: Telling the Story of World War II Military Nurses to a New Generation," *Creative Nursing* 20, no. 3 (2014)

²⁶ Bonifazi, "Pure Grit: Telling the Story of World War II Military Nurses to a New Generation," (2014)

battlefield nurses had to try to treat soldiers under the danger of constant gunfire.²⁷ In the Pacific theater of war, they faced nighttime bombing raids in which they would have to carry soldiers to safety. In some cases, nurses were taken as prisoners of war and had to endure torture and horrid living conditions.²⁸

Nurses were essential to the United States victory in World War II. They endured horrible conditions in order to try to save the lives of soldiers. Most days these women worked a minimum of twelve hours, to try to save as many soldiers as they could.²⁹ In some cases, battlefield nurses would be working twenty to twenty-four hour shifts, almost passing out from exhaustion³⁰. All while being short staffed, short of necessary supplies, and short of medicine.³¹ These women had to face not

just injuries suffered by soldiers on the battlefield, but also diseases and sicknesses that ran rapid. World War II nurses faced sicknesses such as malaria, typhus, and dysentery.³² Without the large number of women who joined the war effort by becoming nurses, the loss of life on the battlefield would have undoubtedly been much higher. They also allowed soldiers with minor injuries to return to the battlefield, which kept the need for more soldiers to be drafted or sent overseas at a minimum. Their work limited the number of casualties that occurred during World War II. These women worked in dangerous conditions and were often lacked the supplies necessary to help wounded soldiers. However, they continued to do what they could to save lives. The conditions they had to endure, would have been difficult for both

²⁷ Bonifazi, "Pure Grit: Telling the Story of World War II Military Nurses to a New Generation," (2014)

²⁸ Bonifazi, "Pure Grit: Telling the Story of World War II Military Nurses to a New Generation," (2014)

²⁹ Bernier, "'We did the best we could'--the United States Army Nurses of Ie Shima," (2013).

³⁰ Bonifazi, "Pure Grit: Telling the Story of World War II Military Nurses to a New Generation," (2014)

³¹ Bernier, "'We did the best we could'--the United States Army Nurses of Ie Shima," (2013).

³² Bernier, "'We did the best we could'--the United States Army Nurses of Ie Shima," (2013).

men and women to handle. These women were essential to the United States' victory in the fact that they dealt with dangerous and ill-supplied conditions in an effort to save the lives of wounded soldiers and often times wounded civilians.

Women in the Military

Another way that United States women helped to win World War II is by joining the military. When the United States joined the war thousands of men joined the military to fight against the Axis Powers. However, there was not many opportunities for women to join the military. It was not until Massachusetts Representative Edith Nourse Rogers advocated that woman could serve a crucial role in the United States military.³³ She created a bill in May of 1941

calling for the formation of the Women's Army Corps.³⁴ However, many people in the United States were against having women anywhere near the military. Even General and eventual President Dwight D.

Eisenhower was extremely against having women in the military.³⁵ However, the United States government saw the potential of having women in the military and created the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps or WAACs after passing a bill in May of 1942.³⁶ The passing of the bill created the first units for women to serve in the military that were not nursing units. There were only four hundred and fifty officer positions when the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps first started taking recruits.³⁷ However, this did not stop over thirty thousand women

³³ Yashila Permeswaran, "The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps: A Compromise to Overcome the Conflict of Women Serving in the Army," *The History Teacher* 42, no. 1, (2008): 95.

³⁴ Permeswaran, "The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps: A Compromise to Overcome the Conflict of Women Serving in the Army," 95.

³⁵ Permeswaran, "The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps: A Compromise to Overcome the Conflict of Women Serving in the Army," 96.

³⁶ Permeswaran, "The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps: A Compromise to Overcome the Conflict of Women Serving in the Army," 98.

³⁷ Permeswaran, "The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps: A Compromise to Overcome the Conflict of Women Serving in the Army," 98.

from applying for the positions.³⁸ Unfortunately like most times when women make social improvements throughout United States' history, these women were not taken seriously and seen as more of a novelty than anything.³⁹ Reporters often covered the relationships and uniforms of these women, rather than their actual progression as a military unit.⁴⁰

As World War II continued and the United States' forces continued to lose men, it became necessary to actually use the WAACs. The military used the WAACs as supply drivers, automobile mechanics, and clerical member.⁴¹ The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps were also asked to test and distribute weapons and ammunition. Many of these women specialized in the mobilization of these supplies being sent

overseas to provide the ground forces with weapons and ammunition. If these women were not in the military to provide this serve, chances are the frontline would not have had adequate supplies to fight the Axis Powers. When WAACs were sent overseas they were put into the Quartermasters Corps, Transportation Corps, and Signal Corps.⁴² None of these Corps saw direct combat, but they were essential to the mobilization and organization of the Allies' forces. Each of these divisions were in charge of transporting soldiers and supplies. Another important role that these women played in winning World War II was their work in the Manhattan Project. The Manhattan Project was dedicated to creating the atomic bombs that would eventually be dropped on Japan during World War II. WAACs were used for

³⁸ Melanie Anne Veach Kirkland, "Daughters of Athena: American Women in the Military During World War II." (Texas Christian University, 2009): 33.

³⁹ Permeswaran, "The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps: A Compromise to Overcome the Conflict of Women Serving in the Army," 98.

⁴⁰ Permeswaran, "The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps: A Compromise to Overcome the Conflict of Women Serving in the Army," 98.

⁴¹ Kirkland, "Daughters of Athena: American Women in the Military During World War II," (2009): 46.

⁴² Kirkland, "Daughters of Athena: American Women in the Military during World War II." (2009): 49.

administrative, clerical, and technician positions.⁴³ Over four hundred and forty women worked on the Manhattan Project, which is arguably one of the most important projects in World War II.⁴⁴ Their work helped the United States to force Japan to surrender and effectively take them out of World War II. The roles that the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps were essential to the United States winning the war. Without these women it would have been much more difficult for soldiers to mobilize and receive supplies necessary for fighting the war. The roles of these women often get overlooked by historians, but without a doubt their efforts in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps outside of the battlefield helped the United States to win World War II.

The success of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps opened the door for women to enter other branches of the United States

military. One such branch is the Women's Airforce Service Pilots or WASP. The WASP was created in late 1943. The main reason that the WASP was created was to allow a larger number of men in the Air Force to move to positions where they would see combat.⁴⁵ During World War II, many WASP members would fly newly made airplanes to army bases for the airmen overseas to use. They also helped to train male air force recruits in several fields. Some WASP members flew airplanes towing targets for male recruits to shoot at. This job was extremely dangerous, and some WASPs were even killed during these training exercises.⁴⁶ They also trained male air force recruits to use radar and other technologies that were vital for their performance as pilots. Like other women's military units their work was important, but disrespected. Regardless of how essential

⁴³ Kirkland, "Daughters of Athena: American Women in the Military during World War II." (2009): 48.

⁴⁴ Kirkland, "Daughters of Athena: American Women in the Military during World War II." (2009): 48.

⁴⁵ Kirkland, "Daughters of Athena: American Women in the Military during World War II." (2009): 97.

⁴⁶ Kirkland, "Daughters of Athena: American Women in the Military during World War II." 111-112.

their work was in training and supplying United States airmen, the WASP was disbanded for being inefficient, although their numbers showed that they were more efficient than male pilots.⁴⁷ The WASP played an important role of supplying and training airmen to fight overseas. They helped the United States win the air battle with both the Japanese and the Germans. Winning the battle of the air was seen as one of the most important aspects of the United States' victory in World War II, and the WASP were essential to this victory.

The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps also paved the way for the creation of WAVES. WAVES stands for Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services. This unit was the United States Navy's way of forming a unit for women, but at the same time limiting the role women

would have in the Navy. Like the other branches of military, women's involvement in the Navy received a lot of backlash.

Naval men also would make crude comments and try to make sexual advances towards naval women, even going as far as coining the term "Ride the WAVES".⁴⁸

However, these women ignored the adversity that they faced and were able to make a positive impact on the war effort.

Although, WAVES could not serve outside of the continental United States, they could serve on naval bases around the U.S.⁴⁹ This was an important role because it allowed more navy men to be sent to the Pacific theater of the war.⁵⁰ These naval women were also put in charge of security details, transportation of supplies and men, and stenographic facilities.⁵¹ All of these roles

⁴⁷ Kirkland, "Daughters of Athena: American Women in the Military during World War II." 137-138.

⁴⁸ Kirkland, "Daughters of Athena: American Women in the Military during World War II." 153.

⁴⁹ Kirkland, "Daughters of Athena: American Women in the Military during World War II." 187.

⁵⁰ Kirkland, "Daughters of Athena: American Women in the Military during World War II." 187.

⁵¹ Kirkland, "Daughters of Athena: American Women in the Military during World War II." 189.

that the WAVES held were important to the war effort, especially in the Pacific theater.

Women who participated in the Woman's Army Auxiliary Corps, Women's Airforce Service Pilots, and Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services played an essential role in the United States' victory during World War II. Although, these women never saw the battlefield, their military involvement allowed more men to be put on to the fields. WAAC set women on a path of military service, performing so well that other military divisions started allowing women to join. They also provided important weapon testing, supply transporting, and transportation of soldiers. The WAAC also helped with the Manhattan Project. The WASP helped train airmen and transport airplanes to the front lines. WAVES freed up more naval men to be sent overseas and helped to transport important supplies. All of these positions that women

held in the United States' military were essential to the United States' victory.

Conclusion

The most important take away from the roles that United States women served during World War II is that they were not just important, but essential to the United States winning World War II. Women joined the work force in large number, which helped to stimulate the wartime economy and also fill important positions such as factory workers that supplied the United States military with ammunition, tanks, vehicles, and airplanes, shipyard workers who made ships for the war effort, and accountants that helped to book keep for companies during the war. Housewives also contributed to the war effort by supplying the military with fats and recycled materials for bombs and bullets, but also successfully navigated the difficulties the war put on their home lives. Many women also went overseas and worked as nurses near the

battlefield, helping to save the lives of soldiers. Lastly, many women joined the United States military, helping the war effort by training men, testing weapons, and transporting weapons, airplanes, vehicles, and soldiers. Most of the time, historians make it seem as if the only addition that women made to the war is joining the labor force or only focus on the fact they worked in factories. However, this is not the case. Women had a much larger role during World War II than just joining the work force. All of their efforts during World War II were essential to the United States' victory and it is important that historians start to acknowledge this fact when discussing the outcome of World War II.

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