

American Women in World War II

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During World War II, some 350,000 women served in the U.S. Armed Forces, both at home and abroad. They included the Women's Airforce Service Pilots, who on March 10, 2010, were awarded the prestigious Congressional Gold Medal. Meanwhile, widespread male enlistment left gaping holes in the industrial labor force. Between 1940 and 1945, the female percentage of the U.S. workforce increased from 27 percent to nearly 37 percent, and by 1945 nearly one out of every four married women worked outside the home.

WOMEN IN THE ARMED FORCES

In addition to factory work and other home front jobs, some 350,000 women joined the Armed Services, serving at home and abroad. At the urging of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and women's groups, and impressed by the British use of women in service, General George Marshall supported the idea of introducing a women's service branch into the Army. In May 1942, Congress instituted the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps, later upgraded to the Women's Army Corps, which had full military status. Its members, known as WACs, worked in more than 200 non-combatant jobs stateside and in every theater of the war. By 1945, there were more than 100,000 WACs and 6,000 female officers. In the Navy, members of Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) held the same status as naval reservists and provided support stateside. The Coast Guard and Marine Corps soon followed suit, though in smaller numbers.

Did You Know? On March 10, 2010, nearly 70 years after they were disbanded, the Women Airforce Service Pilots received the Congressional Gold Medal.

One of the lesser-known roles women played in the war effort was provided by the Women's Airforce Service Pilots, or WASPs. These women, each of whom had already obtained their pilot's license prior to service, became the first women to fly American military aircraft. They ferried planes from factories to bases, transporting cargo and participating in simulation strafing and target missions, accumulating more than 60 million miles in flight distances and freeing thousands of male U.S. pilots for active duty in World War II. More than 1,000 WASPs served, and 38 of them lost their lives during

the war. Considered civil service employees and without official military status, these fallen WASPs were granted no military honors or benefits, and it wasn't until 1977 that the WASPs received full military status. On March 10, 2010, at a ceremony in the Capitol, the WASPs received the Congressional Gold Medal, one of the highest civilian honors. More than 200 former pilots attended the event, many wearing their World War II-era uniforms.

"ROSIE THE RIVETER"

While women worked in a variety of positions previously closed to them, the aviation industry saw the greatest increase in female workers. More than 310,000 women worked in the U.S. aircraft industry in 1943, representing 65 percent of the industry's total workforce (compared to just 1 percent in the pre-war years). The munitions industry also heavily recruited women workers, as represented by the U.S. government's "Rosie the Riveter" propaganda campaign. Based in small part on a real-life munitions worker, but primarily a fictitious character, the strong, bandanna-clad Rosie became one of the most successful recruitment tools in American history, and the most iconic image of working women during World War II.

In movies, newspapers, posters, photographs, articles and even a Norman Rockwell-painted Saturday Evening Post cover, the Rosie the Riveter campaign stressed the patriotic need for women to enter the work force-and they did, in huge numbers. Though women were crucial to the war effort, their pay continued to lag far behind their male counterparts: Female workers rarely earned more than 50 percent of male wages.