

The Roles of Women in WWII

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Directions: The following question is based on the accompanying documents (A-E). Some of these documents have been edited for the purposes of these exercises. This question is designed to test your ability to work with historical documents. As you analyze the documents, take into account both the sources of the document and the author's point of view.

Background information:

When the United States entered WWII after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the country seemed to change overnight. Factories that had once been built for automobile manufacturing were turned into factories that focused on building planes, tanks, ships, and weapons for the war effort. Men were being deployed to go to war at an alarming rate and women had to do their part to support the war, even if it meant that they had to work outside of the home.

Essay Question:

During WWII it became clear that women had many new roles to play in society other than just being a wife and mother. Before the war, women were expected to clean the house, cook, and take care of the children. When WWII started, women were quickly forced to accept other roles. Some women worked in factories to help make war materials for the struggle overseas. Other women realized they could aid in war by becoming nurses and helping the wounded soldiers.

Describe the many different roles that women played during World War II and how the U.S. Government got women enthusiastic about their part in ending the war.

Document A: Propaganda Posters

The government used propaganda to entice women into work place. They used themes of patriotism to recruit middle class white women who did not work outside the home into getting jobs. They also emphasized a pay raise for women who worked in factories, or who did the jobs that men generally did before the war began. Husbands were also called upon to encourage their wives to work toward the war effort. Below are just a few posters from WWII that were used to encourage women to become employed.

These are just a few of the posters that were displayed during WWII to get women patriotic and excited about helping their country. Answer the following questions:

1. What do you notice about the appearance of these women?
2. Where can women go to find out about jobs that are available to them?
3. What kinds of jobs will these women be doing to help the country?



The documents B-E have been taken from diaries or interviews taken from women who were involved in the war in some way. Each of these women played a different role to assist in the war effort.

Document B: This quote is from Geraldine Snyder, a woman who worked in a factory during WWII.

Taken from “Rosie the Riveter: Women Working during World War II” website:

<http://www.nps.gov/pwro/collection/website/geraldine.htm>

“...I was hired as an “inspector” and was sent to General Motors Tech to learn the job. I had to learn how to use a precision micro instrument and a slide rule and measure very minute sizes. My work had to be very exact. I was assigned to inspect the firing pins, thousands at a time. The pins were only about 1/4” long, and 1/8” round, so very nimble fingers were required. I was told these pins were sent to England and used in the bombs that were loaded into the R.A.F. planes. I sat on a high stool in a booth that had three sides covered. There was a screen in the front where I would put the firing pins on a fitter pin, and then it would magnify the firing pin onto the screen. The good pins were left in the tray; the bad ones were put in another. I inspected thousands of these pins about three times a week, 8 hours at a time. Every single pin had to be inspected, and I felt like I was doing a very important job for the War effort. If I wasn’t inspecting firing pins, I would inspect smaller tools. Every little part had to be measured and recorded, so it was very taxing work. If I ran out of small tools, I would move on to other types of tools, as you could not stand around with no work in front of you.

My foreman was a rough talking boss; he would talk a blue streak of cuss words. I could wear slacks to work so that was nice. We had no breaks at all, only long enough to use the restroom. You would get docked if you punched the time clock too early, or too late. There was a ½ hour lunch break in a lunch room, and you could not stop working until the whistle blew.

I worked the inspector job on the midnight shift from 11 pm to 7 am, six days a week. To get to work I had to take a trolley uptown, change trolleys there, and take another to the plant.

After a while, I was selected to be an air raid warden and first aid representative. I was excused to go to another building and take classes pertaining to first aid, taking care of the sick and injured, etc. I believe these classes were taught by the Red Cross. I had a big glow in the dark badge to wear and my duty was to get everyone to stop production in my department every time the alarm siren rang. I would turn the lights out and everyone under the tables for safety. If there were any injuries, I was called on to administer first aid...”

1. What was Geraldine Snyder’s job and why was it important?
2. What kind of working conditions did Geraldine work in?
3. After Geraldine was selected to be a first aid representative what was her duty?

While some women felt the call to work in the factories to help with the war effort, still some remained to be housewives who stayed at home with small children and cared for the home. The government made housewives feel as if they were a part of the war too by asking them to buy savings bonds and stamps so the government could make money for the war. They also were given ration stamps for items needed, such as meat, sugar, canned goods, gasoline, etc. These items were in high demand for men fighting in the war.

Document C: Reflections from Myrtle George Nase about life during the war. She was a mother of two young children and did not work during the war.

Taken from the book *We Knew We Were at War* by Peg George.

From the “Women Remember World War II: Women and their Families” section.

<http://www.peggeorge.com/Excerpt75.htm>

“...I was living in Perkasio, Pennsylvania during the war years. I had two babies- one in October 1942, the other in January 1945. My husband was a high school teacher and coach.

We had ration stamps for all kinds of things. One category was for fuel oil to heat our homes. Since there were small children in our home, we were issued extra stamps. Most people were given A stamps for gasoline, which provided just a few gallons a week to keep cars going. Teachers on high school staffs who hauled athletes to games, such as my husband, were given B stamps. Trolleys and trains were used much more than in previous times. Sugar, meat, coffee, and butter were also rationed. We ate lots of hot dogs back then, and oleomargarine. It was white but the package had a little red button that you squeezed. You would knead the package so the color would spread and it would turn yellow...

I never felt that we were short of food or other necessities, but we did have to improvise sometimes...since fresh food was at a premium, we used lots of canned products, and then we would take the lids off both ends, step on the cans and recycle them. All of these products- fuel oil, gasoline, and food products- were in great demand for our troops.

People were encouraged to buy War Savings Bonds and Stamps in order to provide the government with funds for the war. The cheapest bond was \$18.75 and if held to maturity in ten years would be worth \$25.00. Stamps in various denominations were also sold, mostly to schoolchildren. The stamps were placed on a card which, when filled with twenty- five cent stamps, would be worth \$18.75. Then it could be turned in for a bond. Everyone, including schoolchildren, participated in the war effort...”

1. What items were ration stamps used for?
2. What were the A stamps used for? What were the B stamps used for?
3. Why were people encouraged to buy War Savings Bonds and Stamps?

Document D: Margaret Theobald Ralston- a nurse who was overseas during the war to help the injured.

Taken from the book We Knew We Were at War by Peg George.

From the “Women Remember World War II: Women in Uniform” section.

<http://www.peggeorge.com/Excerpt115.htm>

“...Shortly after I graduated from a three- year nursing program at Mercy Hospital in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and against my parents’ wishes, I enlisted in the U.S. Army on September 1, 1944. The need for nurses at the front was intense. As a registered nurse and a second Lieutenant, I was assigned to the 63rd Field Hospital and was sailing out of Boston headed for Scotland on November 10, barely two months after enlisting. It was then on to France and finally to Germany where we learned what war really was.

In February of 1945, in the midst of a raging blizzard, our 63rd Field Hospital servicemen and women set up camp. We were situated at Lovenich, close to where the Ruhr River joins the Rhine and where war was being raged a slight three miles away. In no time, we converted an abandoned farmhouse into a temporary hospital ready to treat seriously injured soldiers.

We could hear the buzz bombs flying overhead, and the casualties started coming in. I was very young and naïve, and had to learn a lot in a hurry. I really grew up quickly. Most of us were shocked at the conditions- we were used to hospitals with plenty of supplies- but we did have some good equipment. We didn’t have any extra sheets, and I remember we had to put the poor guys directly from a stretcher onto a cot without sheets. We did what we could with what we had to work with.

All of us in the medical/surgical unit worked days without sleep as we treated the most critically injured...”

1. When did Margaret Theobald Ralston enlist in the U.S. Army? Why?
2. What was Margaret Theobald Ralston’s title and rank when she enlisted?
3. Where was she sent and how close was she to the fighting going on in the war?
4. What struggles did the hospital have when injured men came for medical attention?

Document E: Jane Doyle- a woman who went to the Civilian Pilot Training Program and joined the Civil Air Patrol and WASP during WWII.

From "Women Veterans Historical Collection" website

Found at <http://library.uncg.edu/dp/wv/results5.aspx?i=3878&s=5>

I had applied to be accepted in the WASP [Women Air force Service Pilots] program, and so—but I couldn't get in until November. I finished college in the summer. I took eighteen hours to get finished in the summer so I could go into the WASP program in November of 1943. And from summer school ending in I think it was probably in August of '43 until November of '43, I worked for a graphic artist in Ann Arbor.

...When I was in junior college...in the summer of 1940...I had heard that there was going to be a Civilian Pilot Training Program. Because the war had broken out in Europe and they needed more people, more pilots, so that they offered this Civilian Pilot Training Program, and for every ten fellows they would let one girl in the program. And I got into that and got my private pilot license in the summer of 1940. And then when I went on to Michigan, I wanted to get into the advanced program, which would give you a commercial license, but they wouldn't let women in that. So I joined the Civil Air Patrol just to keep up my flying time. And so I kept flying then to keep up my license until I graduated from college and went into the WASP.

...During training we just wore our uniform was a zoot suit. It was a coverall that was leftover from the cadets that had been there. They were all men's sizes, so for some people they fit but for others like myself, being short, they were sort of baggy. And then our we did have khaki pants that we had to purchase and a white shirt...for the ceremonies at the field, then we wore our khaki pants and white shirt.

...The way flight training was scheduled, one week we would be in the morning and the other week it would be in the afternoon, so it would change between the two different flights. And in the mornings when we got up, lots of times I think it was about six o'clock we had to get up, and we'd go to the mess hall to eat and then go right down to the flight line. And then on the other days we would go to ground school in the morning, and so we would alternate. Ground school and PT, physical training, we had that every day... The whole program was run on the same basis as the cadet military program.

1. When did Jane Doyle go into the WASP (Women Air force Service Pilots) program?
2. What was the ratio that a woman would get chosen for the Civilian Pilot Training Program?
3. What was dress code like for cadets in the program?
4. What was the overall program based upon?

Sources Used

Document A: Poster pictures taken from: "Rosie the Riveter: Women Working During World War II"

Rosie the Riveter- (bottom left) taken from: <http://www.nps.gov/pwro/collection/website/home.htm>,

"The More Women at Work the sooner we win!" - (top right) taken from:
<http://history.sandiego.edu/gen/st/~cg3/outline.html>

"I've Found the Job Where I fit best!" (bottom right) taken from:
<http://history1900s.about.com/library/photos/blywwiip86.htm>

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