

The Forgotten Heroes of the “Greatest Generation”

by

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THE FORGOTTEN HEROES OF THE “GREATEST GENERATION”

The debate still simmers in the news, with headlines flashing “She Refused to Deploy”.¹ The article is about a single female Soldier who would not deploy and leave her child without a parent, thus providing more fuel for the fire. This type of incident instantly questions the viability of women in modern combat. However, there is a group of women who long ago proved that they had the mettle required to survive and even perform valorously in combat. These brave women passed that test under fire. They saw the elephant just as their brothers did and performed above and beyond the call of duty, many earning medals for valor. From the “Angel of Anzio” to the “Angel in Fatigues” the women of the United States armed forces proved to the world that they too had the right stuff to battle fascism during World War II.

The United States Army had, up until 1942, very few women serving actively, usually in support roles, as nurses or secretaries, but sometimes as actual combatants. These women demonstrated repeatedly that their sex, while fairer, was no less fierce. In 1941, with the backing of the First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, Congresswoman Edith Rodgers and General George Marshall formed the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps

¹ Russ Bynum, "Single Mom Refuses To Deploy To Care For Baby," *ArmyTimes*, November 18, 2009, http://www.armytimes.com/news/2009/11/ap111609_singlemom_deploy// (accessed December 10, 2009).

(WAAC).² This was not to be full membership into the exclusively male club. However, as the name implies, these women would be “auxiliary” forces to support their brothers who would do the actual fighting. This special group of women, along with the “Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service” (WAVES) affiliated with the Navy, the “Women Air-force Service Pilots” (WASPs) of the Air Force and the enlisted women of the Coast Guard Reserve known as “SPARS” (from the USCG motto “Semper Paratus - Always Ready”) would be leaned on heavily to replace and augment men throughout the world in roles that were traditionally male.^{3 4 5 6}

There is little debate on the usefulness of women in an active support role in the United States military, as the precedence was long set in the medical field where women had a firm foothold. However, the idea of female combatants is to this day controversial, and in 1941 the sensibilities of the military establishment were adamantly against such a paradigm shift. In fact the legislation establishing the WAACs would be stalled by both

² Judith Bellafaire, *The Women's Army Corps - A Commemoration of WWII Service* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History), Center of Military History, CMH Publication 72-15, 1-4, CMH Publication 72-15 (accessed December 10, 2009).

³ Judith Bellafaire, 1-4

⁴ Penney White, "Spars - Women In The Coast Guard In World War II," *Associate Content News*, October 6, 2009, http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/2324672/spars_women_in_the_coast_guard_in_world.html. (accessed December 10, 2009).

⁵ Nancy Parrish, "Remember The Wasp," *Wasp On The Web*, 2009, <http://wingsacrossamerica.us/wasp/> (accessed December 10, 2009).

⁶ Unknown, "World War II Era Waves," *Naval Historical Center*, January 28, 2001, <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/prs-tpic/females/wave-ww2.htm>. (accessed December 10, 2009).

Congress and the military until the attack on Pearl Harbor brought the war and the sudden need for “manpower” into sharp focus.⁷

Women would serve in every major campaign of the war in all five branches of the military. They would ferry aircraft from the United States to Europe, endure hardship as prisoners of war as well as bleed and die next to their male brothers in the great crusade to defeat fascism. By 1943 the WAAC had become a full-fledged branch of the US Army, renamed the Women’s Army Corps as the experiment had begun to prove itself in practice. Over 1000 women earned their wings in the WASPs, over 10,000 enlisted in the SPARs, 88,000 officers and enlisted in the WAVES and over 150,000 served in the WAC by the end of the war.^{8 9 10 11} These women would amass thousands of citations, medals and commendations while serving their nation faithfully and gallantly. These women were all in addition to the 32,500 strong Army Nurse Corps (ANC) and the 1200 women in the Navy Nurse Corps (NNC), which were “regular” Army and Navy members, albeit in a strictly medical role.¹²

The women that served during the war were truly a part of the aptly named “Greatest Generation” as witnessed by their sacrifices and heroics throughout the war.

⁷ Judith Bellafaire, 1-4

⁸ Judith Bellafaire, 1-4

⁹ Penney White (accessed December 10, 2009).

¹⁰ Nancy Parrish (accessed December 10, 2009).

¹¹ Unknown, *Naval Historical Center* (accessed December 10, 2009).

¹² Jane Blankenship, "Women at War - From the Revolutionary War to Present," *Veterans of Foreign Wars Magazine*, 39, March, 2008.

The WACs alone earned over 600 medals over the course of the war.¹³ While these medals were not the first awarded to women in the armed forces, they represent the transition of women from incidental or auxiliary participants to official active participants on the battlefield.

The “Angel in Fatigues” is widely recognized as the most decorated military women in US history. Colonel Ruby Bradley served in World War II and Korea and earned an impressive array of metal and silk. As a nurse in the Philippines, she earned the first of her two Bronze Star Medals while tending to fellow POWs after capture by the Japanese. She found herself imprisoned for over two years, suffering in the same brutal conditions as her male counterparts, including nearly starving to death. In Korea, she earned a second Bronze Star for insisting on remaining until she evacuated her last patient under fire and in danger of the 100,000 Chinese soldiers overrunning her hospital.¹⁴

Another hero that gained notoriety was the “Angel of Anzio”; Lieutenant Mary Louise Roberts joined the Army after Pearl Harbor and served in both North Africa and Italy as a combat support nurse as part of the “Women’s Expeditionary Force”. She suffered on the Anzio beachhead through strafing runs and indirect fire in arduous conditions, steadfastly attending to the wounded. She remained cool and led her staff superbly throughout the bombardment in spite of shrapnel ripping through the surgical

¹³ Judith Bellafaire, 1-4

¹⁴ Unknown, "Ruby Bradley," *Arlington National Cemetery Official Website*, July 3, 2002, <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/rbradley.htm>. (accessed December 9, 2009).

tent. Her actions that day earned her a Silver Star Medal.¹⁵ She was the first of several to receive the medal in World War II, along with three of her sisters; Lieutenants Ellen Ainsworth, Elaine Roe and Rita Virginia Rourke, for similar actions on the same day. Ainsworth died of wounds that she received during the fight, thus her medal was posthumous.¹⁶

Lillian Kinkella Keil left her job as a stewardess with United Airlines to become a flight nurse, and began flying evacuation missions in 1943. She racked up an amazing 250 missions, including crossing the Atlantic ocean over 20 times. She never lost a patient in flight and in spite of leaving the service at the war's end, she returned to assist in another 175 missions in Korea. Her service netted four Air Medals and the thanks of an estimated 10,000 soldiers that she helped.¹⁷

These brave women, along with hundreds of others proved repeatedly that women could and would be vital to the war effort and face the same dangers that the males did. The poise and bravery that they displayed under horrible conditions, all while facing death is admirable regardless of gender, but remarkable in the context of the era. Although the numbers may seem small juxtaposed against those of the combatants, the loss of 543 of these brave women from all branches over the course of the war demonstrates the danger they faced and the sacrifices that they made.¹⁸

¹⁵ Thomas Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 2004), 176-179.

¹⁶ Jane Blankenship, 29.

¹⁷ Unknown, "Capt. Lillian Kinkella Keil," *Official Web Site Of The Us Air Force*, 2009, <http://www.af.mil/information/heritage/person.asp?dec=&pid=123006461/> (accessed December 12, 2009).

¹⁸ Jane Blankenship, 11.

Their deeds would do much to bring to light the value of their sex and close the perceived gap in the martial ability of women. However, it would be many years until the Military would see female combatants. The prohibition on women in active combat roles is in effect to this day for all branches of the US Military except the Air Force. The Army, Navy and Marines still bar women from serving in “direct combat” roles, except while onboard ships. However, the services have allowed women to serve in every other non-combat capacity. The ongoing “War on Terror” has brought the issue of women in combat to the fore as several women have earned awards for valor in direct close combat with the enemy. Additionally, the Air Force has awarded several medals for valor to female pilots who showed their mettle in the skies over the Middle Eastern deserts. These women have come a long way from those relegated to “woman’s work” in the 1940s and owe part of their success to those who helped pave the way in World War II.

Women like Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester, who won the Silver Star for heroism in direct combat in Iraq and Captain Kim Campbell, who won the Distinguished Flying Cross for valor while piloting her A-10 “Warthog” in support of ground troops over Baghdad both displayed the same kind of moxie and bravery that their predecessors would have recognized 50 years earlier.^{19 20} There can be little argument that these women have again proven themselves as a benefit on the battlefield.

¹⁹ Unknown, "An American Hero: Army Woman Earns Silver Star And Makes History," *Women In Military Service For America Memorial*, March, 2008, <http://www.womensmemorial.org/Education/WHM08KitUSA.html>. (accessed December 8, 2009).

²⁰ Jane Erikson, "Her Plane Shot Up Over Iraq, Air Force Captain Completed A Dangerous Flight To Safety," *Saluting America's Valor*, 2009, <http://www.americanvalor.net/heroes/332/> (accessed December 12, 2009).

Although Specialist Alexis Hutchinson's case of declining deployment may shed light on one of the many supposed hazards of women serving in combat, the statistical data points to other conclusions. Over 100,000 women with children have earned their campaign medals in the current war. All of them were required to have a "family care plan" that provides for the care of dependents during deployment. 12% of women serving in 2008 were single parents with the possibility of needing to invoke their family care plan, compared to 5% of male soldiers in similar situations. Those who would lament that the children of those mothers that are killed in action are at an unfair disadvantage again are stymied by statistics. Only 25 mothers have been killed in the present war and 121 wounded. This is out of over 2 million troops that have been in combat since 2001. This data points to the willingness and capability of women to perform in spite of the additional burdens such as leaving their children and the worry of who will take care of them.²¹

The women detailed above were but a few of the hundreds that earned decorations for valor and meritorious service during World War II. Their dedication to duty and bravery stands as a testament to the American fighting person. However, the more specific testament is to the women of the United States and their dedication to duty in spite of their status as second-class warriors. The women who earned those combat medals in World War II paved the way for the female Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines of today to take active roles in combat support positions. From the Angel in Fatigues to the Angel of Anzio these women proved that the excuses held up by the likes

²¹ Lizette Alvarez, "Wartime Soldier, Conflicted Mom," *New York Times*, September 26 2009, sec. US.

of the Army Times and other opponents of female combatants ring hollow as the exceptions to the rule that women are capable and valuable in a combat environment.

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