

A Woman's Place Is In The Ranks

Part I

Story by Guy Anselmo



Thousands of women joined the Marine Corps in World War II to "Free a Man to Fight." The peak strength of Women Reservists was nearly 19,000, prompting a wartime Commandant, Gen A. A. Vandegrift to say that they were responsible for putting the Sixth Marine Division in the field.

Photos courtesy of the Marine Corps Historical Center

For nearly 55 years, since 1918, when 305 women first donned Marine green and performed significant, though low-profile jobs in the "Great War," the women's side of the Corps has witnessed a striking change: their replacement, for front-line engagement, of thousands of male counterparts (they "freed a man to fight")—a broadening of training, of skills and of performance (with great efficiency)—and an elevation to more senior rank, and command status—all essential ingredients of a "unification process" that has really worked! For the uninformed, who view women soldiers/sailors as a new phenomenon, the pages of history tell a different tale.

Skimming past records of women in combat in ancient times and climes, we find the symbolic "Molly Pitcher" (really Mary Hays, a wife of a Revolutionary War Pennsylvania artilleryman), taking up her wounded husband's position, swabbing out a smoking cannon, ramming home a new charge, and firing.

And, probably only to lend some color to Marine Corps "mythology," one "George Baker"—a fictional woman-figure aboard USS *Constitution* in the War of 1812—was "dubbed" the "first girl Marine!" No evidence supports the story!

Though 19th century women didn't shoulder arms or sport Sam Browne belts, *real* history is rich with the brave; the devoted. In the Mexican War, one Sarah Borginis—a bit ahead of her time—became a brevet colonel under Zachary Taylor. Later, on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, it was the gentler sex who bound wounds, comforted the dying, and aided men of war from Gettysburg to Richmond and beyond. Further, women at the front proved their selflessness on the battlefields of France—in non-combatant roles as ambulance drivers and as nurses. (One future woman Marine won a major French decoration for valor!)

World War I represents "stage one" of the military metamorphosis. More than a year prior to emergence of the first woman Marine, the Navy, reacting to the crush of male volunteer/draftees and its impact on the labor force, began to notice women, and, for the first time, welcomed them. *New Republic* magazine of August 1917 noted: "... The chief potential resource at our command lies



Obtaining proper fitting uniforms for women was a problem when they first came on duty in both world wars. Note the footwear on these recruits at Parris Island, S. C., in 1918.

evidently in the increased employment of women." That was no mere wishful thinking; it reflected dramatic change! The "Volunteer Army" of the time made great contributions to the war effort—but it was the absence from the home front of large segments of the man's world which forced an even greater assumption, by women, of skilled and semi-skilled jobs: postmen, streetcar conductors, drill press operators and the like—a status previously considered "reserved" for male abilities. The famous "Call to Colors" broadcast galvanized the Navy into action, under the wise hand of Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, and led to a patriotic force of more than 12,000 who served as Yeomen (F).

The drain on the Stateside male population increased dramatically in July 1918 as escalation of combat and consequent casualties forced even greater deliberations by the wartime personnel planners. The Marine Corps realized that great numbers of battle-ready Marines, then holding down clerical jobs, were needed in the trenches. Who would now man typewriter, tablet and telephone?

Enter Major General Commandant George Barnett, who summoned, from his top subordinates, an analysis of male-held jobs which, realistically, could be taken over by

the women who waited. Concluding that they could, indeed, "do the job," Barnett, in his letter to SecNav of 2 August 1918, requested authority "to enroll women in the Marine Corps Reserve for clerical duty... where their services might be utilized to replace men who may be qualified for active field service." Secretary Daniels approved, and the United States Marine Corps, for the first time in its 142-year life, would break the gender barrier.

Brigadier General Charles McCawley was then the quartermaster general, and in his office there labored a civil servant named Mrs. Opha Mae Johnson. Like thousands of American women fired with patriotism and the unique new "service" opportunity now offered, she wasted no time enlisting on August 13, 1918: The first woman Marine!

Although the vast array of job titles was to come years later, the "scope" was limited to office-related tasks: stenographers, typists, bookkeepers and accountants (but later, also, "recruiters' aides" and special messengers), one requirement dominated: exceptionally high personal and physical qualities!

Enrolled as a private, Marine Corps Reserve, for a four-year period, Jane Van Edsingna (later Blake-ney) of New York was typical of her group of 11 who, driven by the emotions of the era, yearned to serve her country. Although facilities for housing and messing for the "new breed" were quite rudimentary then, she noted that the Marine Corps not only welcomed them cordially on their arrival at Washington's Union Station, but "really took good care of us" (a thought which relieved the anxieties of her concerned father, who at first objected to her enlistment and probable assignment to some far-off location). It was an "on your own" experience in 1918, as she and four other women colleagues were driven to a private home in northeast Washington, D. C., where they would be quartered—but also given "two days off" to look for other accommodations if they so desired.

Officially designated Marine Corps Reserve (F)—more informally, "Marine Reservists (F)"—the new recruits had to suffer through other "designations." "Lady Hellcats," "Skirt Marines" and "Lady Leathernecks" were among the more "respectful" labels. Perhaps most widely known,



This oil painting was used as a recruiting poster in 1943, during WW II.

A WOMAN'S PLACE (cont.)

however, was the term "Marinette"—loathed by the women and widely frowned upon by the Corps establishment (but today still believed by some to have been an "official" title). In that regard Blakeney also recalled the position of the Commandant: he abhorred the name, emphasizing that they be known as *Women Marines*, stating bluntly that: "All Marine women are ladies, and do not dangle from strings!"

Blakeney also threw interesting light on the life of the woman enlistee of the time, touching on several facets:

- Training** involved assignment, for two-week periods, to various jobs (early "OJT"), followed by more formal training periods.

- Specific job roles** were clerical—"We started in the file section and answered the telephones."

- Military bearing**—Two male sergeants major ("They were stern," she noted) established a strong "esprit de corps" among the new women, putting them through tough, close-order drill on the Ellipse back of the White House, and assigning them to parades and ceremonies.

- Social Life**—For young women "newly on the town," opportunities—and eligible men were abundant. She and her fellow WMs often observed the Congress in session, then adjourned to Union Station for sandwiches and ice cream.

- Uniforms**—"Well turned out" wouldn't necessarily describe the early woman Marine, for standard uniform gear was not then supplied. Like others, Jane Blakeney was sent to the supply department where the tailor would determine if a man's blouse could be "adapted" for her. Uniforms were often cut down, skirts fashioned, men's campaign hats provided, and, at last, some kind of "military feminine mystique" painfully emerged!

Such a rudimentary approach to a "uniform" uniform led to certain liberties. The Commandant, in a memorandum to the adjutant and inspector and to the paymaster and quartermaster of 8 February 1919, called attention to the problem of disregard of regulations by some female Reservists attached to headquarters. "Several of them," he said, "have recently been seen in public places wearing rifle insignia, Sam Browne belt, spats, and non-regulation shoes."

"It made the uniform look particularly stunning," remembered Sgt Ingrid Jonassen, describing her Sam Browne belt—highly "illegal" but regularly worn by the risk-takers on leave and liberty and at rallies and parades. (Pvt Avadney Hea's formal portrait, a part of the official study *Women Marines in World War I* does, indeed, look "terribly glamorous" in winter field service green, complete

with "the belt"—even a swagger stick!)

Armistice, on November 11, 1918, quickly changed the urgency of everything. The Commandant's order called for transfer of all Reservists then on active duty to inactive status prior to August 11, 1919. The phase-out of the women's contingent carried forward at a gradual pace, but it was late 1922 before the Marine Corps was totally devoid of its small, but select group of Marine Reservists (F). At a White House lawn pass-in-review, SecNav Daniels, apparently forgetting that his audience was primarily female, evoked humorous reactions as he good-naturedly said: "As we embrace you in uniform today, we will embrace you without uniform tomorrow."

Two decades were to pass before women returned to the ranks, on a grander scale, making even greater sacrifices and contributions in the next global conflict.

Whether it was the resiliency of the Corps or the humans male and female alike who were its fabric—the 20-year gap between two "generations" of women Marines seemed not to have mattered, as the second round of multi-national conflict now called, even louder, for womanly back-up of the male contingent. The swiftness of response, the smoothness of reintegration made it appear that a tradition, once established, had never noticed the break of time.

Ten months had passed since the tranquility of Pearl Harbor was shattered by the uninvited; Midway and the Coral Sea were now history; and Marines were also falling, at the Canal. It was action by Plans and Policies personnel at Headquarters, Marine Corps, accelerated by the urgent need for combat personnel, which reopened deliberations on women and active duty. On November 7, 1942, the Commandant penned the document creating the Marine Corps Women's Reserve. It was not officially announced until February 13, 1943, permitting the Corps properly to gear up for its momentous transition.

The Commandant had previously set to work trying to locate the

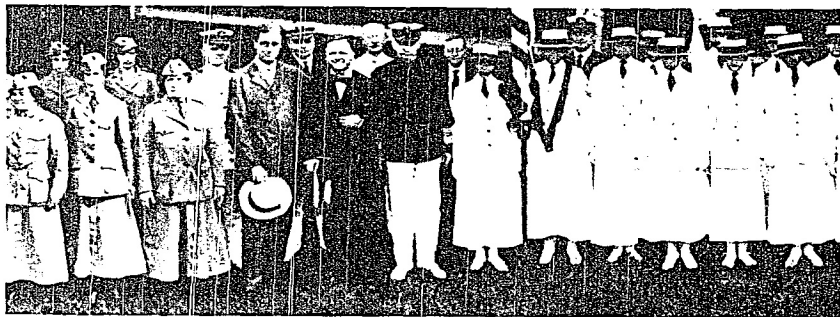
"right" Director, so he enlisted the experience and wisdom of Barnard College's dean, Virginia Gildersleeve. Her committee's careful evaluations of the "best of the best" led to Mrs. Ruth Cheney Streeter. Her appointment as the first Wartime Director of Women's Reserve assured success for the new contingent, literally from day one.

As during the first World War, the problem of describing the woman Marine appeared a large one; whereas "Marinettes" had raised earlier hackles, on this round it was such unsolicited absurdities as "Femarmies" and "Women's Leatherneck Aides," which raised blood pressures! Fortunately for all, a now-established respect for the talents of women, quickly settled the issue. "Marines" was, the way Colonel L.W.T. Waller, Jr., Director of Reserve, reinforced his statement that "... these women will not be auxiliary but members of the Marine Corps Reserve and as... they will be performing many duties of Marines it was felt they should be so known." The last of the four services in WW II to structure a women's Reserve, it was also the only women's component known for what it was—identified neither by acronym nor disparaging nickname.

The importance of women as a supplement to the already established Corps was obvious: The size, scope, and far-flung land and sea battlegrounds of the conflict, compared to smaller-sized geographics 20 years before, as well as the sheer magnitude and complexity of the tools and supporting systems of the 1940s, cried out for skills and techniques earlier unknown.

The Navy rose to the occasion, giving the Women's Reserve a quicker start-up time by throwing its support to the Corps' recruiting efforts; and it made available both educational sites already in place—at Mount Holyoke and Hunter Colleges—and its seasoned personnel.

Major W.W. ("Bucky") Buchanan and Major E. Hunter Hurst (both to retire as brigadier generals) were undoubtedly the principal figures as initial training moved into high gear. "In February 1943," Buchanan reported, "I was ordered to Hunter College... to establish a Marine enlisted training facility as part of the Navy Women's Reserve School. (Hurst organized and commanded the Officer's School at Mount Holyoke.)



Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels and his assistant secretary, Franklin D. Roosevelt, posed with Marine Reservists (F) and Navy Yeomen (F) at their final review in 1919.

Buchanan continued, noting that, as CO, his new detachment—composed of an XO, five to seven lieutenants/instructors and First Sergeant McElroy ("a titan of strength" as he put it)—developed a program for the 725-strong first class. "We used material from Parris Island (S.C.), from the Correspondence School, Quantico (Va.), and we created the remainder from our own experience."

However fine the offerings of the "civilian" campus environments at



Both of these photos contributed to the recruiting effort in World War II.



A WOMAN'S PLACE (cont.)

Hunter and Holyoke were, it was soon apparent that some definite limitations existed "to our ability to make Marines out of these women," as General Buchanan described the problem. So, enlisted, and officer training departed New York and Massachusetts for Camp Lejeune, N. C., where, in June 1943, the Marine Corps Women Reserve Schools were activated.

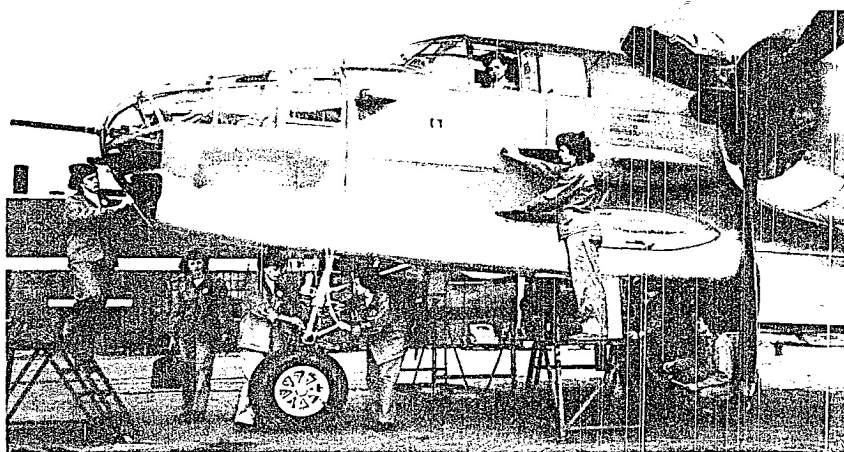
"Generally speaking," he added, "the program was similar in many respects to the male recruit program, eliminating much of the detail on combat weapons. We probably had more close-order drill, since universally the women recruits preferred this to lectures. (They were good at it, too.)

"After arriving at the new location," he commented, "we were able to enliven the training for both officers and enlisted by permitting them to witness live-firing demonstrations, ride in LVTs and LCVPs and observe landing exercises. . . . This resulted in a graduate of the course feeling much more thoroughly indoctrinated into the Marine Corps."

He concluded by noting that "being pioneers in training women Marines, "they were faced with innumerable, unforeseen problems. "For instance," he said, "the Marine Corps Manual has been the bible for administration of Marine personnel for over 200 years, but only for the male gender. We were constantly running into situations unique because we were dealing with women. . . . On many occasions we had to get a ruling from Headquarters. . . .

One such issue was that of "socializing" (male officer with enlisted WR)—a matter about which he gives high praise and credit to his prime assistant, Capt Katherine A. Towle, for the sensible solutions she developed.

Along with the monumental tasks of recruiting, classifying, training and assigning thousands of women, special attention was focused on the uniform. Unlike the 1918-era hit-or-miss attitudes about clothing, WW II represented a quite sophisticated approach to the "greening" of the ladies. So much so, in fact, that Anne Adams Lentz—an employee of the War Department—was, in mid-December 1942 detailed for temporary duty at HQ, USMC. A sea-



These aviation mechanics are shown working on a PBJ. Women had a great impact on Marine aviation during WW II, with nearly one-third of their total number serving at air commands or bases.

soned New York clothing designer, she had contributed to the design of the WAAC uniform. Since the priority of her assignment (prior to actual establishment of the World War II force) required a longer time commitment than the original 30-day duty period, she transitioned into the Corps. Sworn in as a captain on January 18, 1943, she became the first commissioned officer of the war.

From the Quartermaster Depot in Philadelphia she moved to New

York, setting up base to oversee construction of model uniforms by the Women's Garment Workers. The essentials of the project: forest green was the color, and the style was to be identical to men's uniforms. A regulation Marine uniform resulted, produced in a lighter-weight serge or covert material. With "style" as a requisite, it was not unusual that WMs often won "hands down" when their outfits were compared with those of other military women. More than once, summer dress uniforms stole



Major Ruth Cheney Streeter, first Director of the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, greeted Pfc Eugenia Lejeune during a wartime visit to Camp Lejeune. The North Carolina Marine base was named in honor of her late father, LtGen John A. Lejeune, Commandant of the Marine Corps from 1920-29.

the show—in particular at one War Loan Drive when MCWRs, so attired, escorted Hollywood's best and won accolades from none other than Dick Powell, a movie star of the era.

Next to education and training, essential to a functioning force of professionals in wartime, was the business of job classification, especially when one considers the panorama of assignments women held in that conflict. "Appropriateness" was the way the Corps described "female capabilities" to perform their work (vs. the men they released). Categorized under four distinct groupings, women in the Marine Corps work force were seen this way:

- **Class I:** Jobs in which women are better, more efficient than men. Example: All clerical jobs.

- **Class II:** Jobs in which women are as good as men, and replaced men on a one-to-one basis. Examples: Some clerical jobs in which men are especially good, like accounting. Also, jobs requiring a high degree of finger dexterity.

- **Class III:** Jobs in which women are not as good as men, but can be used effectively when need is great, such as wartime. Example: Most of the jobs in motor transport.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

February 10, 1944.

TO THE MARINE CORPS WOMEN'S RESERVE:

As we of the nation are deeply proud of the gallant Marines who have been pressing this war in the South Pacific, so are we proud of the Marines here at home whose staunch support of the battle lines plays so great a part in making victory possible.

Among these are you of the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, who are tomorrow observing the close of your first year of service.

The nation is as proud of you as of your fellow Marines — for Marine women are upholding the brilliant traditions of the Corps with a spirit of loyalty and diligence worthy of the highest admiration of all Americans. You have quickly and efficiently taken over scores of different kinds of duties that not long ago were considered strictly masculine assignments; and in doing so, you have freed a large number of well-trained, battle-ready men of the Corps for action in the great offensive relentlessly sweeping the Japanese enemy from the Pacific.

In this war, as never before, there has fallen on American women the solemn responsibility, and the solemn privilege, of taking a most vital part in the nation's march to victory. The Marine Corps Women's Reserve is an outstanding example of the dynamic way in which American women are meeting that responsibility and making the most of that privilege.

I know I speak for every American in offering hearty congratulations to you of the Marine Corps Women's Reserve on the occasion of the first anniversary of your service. We shall watch your ever-expanding accomplishments with utmost confidence and pride in the challenging days and months that lie ahead.

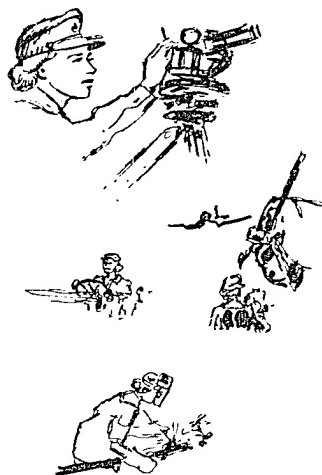
Franklin D. Roosevelt

A birthday greeting from the President of the United States.



A Marine band, consisting of Women Reservists from Camp Lejeune, N. C., participated in a review honoring the return of Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz on October 5, 1945, in Washington, D. C.

Accountant *Armorer. Aircraft *Artist *Aviation Salvage Crew Mechanic *Baker
 *Band Leader *Beauty Operator *Carpenter. Aircraft *Chaplain's Assistant
 *Chauffeur *Combat Correspondent *Control Tower Operator *Cook *Court Reporter
 *Crane Operator *Drill Instructor *Education Specialist *Electrician. Aircraft
 *Field Artillery Fire Control Man *Fire Fighter *Instrument Mechanic. Aircraft
 *Legal Clerk *Link Trainer Instructor *Mess Sergeant *Ordnance Stockman *Parachute Rigger
 *Passenger Transportation Clerk *Photographer. Aerial *Plotter. Air Warning
 *Projectionist, 35-mm. *Publication Man *Railway Clerk *Recruiter
 *Sheet Metal Worker *Ship Loading Man *Small Arms Mechanic *Statistical Clerk
 *Stenographer *Steward *Storage Battery Electrician *Tabulation Machine Operator
 *Tailor *Teletype Operator *Toolroom Keeper *Tractor Driver *Training Aids Specialist
 *Translator *Truck Driver. Heavy *Veterinary Technician
 *Weather Forecaster



A WOMAN'S PLACE (cont.)

• **Class IV:** Jobs in which women cannot or should not be used at all. Example: Jobs demanding excessive physical strength.

Basically, the principal occupational goal was that of training women to replace men—with no loss of military efficiency. If “glamour” was her objective, the WM enlistee was in the wrong pew, for, up front it was made clear to her that she must ready herself to learn new skills, to steel herself for much hard work, and to “cheerfully assume” whatever duty might be given her!

Who were the “doers” of the war? Simply stated, the women, enlisted and officer alike, who demonstrated high calling to their assignments; individuals who exhibited great responsibility (and devotion) at least equal to—more often beyond—the call of duty.

LtCol Lily Hutcheon Gridley enlisted in the Navy a year to the day after Pearl Harbor, then became one of the first 20 commissioned into the Marine Women's Reserve. She holds the distinction of being the first WM legal assistance officer. She reflected that military service has done more for women than the Equal Rights movement; that women in the service were generally not the objects of discrimination; that they often enjoyed greater opportunities than their male counterparts. She also alluded to those many professional spheres opened to women which would otherwise not have materialized.

A true “pioneer” was Wisconsin-born SgtMaj Ethel M. Wilcox, whose entire war contribution was as a top recruiter. “As WW II progressed,” she noted, “our staff gradually increased to about 50 Marines—about a quarter of them women. . . . When we arrived, often at 0600, the halls were lined with volunteers. . . . Many days extended well after midnight as we had to be ready for the next morning's inundation of recruits. . . . because we women recruiters were a ‘first,’ the newspapers followed up quite closely from initial interviews and pictures.”

Col Helen G. O'Neill came out of WW I as a chief yeoman; organized the National Yeoman (F) organization; and became a skilled linguist. It was Commandant Holcomb who plucked O'Neill from the office of the Assistant Secretary of the Navy—a first step toward that eventual posting as assistant to the Director of Women Marines; an assignment she handled with great distinction. At times acting as Director in Colonel Streeter's absence, O'Neill prepared uniform regs, represented the Director at official functions, attended graduation ceremonies for enlisted and officers alike, and, on November 10, 1943, helped unveil the “Molly Marine” statue in New Orleans.

World War II: A unique chapter in American history which witnessed the elevation of the aspirations of women who saw service, whether Army, Navy, Coast Guard or Marine Corps. Illustrating the relevance of Marine Corps aviation to the women who served, nearly a third of all WMs held down aviation specialty billets—and they shined! By sum-

mer 1944, WMs at Cherry Point handled all Link Trainer instruction and most of the landing field control operations slots. With great “air” experience now, women had, through high qualification, seen formation of several aviation-related detachments known as the “Aviation Women's Reserve Squadrons.”

Recruiting for the Women's Reserve quite naturally ceased with V-J Day and the September 1945 Japanese surrender. Total WR strength in August 1945 stood at 18,460. . . (17,640 enlisted and 820 officers). Women commanded 28 units! With September 1, 1946, set as final phase-out, by June of that year WR activities had been disbanded at Camp Lejeune, Parris Island, and the Philadelphia Supply Depot. Other deactivations followed at a stepped-up pace.

By the September termination date, the only WR units still operative were at Henderson Hall, Arlington, Va.; Cherry Point, N. C.; El Toro, Calif.; and the Department of the Pacific, San Francisco. They tell the story of the motorist who, some years after the war, was enroute past the replica, at Quantico, Va., of the Marine Corps War Memorial, and offered a youngster a ride. Noticing the Marine globe and anchor emblem on his cap, the driver asked: “Is your father a Marine?”

“No, sir,” replied the lad, but my mother was!”

(To be continued next month.)

