

Women of the Greatest Generation

Over the vast Pacific Ocean a lone four engined Douglas C-54 Skymaster flies along. On this medical evacuation flight two dozen wounded men are flown by a four man crew and a like number of Army Flight Nurses. And while these nurses might be the only women to have direct contact with these men they are far from the only ones involved in making this flight possible. In fact this flight, the fight the men were in, and the successful outcome of this conflict would be largely the result of the role women played during the war.

As the United States found itself on war's doorstep it became apparent to all that the needs of the military would quickly devastate the home front work force. So as Americas industry spooled up for wartime production they quickly began to accept women into the ranks of manufacturing. Women who had never so much as changed a tire or drove a nail would become "Rosie the Riveter". Industry quickly established new manufacturing techniques that would allow less skilled personnel to build weapons of war. Instead of having someone who could do multiple jobs it was now set that people could be taught just a single skill and they would be useful, especially given the massive scope of production. So, just like that women flocked to the factories and began to learn and then began to build.

They welded, they riveted, they learned how to build engines and wire up airplanes. Guns were built and tested. Aircraft would be assembled, inspected and then test flown.....all by women. Smaller women welded in keels of ships or worked inside the wings of planes, places men had a hard time fitting. Some women took on less physical tasks of painting aircraft instruments with radium paint, or assembling navigation tools. They worked in factories in 8 to 12 hour shifts. They invested part of their paychecks to buy bonds. They became the heart and soul of the arsenal of democracy.

Other women decided they wanted to do even more, they wanted to serve in uniform. By mid 1942 that desire would become a reality as both the Army and Navy established women's auxiliary programs. The Coast Guard and Marines soon followed suit. Prior to the war the only women in military service were nurses. Now with things evolving women filled a host of jobs. They became air traffic controllers, parachute riggers, and propeller mechanics. More would become telephone operators, instructors and drivers. While the Navy with its "women accepted for voluntary emergency service" program kept most of its members stateside or in Hawaii the Army had no qualms about sending its women of the "Women's Army Auxiliary Corps" to the four corners of the world.

Perhaps the most prestigious of the programs for women were the WASP's. The Women's Air Service Pilots was a program that ran from 1942 to 1944. Fewer than 1100 women, all of whom were already licensed pilots, would complete training and fly in service of the country. Of these women 19 would be stationed here at Kingman

Army Airfield. One of these women was Isabelle McCrae. A nurse before the war she would spend the summer of 1944 here at K.A.A.F, flying B-26's. After the WASP program ended she was accepted as an Army flight nurse and would spend the last year of the war transporting wounded servicemen.

Lastly there were the volunteers. Literally millions of women, many who were also war workers would volunteer their time for the country. Many would volunteer with the Red Cross in positions ranging from nurses aids to drivers. Others still would serve in Civil Defense as air raid wardens, communications specialists or any number of other jobs. Women would volunteer at USO clubs and other serviceman centers. A great deal of the people serving with the Air Warning Service would be women as well. Young girls would volunteer with junior Red Cross, Girl Scout or Campfire Girls. Elderly women would spend time knitting sweaters to be sent to soldiers in especially cold regions. If you wanted to volunteer some time or skills there was a way.

As we look at all of these contributions we go back to our C-54 on its mission of mercy. Our wounded men had sailed to battle on a ship that women helped build. Their weapons, vehicles, uniforms and gear had all come from factories where women worked. The stretcher that had carried them from the field of battle and the plasma that had saved their life all had the hands of women on them. The plane they were now in, the engines that powered it and the instruments that let the pilots navigate, all things produced by the women war workers at thousands of plants across the country. Of course the flight nurses who's compassionate hearts and skilled hands care for the wounded are women as well.

This month we celebrate Women's History Month. We have two very exciting displays in Kingman dedicated to the Women of the Greatest Generation. The Mohave County Museum of History at 400 W Beale street has a display featuring artifacts belonging Isabelle McCrae. This display features some of her paperwork, photographs and personal items. The second display is in space graciously provided by National Bank of Arizona on Stockton Hill Road. Here the lobby has been transformed into a museum with uniforms, photographs, posters and artifacts of these women. Everyone from war workers to sailors, volunteers to soldiers are represented. The National Bank of Arizona display will run through the last Thursday of March. So please check out these two displays and help us celebrate and honor these women of the Greatest Generation.

Thank You
Tom Saluzzo
Mohave County Museum of History

Tom Saluzzo is a military historian, pawnbroker & board member at the Mohave Museum of History and the Arts. If you enjoy these displays please feel free to check out his permanent display at Pawn World II on Northern Ave.