

# WHAT DID YOU DO IN THE WAR, GRANDMOTHER?

When we think of war, we may think of men in combat. But in World War II, as in any war, soldiers and sailors could not fight without food and equipment. Fighter pilots could not fly against the enemy without planes. During the war, the task of making weapons, machines, and supplies and running the home front fell on the shoulders of women. Without the efforts of women at home, in factories, and in the armed services, there would have been no victory.

During World War II, American women came into their own. During the Depression of the 1930s, many people did not have jobs. Women were encouraged to work at home and not take jobs away from men.

But when the war started and men were drafted into the armed forces, women were needed in industry for heavy work. "Almost overnight," said Mary Anderson, head of the newly formed Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, "women were reclassified by industrialists." Women became riveters, lumberjacks or lumberjills, welders, crane operators, tool makers, shell loaders, blast-furnace cleaners, locomotive greasers, police officers, and taxi drivers. They were also needed for volunteer work in their communities. They led scrap drives, became civil defense spotters, and took on other jobs usually held by men.

In fact, the image of Rosie the riveter, a muscular, overalls-clad, factory worker, was as well-known a symbol of the war effort as Uncle Sam. With her hair tied back in a bandana, her sleeves rolled up, and her arm raised in a fist, Rosie urged women to buy war bonds and get on the assembly lines. Newspapers and magazines, radio and movies proclaimed Rosie a war hero.

The attitude that women should stay at home eased during the war. Millions of married middle-class women, many of them over the age of thirty-five, took outside jobs for the first time in their lives. Few were

hired for foreman's positions or highly skilled factory jobs. They were paid only about 65 percent of what men were paid for the same work. Still, their contribution was vital.

For some, work was an economic necessity; for others it was a patriotic duty. Whatever their reasons, jobs brought women benefits. They could make their own money and they felt good about holding jobs important in winning the war.



Machinist at Vermont Manufacturing Company, White River Junction. Courtesy of Green Mountain Power Corporation.

Women served in other ways. Half of the 1944 graduates of the Burlington's Fanny Allen Hospital nursing class entered the army, navy, and air force. Grace Pugh, the first Vermont woman to get a pilot's license, taught ground school to Army Air Corps pilots at South Burlington airport.

Margaret P. Garland of Burlington became one of a thousand members of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots, flying new combat planes from factories to air bases. Flying was one of the glamour jobs. Some male pilots did not like to see a woman in the cockpit, according to Garland. Her work ended in late 1944



Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) after a flight.

when the air war over Europe slowed. Male pilots took over. Like many women in the war, she lost her job with only a few weeks notice.

Because rationing, saving scraps, and canning were so important, the war changed how housework was done. Vermont women struggled with the new rationing system and tried to make do with less. As a government poster advised: "Use it up, wear it out, make it do!" Housewives saved every ounce of used fat by skimming fat cakes off the top of chilled soups and melting scraps left on dinner plates. "Don't let any Brattleboro boy man a gun without any ammunition," read a notice in a 1944 *Brattleboro Reformer* "Keep the waste fats going to war. It's one way to pile on the headaches for Mr. Hitler."

With the close of the war, women were again discouraged from working outside the home in jobs that men might do. But many found that they liked the independence of making their own money. And many still had to help their families. Some say that women's experience in World War II led to the movement for women's rights in the 1970s.

One way to find out more is to ask people who were alive then. So if you want to know more about what it was like during World War II, ask your grandmother!