Women in War from World War I through World War II

Introduction: Changing Roles of Women in Early 20th-Century Wars

Throughout history, women's participation in warfare was often limited to behind-the-scenes support, nursing, or rare disguised service as soldiers. This changed dramatically in the early 20th century. World War I (1914–1918) was a "total war" that demanded the mobilization of entire societies, drawing unprecedented numbers of women into roles previously reserved for men. Women stepped up to work in factories, serve near battlefields, and keep farms and households running. They proved indispensable on the home front and, at times, in proximity to combat. In World War II (1939–1945), these contributions expanded further, with women taking on more diverse and officially recognized duties, including military auxiliary service and active resistance in occupied territories.

World War I (1914–1918): Breaking New Ground

Factory Workers: Munitionettes and "Canary Girls"

One of the most significant contributions of women during WWI was in munitions factories. As the war's appetite for shells and small arms grew, women were recruited in large numbers to work in ordnance manufacturing. In Britain, these women were nicknamed "munitionettes." They labored long hours filling shells, mixing propellants, and assembling ammunition vital to keeping armies supplied. The work was exhausting and dangerous. Explosions were a constant risk, and accidents did occur—most tragically exemplified by the **1917 Silvertown explosion in London, which killed 73 people** and underscored the mortal hazards of munitions work. Prolonged exposure to TNT could stain the skin and hair a yellow hue and cause toxic illness, giving rise to the nickname **"Canary Girls."** Despite the risks, munitionettes took pride in their role, knowing that every shell could save lives at the front. Their performance under pressure helped change perceptions of women's abilities in heavy industry.

Mining Women: The Pit Brow Lasses

Before WWI, women in certain industrial regions had already proven their mettle in heavy labor. In Britain's coalfields, **"Pit Brow Lasses"** worked at the pit head—sorting coal, loading carts, and processing output on the surface—because Victorian-era laws barred women from underground mining. When the war created soaring demand for coal to fuel ships, trains, and factories, these women became more essential than ever. As men left for the front, pit brow lasses helped keep production going in harsh conditions—wind, soot, and long hours. Their

contribution was crucial: coal was the lifeblood of wartime industry and transport. In taking on such demanding work, they also blazed a trail for acceptance of women in physically strenuous jobs.

Women in Agriculture: The Land Girls of World War I

Food production was another critical front. With men drafted from farms, countries faced the threat of shortages. In 1917, Britain formed the **Women's Land Army (WLA)**, recruiting **"Land Girls"** to work on farms and estates. Often from urban backgrounds, they learned agricultural tasks quickly—planting and harvesting, milking, managing poultry, and driving tractors. Their work kept Britain's food supply from collapsing under the strain of war and naval blockades. Skepticism from some farmers gradually gave way to respect as the Land Girls proved both capable and resilient. The United States also organized women into farm work through volunteer and government efforts, setting precedents for an even larger mobilization in the next war.

Planting for Victory: Early "War Gardens"

Beyond organized farm labor, WWI popularized the idea of civilians growing food wherever possible. Initially called **"war gardens"** (the precursor to "victory gardens"), these plots enabled families and communities to ease demand on public supplies. Women's groups and civic organizations taught neighbors to plant, harvest, and preserve produce. While smaller in scale than WWII's effort, WWI war gardens boosted morale and food self-sufficiency, foreshadowing the massive victory-garden movement to come.

Nurses and Medical Heroines—and Victims of Mustard Gas

Women were highly visible as caregivers to the wounded. Thousands served in organizations such as Britain's **Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD)** and the **American Red Cross**, staffing field hospitals and ambulance convoys near the front. Working close to the lines, they faced shelling and the new horrors of chemical warfare. **Mustard gas**, first widely used in 1917, caused severe burns and eye injuries. Nurses and medical staff sometimes suffered exposure while treating victims or when gas lingered on clothing and equipment. Their resilience—often with only primitive masks and limited supplies—saved countless lives and revealed the human costs of modern war. Figures like **Edith Cavell**, executed in 1915 for aiding Allied soldiers' escape from occupied Belgium, epitomize this courage.

Comfort and Morale: The Donut Lassies

American **Salvation Army** volunteers known as **"Donut Lassies"** supported U.S. troops in France from 1917 onward. Operating near the front in makeshift huts, they fried doughnuts, brewed coffee, helped with letters home, and offered conversation—sometimes under bombardment. These small rituals of comfort had an outsized effect on morale and reminded soldiers of home. Their legacy was later honored with **National Donut Day (1938)**.

World War II (1939–1945): Expanding Frontiers

Defending the Skies: The "Ack Ack Girls"

Britain's **Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS)** supplied women to **mixed anti-aircraft (AA) units** beginning in 1941. Nicknamed **"Ack Ack Girls,"** they operated rangefinders, predictors, radar, and fuse-setting gear—performing every technical function short of pulling the trigger, which regulations barred at the time. They stood to their posts through bombing raids and later the V-1 campaign. AA sites were frequent targets; casualties among mixed crews—including women—were real. Their precision and endurance were central to Britain's layered air defense and transformed public perceptions of women's technical prowess under fire.

The British "Flying Wrens": WRNS in Naval Aviation and Dispatch

Members of the **Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS)**—affectionately **"Wrens"**—served across more than 200 trades, including aviation support with the **Fleet Air Arm** (air mechanics, electricians, radar/plotting, communications, photographic units, and parachute packing). Many also worked as **dispatch riders**, braving blackout conditions and bomb damage to carry urgent messages. While "Flying Wrens" is a colloquial umbrella and not an official unit name, it captures the breadth and daring of WRNS service in keeping naval aviation and communications running under intense pressure.

Women of the French Resistance

In occupied France, women became a backbone of clandestine resistance. They served as couriers, printers of underground newspapers, saboteurs, and shelter providers, often operating under constant threat of arrest and execution. Some worked with Britain's **Special Operations Executive (SOE)** as wireless operators and organizers; others, like **Lucie Aubrac**, helped orchestrate daring rescues. Their intelligence and sabotage efforts were pivotal to Allied planning and to the disruption of German control, particularly in the run-up to the 1944 liberation.

Virginia Hall: The "Limping Lady"

American agent **Virginia Hall** served with the **SOE** and later the U.S. **OSS**, operating in France with a wooden prosthetic leg she nicknamed "Cuthbert." She built resistance networks, coordinated supply drops, trained fighters, and organized sabotage. So effective was her work that the Gestapo deemed her "the most dangerous of all Allied spies." After the war, she received the **Distinguished Service Cross—the only civilian woman of WWII** to be awarded that honor—and was appointed MBE by Britain.

"Rosie the Riveter" and American Wartime Industry

"**Rosie the Riveter**" symbolized the millions of American women who filled defense-industry jobs—riveting aircraft, welding ships, assembling tanks, and producing munitions. Between 1941 and 1945, over **six million** women entered the workforce, shattering production records and social expectations. Although many were displaced after demobilization, Rosie's image endured as a powerful emblem of capability and economic independence, energizing later movements for workplace equality.

Pilots in Service: The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs)

From 1942 to 1944, the **WASPs**—about **1,074 graduates**—performed **stateside** military flying: ferrying new aircraft from factories to bases, towing aerial gunnery targets, and test-flying repaired planes. They logged **millions of miles** and proved their skill across dozens of aircraft types. **Thirty-eight** died in service. Though not militarized at the time, they were granted **veteran status in 1977** and collectively awarded the **Congressional Gold Medal in 2009**. (WASP duties did **not** include trans-Atlantic ferrying; those deliveries were handled by other organizations.)

Feeding the Front: The Women's Land Army in World War II

Britain revived the **Women's Land Army** in 1939, ultimately mobilizing **80,000+** Land Girls at its peak. They sowed and harvested crops, drove tractors, managed livestock, and kept farms operational despite U-boat blockades and labor shortages. In the United States, **farm-labor programs under the Crop Corps**—including the **Women's Land Army of America**—brought **hundreds of thousands** of women into seasonal and wartime agricultural work (alongside millions of youths and other laborers). The result was a dramatic increase in domestic food production that sustained civilians and armed forces alike.

Victory Gardens: "Grow Your Own"

Building on WWI's precedent, WWII saw an enormous expansion of **victory gardens** across Allied nations. In the United States alone, by **1944** an estimated **20 million** gardens were in cultivation, supplying **up to 40%** of the nation's fresh vegetables. Women led community gardening, canning, and preservation drives, turning yards, parks, and vacant lots into productive plots. The movement improved nutrition, reduced pressure on transport and rationing, and gave civilians a tangible way to contribute.

"Flying Nightingales": Airborne Evacuation Nurses

In June 1944, just days after D-Day, Britain deployed the first **air-evacuation nursing orderlies**—popularly dubbed **"Flying Nightingales"**—aboard RAF Dakotas to bring wounded soldiers from Normandy to England. Their mid-air care stabilized patients for rapid treatment at home hospitals. **Hundreds** served on these missions through the campaign; some were killed in the line of duty, underscoring the risks of flying into active war zones. Their success helped pioneer modern aeromedical evacuation.

Post-World War II and Lasting Legacy

With the end of WWII, demobilization returned many women to civilian life and shuttered or reorganized wartime women's branches. Yet the legacy of service and competence was indelible. The United States passed the **Women's Armed Services Integration Act (1948)**, allowing women to serve as permanent members of the armed forces (initially with restrictions). Britain continued its women's services after the war, later integrating them into the regular forces. Socially and politically, wartime participation propelled advances: nations expanded women's rights (France granted women suffrage in **1944–45**, for instance), and postwar movements drew inspiration from the wartime example of capability and leadership.

For many individuals, wartime work became a lifelong foundation for confidence and careers. Former pilots, mechanics, farmers, and factory workers carried forward new skills and expectations. Memory and recognition took time—archives opened, reunions were held, and monuments were raised. Today, museums, plaques, and public memorials—including the monuments in Cedaredge, Colorado—ensure that the **Ack Ack Girls, Flying Wrens, French Resistance fighters, Virginia Hall, Rosies, WASPs, Victory Garden organizers, Flying Nightingales, Munitionettes, Canary Girls, women blinded by mustard gas, Pit Brow Lasses, Land Girls, and Donut Lassies** are honored not as a footnote but as a central narrative of modern warfare.

Conclusion

From coal yards to factory floors, farm fields to flight lines, clandestine safe houses to air-ambulance cabins, women in the world wars met the demands of history with courage, skill, and endurance. They built the matériel of victory, sustained their nations, gathered intelligence, rescued the wounded, and resisted tyranny. Their contributions transformed outcomes on the battlefield and accelerated broad social change at home. The stories gathered here—etched now in monuments and woven into public memory—are a testament to the indispensable role of women in war and to the enduring legacy they left for generations to come.