

Women's Uniforms of World War II

GRADES 5-12



Overview

This activity is geared toward participants in grades 5-12. The estimated amount of time to deliver this lesson is 45 minutes.

Before World War II, women could already serve with the Navy as part of the Navy Nurse Corps and the American Red Cross Motor Corps. After the United States entered the war, the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) was created for women to serve in noncombat shore positions.

Participants will examine women's Navy uniforms and draw conclusions on the types of roles women were playing in the war. They will then listen to the oral histories of three women who served in the Navy, in the WAVES, Nurse Corps and Motor Corps.



Objective

Participants will be able to identify the roles and responsibilities of women in the Navy during and after World War II, analyze the relationship between men and women in each naval corps accessible to them and evaluate the way that women's uniforms illustrated their unique place in the Navy during this time.



Materials

- Doris Pearce, Veronica Cotariu, Thayer Boswell Oral Histories
- Images of uniforms worn by WAVES, Navy Nurses, American Red Cross and Hospital Corps
- Possible materials to design uniforms: felt in assorted colors, tulle, cotton, fabric markers, scissors, glue, tape



Inquiry

Ask participants to describe what they picture when they think of Navy uniforms.

- What colors/patterns/textures are you picturing?
- What functions do these uniforms need to perform?

For grades 5-8: Draw what you imagine a Navy uniform looks like.

Distribute attached images of women's uniforms (or physical uniforms from the Museum's collection). Look at each part of the uniform and discuss the following questions:

- What do the types of uniforms women wore tell you about the kinds of jobs they might have done during World War II?
- What are the differences between the uniforms? What might have been the functions of each piece?

Provide background content on the WAVES, Navy Nurse Corps and American Red Cross Motor Corps throughout the uniform exploration.

After viewing all uniforms, discuss the following questions:

- What do the uniforms for women designed during World War II tell us about how women were viewed at the time?
- What do the uniforms for men tell us about how men were viewed at the time?
- What was the focus of women's uniforms? Why?



Investigation

Listen to or read selected [oral histories](#) of Doris Pearce, Veronica Cotariu and Thayer Boswell. As a member of the Navy Nurse Corps, Doris Pearce served from the early 1950s until the Vietnam War, primarily in Japan and eventually on the USS *Sanctuary*. Veronica Cotariu served in the WAVES and continued to serve in the Navy as a link trainer instructor until well after World War II was over. Thayer Boswell transported Navy officers to and from the Navy yard and their living quarters every day during her service in the Motor Corps during World War II. Discuss the following questions:

Suggested questions for grades 5-8:

- What jobs did Doris, Veronica and Thayer have in the Navy?
- What jobs were men doing in the Navy during the times that these women served?
- Do these types of jobs exist today? What kinds of uniforms do people wear for them?

Suggested questions for grades 9-12:

- Women could not join the regular Navy during World War II. What reasons did they have for joining the reserve, motor and nurse corps?
- What kind of work was each woman doing?
- Does the work these women did still exist today? What kinds of uniforms do people wear for them?

For participants who have completed the *Inquiry*, more guiding questions:

- What functions did women's uniforms need to serve during World War II?
- Did the uniforms serve that function?



Design Time

Share oral history transcripts and images of women's uniforms with participants. Participants will design a modern uniform for Doris, Veronica, or Thayer, taking into account their responsibilities, station and individual naval corps. Encourage participants to design functional uniforms over the fashionable ones women wore during World War II. Use assorted fabrics, fabric markers, scissors and glue to put together the uniforms. Participants should consider the following questions:

- Where in the world is your sailor located? What is the weather like where they are?
- What job functions is your sailor performing?
- Who is your sailor interacting with every day?
- What colors and designs might be important to people serving in the Navy?



Explore comics featuring stereotypes of men and women in the Navy in our lesson: **Analyzing Cartoons**.



Background

During World War II, all branches of the military recruited women for the first time. Over 80,000 women joined the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), the women's branch of the Naval Reserve. Another 11,000 served in the Navy Nurse Corps, and many more supported the Navy with supplies in the American Red Cross Motor Corps.

Women continued serving in the Navy after the war ended. The Women's Armed Service Integration Act was passed in 1948, allowing women to continue serving in the regular and reserve Army and Navy permanently. While the WAVES and Motor Corps were demobilized after World War II, women continued to serve in the Navy in shore positions and on hospital ships.

Women were not allowed to serve in the permanent regular and reserve Navy until 1948, with the Women's Armed Services Integration Act. Before, during, and even after this act, women's uniforms varied greatly from men's. Men's uniforms were designed to meet crew members' environmental and daily needs. They were supposed to be simple and not interfere with everyday tasks. Women's uniforms were designed to meet the fashion trends of the day. The WAVES uniforms, for example, were designed by famous New York fashion label Mainbocher.

The WAVES were established in July 1942 when President Roosevelt signed Public Law 689. Women ages 20-35 with a high school degree could join the enlisted ranks and women 20-49 with a college degree could become officers. WAVES could not have children under 18 or be married to servicemen. These WAVES worked as yeomen, parachute riggers, aviation machinists, mathematicians, translators, codebreakers and more.

After World War II ended, over 30,000 WAVES were discharged. However, once the Women's Armed Services Integration Act was passed, women's status in the Navy was solidified. Even though the WAVES were demobilized and women were made a permanent part of the Navy, the acronym remained in popular usage for the next few decades.

The Navy Nurse Corps was established in 1908 and nurses continued to serve in all of the wars throughout the twentieth century, many of them in the Philippines and other islands in the Pacific. Not only were they stationed on bases around the world, but also on hospital ships such as USS *Sanctuary*, which could hold hundreds of evacuated patients at once. Navy nurses were exclusively women until 1965.

Also functioning during World War II was the American Red Cross Motor Corps. Established in World War I, the Motor Corps provided aid to the Army and Navy, primarily dealing with transportation of servicemen and supplies. Navy motor corps volunteers would often transport wounded sailors from ships to hospitals and homes. Around 45,000 women joined the Motor

Corps during World War II, and their role included transportation, providing a messenger service and helping run blood donor centers.



Additional Resources/References

For more information about women in the Navy and Red Cross:

<https://www.redcross.org/about-us/news-and-events/news/2021/women-an-important-part-of-american-red-cross-history.html>

<https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/diversity/women-in-the-navy.html>



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Documents and Images



A clipping from the scrapbook of Katherine Keough, a WAVE

Courtesy of the Battleship New Jersey Museum and Memorial Collection, 2020.003.0264.

Transcript:

NO FRENCH INFLUENCE HERE!-- Navy gals pose prettily in their sleek new modified uniforms especially designed for women of the Naval Service at a recent Pentagon showing. Left, summer gray working uniform worn by lieutenant in the Nurse Corps. Center, white dress uniform of Wave commander and right, blue uniform worn by Hospital Corpsman.



U.S. Navy WAVES Officer Blue Service Jacket

Credit: Collection of the Intrepid Museum. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Pickens III. 2008.41.01.



U.S. Navy WAVES Hatband

Credit: Collection of the Intrepid Museum. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Pickens III. 2008.41.02



Blue Seersucker Women's Uniform

Credit: Collection of the Intrepid Museum. 00.2011.322.01 and 00.2011.322.02



WAVES Captain's Uniform

Credit: Collection of the Intrepid Museum, 00.2011.327.01 and 00.2011.327.02



Bild-A-Set paper uniforms: Nurse's uniform with cape, worker's suit

Courtesy of Battleship NORTH CAROLINA



Bild-A-Set paper uniforms: Navy blue nurse uniform, Nurse's summer dress uniform, Dark blue winter dress nurse's uniform, Nurse's overseas field uniform

Courtesy of Battleship NORTH CAROLINA



Bild-A-Set paper uniforms: Navy jersey indoor dress, Flyer's Dress Uniform

Courtesy of Battleship NORTH CAROLINA