Cornelia Fort and the Changing Roles of Women during World War II

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Essential Question: How did the roles of women change during World War II?

Prior to World War II, women who wished to enter the workforce faced a number of challenges. Many types of work such as construction and heavy manufacturing were closed to women because it was assumed women were not strong enough to do the work. Women were routinely paid less than men for the same work. African American women faced even greater challenges. Often the only work they could find was as janitors or housekeepers. Few women were able to break out of these limited roles.

One woman who defied the accepted norms was Cornelia Fort. Fort was born to a wealthy Nashville family in 1919. She attended exclusive schools including Sarah Lawerence College where she excelled. After graduation, Fort reluctantly returned to a life of civic activities and social functions in Nashville. In 1940, Fort visited Nashville's airport and immediately fell in love with flying. Fort soloed in less than a month and went on to get commercial and instructor ratings. In 1941, she took a job in Honolulu, Hawaii. Fort was giving a flying lesson on the morning of December 7, 1941 when Japanese Zeros flew past her to begin the attack on Pearl Harbor. Fort returned to the mainland and traveled around the nation telling about her experiences selling war bonds.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor pushed the nation into war and brought women new opportunities in the workforce. Men were volunteering or being drafted into military service at the same time that factories were being asked to double or even triple production. Women, once shunned in heavy industry, joined the workforce in record numbers. At the Vultee aircraft plant in Nashville one out of every three workers was female. These female factory workers were immortalized by Norman Rockwell as "Rosie the Riveter" on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post.*

While thousands of women worked in aircraft factories, a few like Cornelia Fort, were uniquely qualified to contribute in other ways. In September 1942, a new organization called the Women's Auxilliary Ferrying Squadroon (WAFS) was formed. The name would later be changed to Women's Air Service Pilots or WASPs. (Female pilots were recruited to ferry planes from factories to military bases. Their efforts would free pilots for combat. Fort was one of the first to report for duty. She was part of the pioneering group of female pilots who established a record of excellence despite substantial resistance. In January 1943, Fort was transferred to Long Beach, California. While ferrying a plane from Long Beach to Dallas, Fort was killed in a mid-air collision.

Following the war, some women were happy to return to their previous roles as wives and mothers. Other women wanted to remain in the workforce, but found themselves forced out in favor of returning soldiers. The so-called "glass ceiling" that kept women from rising in the workplace had returned.

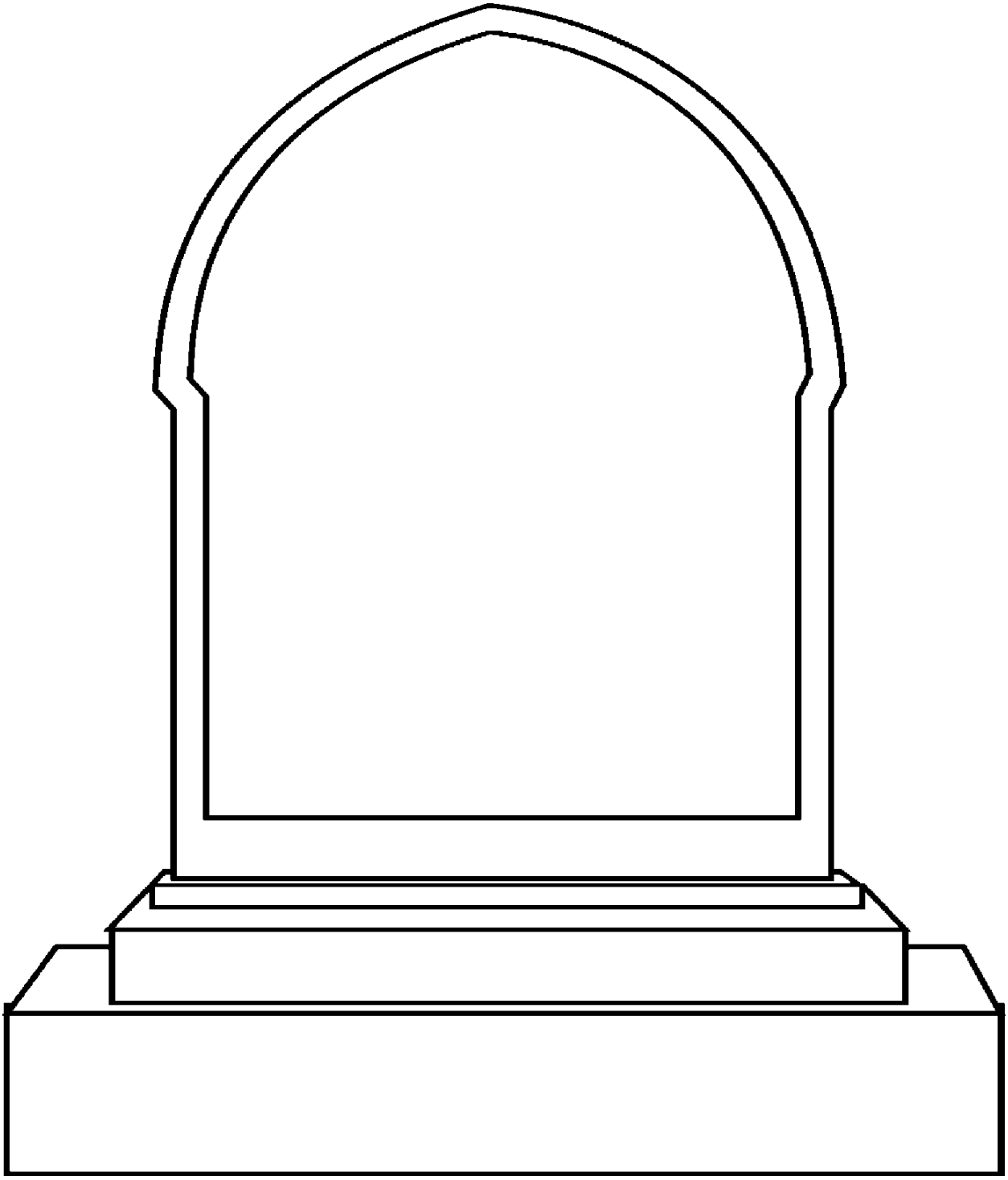
During World War II, women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers. They built airplanes, tanks and jeeps. They canned food, sewed uniforms and enriched uranium for the atom bomb. Some, like Cornelia Fort, served in branches of the military as WASPs, WACs (Women's Army Corp) and WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service). All contributed to the war effort in substantial ways. Their service and sacrifices were essential to the United States' victory in World War II.

Source: "Women Working." *tn4me.org.* The Tennessee State Museum. n.d. Web. 27 July, 2014. < http://www.tn4me.org/article.cfm/era_id/7/major_id/9/minor_id/72/a_id/218>

"Cornelia Fort." *Tennessee Encyclopedia and History and Culture* 1st edition. 1998. Print.

Cornelia Fort

Summarize the text to write an epitaph for Cornelia Fort. An epitaph is a brief statement about the deceased person, sometimes in the form of a poem.



Cornelia Fort

Summarize the text to write an epitaph for Cornelia Fort. An epitaph is a brief statement about the deceased person, sometimes in the form of a poem.

Changing Roles for Women

Use the text to provide examples of how things were changing for women both leading up to and during World War II.

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2. _____

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3. _____

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Cornelia Fort

Summarize the text to write an obituary for Cornelia Fort.

Cornelia Fort

Summarize the text to write an obituary for Cornelia Fort.

Answers will vary, but should include Fort's role in World War II.

Changing Roles for Women

Use the text to provide examples of how things were changing for women both leading up to and during World War II.

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2. _____

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Was their new found mobility permanent? What does this tell us about society before, during, and after the war?

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Cornelia Fort on Pearl Harbor and Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron

At the Twilight's Last Gleaming

by Cornelia Fort

I knew I was going to join the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron before the organization was a reality, before it had a name, before it was anything but a radical idea in the minds of a few men who believed that women could fly airplanes. But I never knew it so surely as I did in Honolulu on December 7, 1941.

At dawn that morning I drove from Waikiki to the John Rodgers civilian airport right next to Pearl Harbor where I was a [ill.] pilot instructor. Shortly after six-thirty I began landing and take-off practice with my regular student. Coming in just before the last landing, I looked casually around and saw a military plane coming directly toward me. I jerked the controls away from my student and jammed the throttle wide open to pull above the oncoming plane. He passed so close under us that our celluloid windows rattled violently and I looked down to see what kind of plane it was.

The painted red balls on the tops of the wings shone brightly in the sun. I looked again with complete and utter disbelief. Honolulu was familiar with the emblem of the Rising Sun on passenger ships but not on airplanes.

I looked quickly at Pearl Harbor and my spine tingled when I saw billowing black smoke. Still I thought hollowly it might be some kind of coincidence or maneuvers, it might be, it must be. For surely, dear God...

Then I looked way up and saw the formations of silver bombers riding in. Something detached itself from an airplane and came glistening down. My eyes followed it down, down and even with knowledge pounding in my mind, my heart turned convulsively when the bomb exploded in the middle of the harbor. I knew the air was not the place for my little baby airplane and I set about landing as quickly as ever I could. A few seconds later a shadow passed over me and simultaneously bullets spattered all around me.

Suddenly that little wedge of sky above Hickam Field and Pearl Harbor was the busiest fullest piece of sky I ever saw.

We counted anxiously as our little civilian planes came flying home to roost. Two never came back. They were washed ashore weeks later on the windward side of the island, bullet-riddled. Not a pretty way for the brave little yellow Cubs and their pilots to go down to death.

The rest of December seventh has been described by too many in too much detail for me to reiterate. I remained on the island until three months later when I returned by convoy to the United States. None of the pilots wanted to leave but there were no civilians flying in the islands after the attack. And each of us had some indication [ill.] brought murder and destruction to our islands.

When I returned, the only way I could fly at all was to instruct Civilian Pilot Training programs. Weeks passed. Then, out of the blue, came a telegram from the War Department announcing the organization of the WAFS (Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron) and the order to report within twenty-four hours if interested. I left at once.

Mrs. Nancy Love was appointed Senior Squadron Leader of the WAFS by the Secretary of War. No better choice could have been made. First and most important she is a good pilot, has tremendous enthusiasm and belief in women pilots and did a wonderful job in helping us to be accepted on an equal status with men.

Because there were and are so many disbelievers in women pilots, especially in their place in the army, officials wanted the best possible qualifications to go with the first experimental group. All of us realized what a spot we were on. We had to deliver the goods or else. Or else there wouldn't ever be another chance for women pilots in any part of the service.

We have no hopes of replacing men pilots. But we can each release a man to combat, to faster ships, to overseas work. Delivering a trainer to Texas may be as important as delivering a bomber to Africa if you take the long view. We are beginning to prove that women can be trusted to deliver airplanes safely and in the doing serve the country which is our country too.

I have yet to have a feeling which approaches in satisfaction that of having signed, sealed and delivered an airplane for the United States Army. The attitude that most non flyers have about pilots is distressing and often acutely embarrassing. They chatter about the glamour of flying. Well, any pilot can tell you how glamorous it is. We get up in the cold dark in order to get to the airport by daylight. We wear heavy cumbersome flying clothes and a thirty-pound parachute. You are either cold or hot. If you are female your lipstick wears off and your hair gets straighter and straighter. You look forward all afternoon to the bath you will have and the steak. Well, we get the bath but seldom the steak. Sometimes we are too tired to eat and fall wearily into bed.

None of us can put into words why we fly. It is something different for each of us. I can't say exactly why I fly but I know why as I've never known anything in my life.

I knew it when I saw my plane silhouetted against the clouds framed by a circular rainbow. I knew it when I flew up into the extinct volcano Haleakala on the island of Maui and saw the gray-green pineapple fields slope down to the cloud-dappled blueness of the Pacific. But I know it otherwise than in beauty. I know it in dignity and self-sufficiency and in the pride of skill. I know it in the satisfaction of usefulness.

For all the girls in the WAFS, I think the most concrete moment of happiness came at our first review. Suddenly and for the first time we felt a part of something larger. Because of our uniforms which we had earned, we were marching with the men, marching with all the freedom-loving people in the world.

And then while we were standing at attention a bomber took off followed by four fighters. We knew the bomber was headed across the ocean and that the fighters were going to escort it part way. As they circled over us I could hardly see them for the tears in my eyes. It was striking symbolism and I think all of us felt it. As long as our planes fly overhead the skies of America are free and that's what all of us everywhere are fighting for. And that we, in a very small way, are being allowed to help keep that sky free is the most beautiful thing I have ever known.

I, for one, am profoundly grateful that my one talent, my only knowledge, flying, happens to be of use to my country when it is needed. That's all the luck I ever hope to have.

Source: Fort, Cornelia. “At the Twilight’s Last Gleaming.” *Fly Girls.* American Experience. 2009. Web. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/flygirls/filmmore/reference/primary/lettersarticles01.html>