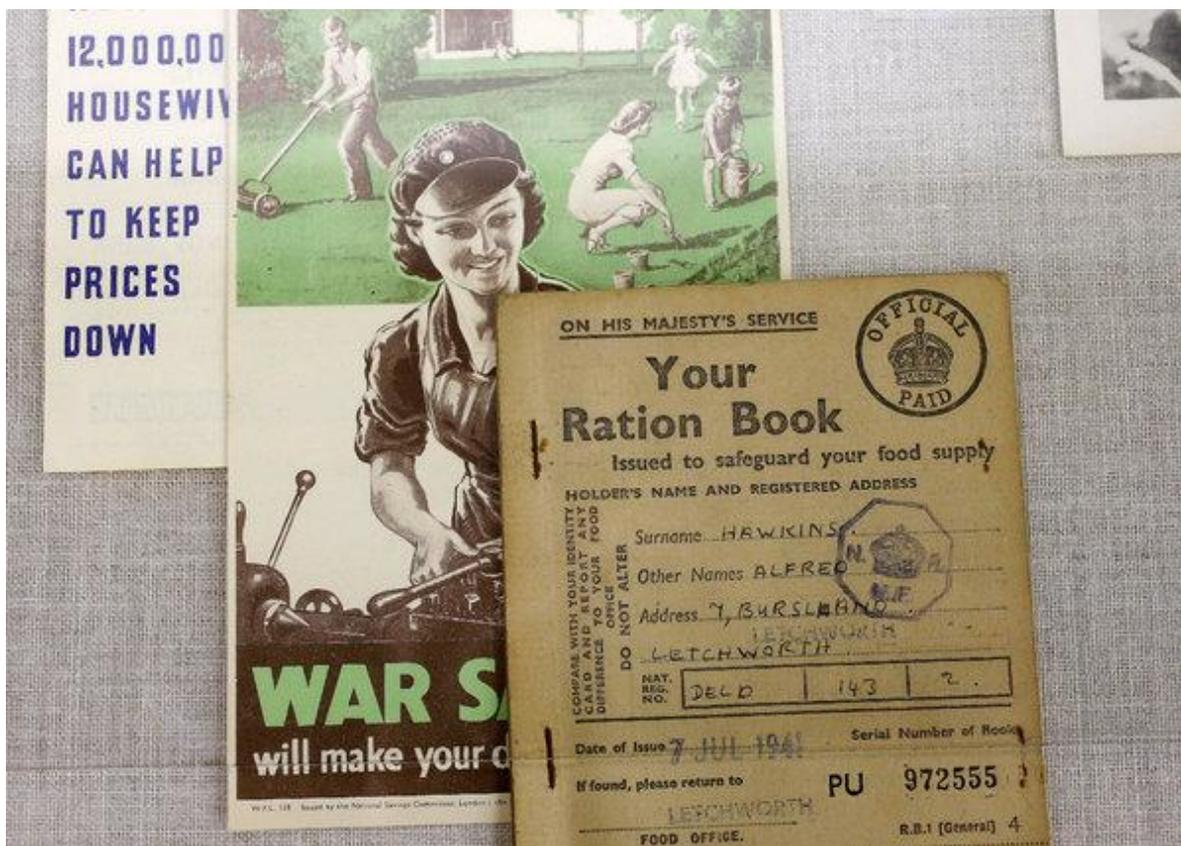


# The New York Times Magazine

AT WAR

## The Many Roles of Women in War: Sniper, Pilot, Death Camp Guard



A World War II British ration card, top, part of an exhibition called “Women in World War II” at The International World War II Museum, in Natick, Mass. Credit Steven Senne/Associated Press

**By Andrea N. Goldstein**

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Staring at the faded blue-and-white stripes of a woman’s concentration-camp uniform, I wondered how many members of my family died wearing one. I only know the names of those who lived. I arrived at the exhibit called “Women in World War II,” at The International Museum of World War II in Natick, Mass., expecting to see uniforms belonging to those who served in the armed forces during the war. As a former intelligence officer in the United States Navy, I was eager to encounter the stories of women

who paved the way: code breakers, radio operators, spies and saboteurs. I wasn't expecting reminders of just how unlikely it was that enough of my relatives survived that I got to be born, decades later, in New York.



Sue Wilkins, director of education at the museum, holds a 1945 newspaper photograph that shows a window washer 10 floors above a Minneapolis street during World War II, when women took over many jobs traditionally held by men. Credit Steven Senne/Associated Press

My grandmother is a Holocaust survivor. My great-grandparents, along with my grandmother and her brothers, escaped Nazi Germany and arrived in the Boston area in 1939. For most of my life, I believed the duty to “never forget” was to remember the millions who perished in the Holocaust. Yet the stories my grandmother and her brothers told were about how their daily lives slowly changed as Nazism gained power. The museum’s exhibit is a reminder that authoritarian regimes start subtly, as well as a reminder that they could not take hold without the support of women. The duty of remembering also involves understanding how the banal becomes brutality. In Germany, a mother might have used a night light emblazoned with a swastika to make her child feel safe at night. In Japan, women participated in “spiritual mobilization,” embroidering special belts for fighter pilots. “If the museum had a subtitle,” Kenneth Rendell, the museum’s director, said, “it would be that war is personal, and it’s complex.”

Displaying the role of women tells the story of the war itself: Everyone participated, and often in jobs that were once unheard-of for women. Most visitors are surprised to learn that women’s wartime roles went beyond Rosie the Riveter-style industrial work, according to Sue Wilkins, the museum’s education director. They were pilots and snipers, garbage collectors and window washers, concentration-camp guards and nurses. In the 1950s, the impulse to glorify the war and return to traditional values obscured the full extent of women’s contributions. Artifacts in the exhibit leave no doubt: a radio hidden under the false bottom of a baby carriage, used by the Resistance in occupied

France; United States Army Capt. Alice Burger's Distinguished Flying Cross, pinned to her uniform jacket. More than 350,000 women served in the United States military; British women were drafted into civil defense roles in the Auxiliary Territorial Service. (Queen Elizabeth, then an 18-year-old princess, volunteered.) In the Soviet Red Army, women served in front-line combat roles. Women's functions were sometimes contradictory: The Nazi death machine was simultaneously obsessed with life, and to propagate the so-called "master race," the government rewarded women with a medal called the German Mothers' Cross of Honor, for having four children or more.

The *Lebensborn* program created birthing centers for women of "Aryan" descent, who were encouraged to have children — typically out of wedlock — with SS officers.



Sue Wilkins explains a pre-war German propaganda poster, extolling a Nazi organization for women factory workers. Credit Steven Senne/Associated Press

In the United States, women's wartime contributions were largely forgotten after the war, but not without a certain amount of quiet debate. Their military service was intended to be temporary. In 1948, the year that women were first accepted as regular members of the armed forces, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower testified before the House Armed Services Committee that he was initially "horror struck" by the idea of women in the military but changed his mind after he saw them in action. During the war, Gen. George C. Marshall commissioned a study to measure the effectiveness of mixed-gender combat units. He and his staff were stunned by the finding that they performed better than all-male units. As the historian D'Ann Campbell discovered in 1993, the study was buried, because the general staff was concerned that the American public and Congress were opposed to expanding women's roles in the armed forces. This debate had nothing to do with what women were capable of, let alone what they wanted. It was a matter of men being bothered by changing roles, Rendell observed. "When women

were brought in to do jobs traditionally done by men, men had a big problem with it. It affected their own sense of what masculinity was.”



A British World War II recruitment poster created by the graphic designer Abram Games to encourage women to join the Auxiliary Territorial Service during World War II. Credit Steven Senne/Associated Press

The museum doesn't take positions on current debates, Rendell said; even so, it's impossible to not see parallels with contemporary issues. When I joined the military in 2009, ground combat jobs were still closed to women by Department of Defense policy. But the sprawling post-9/11 conflicts had no definite front lines and no end in sight, and operational realities led commanders to exploit every loophole possible to deploy women in combat roles, even if it wasn't reflected in their official job titles. I spent three years in a special-operations unit whose primary mission was to deploy alongside Navy SEALs and Green Berets. Women's presence was seen as a necessary inconvenience: These units needed intelligence, medical and logistical support, and often the best person for the job was female. In some cases, women were specifically recruited in order to work with the local population. In the United States' war efforts, special operations have been gender-integrated from their beginnings under the direction of the secretive Office of Strategic Services during World War II. When all roles were officially opened to women, in 2016, it was a case of policy formally recognizing what had been practiced for decades. The commander of United States Special Operations Command at the time, Gen. Joseph Votel, released a video message supporting the policy, citing the role of women in World War II.

In one of the last display cases, a playing card depicts a female Navy officer. She's wearing the female-specific "bucket cover," a hat developed for officers in the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) and still in service today. This item is much-beloved by female officers precisely because of its historical significance. Unlike other uniform items, which are often called

“unisex” but are truly designed for men, the bucket cover was specifically designed for women. This October, female officers will be required to retire this uniform item in exchange for the men’s version. Many female officers, myself included, think that eliminating one of the few traditions unique to women amounts to an erasure of our history and heritage. It erases a connection to both the work that women did during World War II and how hard they had to fight to do it in the first place.

At the end of my museum tour, I took stock of artifacts around me. The uniform of a female concentration-camp guard who might have killed my relatives. The summer camouflage uniform of a woman in the Red Army who served as a sniper 70 years before American women could. A wedding dress made from parachute silk. Images of women performing the everyday tasks that kept their countries running. Horror, heroism and daily life coexisted side by side. “The reality of war is very important to preserve,” Rendell said, “because otherwise you can get a whole generation of politicians who were never in a war, have no kids who served in the military and make decisions based on what appears to be simplistic fact.”

The march to war is conducted step by mundane step. Everyone has a role, whether through action or inaction. Driving home from the exhibit, I considered that perhaps the commitment to “never forget” is a responsibility to consider the everyday. I called my dad. I asked where he kept the memoirs my grandmother wrote to record her experiences in a country that was slipping toward dictatorship, genocide and war. The details that are most likely to be forgotten or erased contain the lessons that are most critical to learn.

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The Women in World War II exhibit runs at The International Museum of World War II until Dec. 29.