

Before Rosie: The Women of the Great War

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Military

Women served in the military too! Any female who served in the military will have a military personnel record just as a male soldier would. Some of these records were impacted by the 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. Additional information about that fire can be found at <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/fire-1973> but the most important thing to remember is that NARA is still working on preserving the records that were saved from the fire. Whether you think the fire affected your ancestor's records or not, ***don't*** just assume your ancestor's file was destroyed in the fire, ***always*** submit a request to NARA to see if the records still exist. The NARA staff strives to be as helpful as they can be with these requests!

There were those who felt the need to join the war effort before the United States entered the war. Many of those individuals crossed the border to Canada and joined the Canadian military until the United States entered the war in 1917. Some even signed up with military units in the United Kingdom and France.

Army and Army Air Corps (Air Force)

Women were only allowed to serve in the U.S. Army as nurses from 1901-1917. They served in military hospitals in the United States and overseas. Women telephone operators and stenographers were recruited by the U.S. Army to serve in France with the Quartermaster Corps. Women did not serve in the Army Air Corps (now known as the Air Force) until World War II.

Navy

Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels issued an order authorizing the enlistment of women in the U.S. Navy on March 19, 1917. Two days later the first woman was enlisted in the Navy as a Yeoman(F)...she was also America's first official enlisted woman of any branch of the service.

Marines

The first woman joined the Marine Corps Reserves in August 1918, another decision of Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels. The women who joined the Marine Corps served in clerical capacities, freeing male soldiers to be sent to the front lines.

Coast Guard

Women have served the Coast Guard as civilian lighthouse keepers since the early 1800s. They were finally authorized to wear the uniform when the Naval policy of authorizing the enlistment of women as female yeoman was extended to the Coast Guard. The female yeoman served as uniformed clerical workers at Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, DC.

Prisoners of War/Injuries/Casualties

Casualty statistics vary widely for the Great War. Estimates range from 9 million to over 15 million casualties. Wikipedia has a good article on World War I Casualties at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I_casualties. It includes an explanation of classification of casualty statistics and a detailed table showing casualties by 1914-1918 borders. Influenza and its complications were a common cause of death among women although some women were killed during battles and a few were executed for being spies.

Awards and Medals

There are a number of decorations, awards, and medals earned by military and civilian personnel during the Great War. The list of resources was, unfortunately, too lengthy to include in this handout and can be found on my website at <https://talkingboxgenealogy.com/resources-and-reading/>.

Division and Unit Histories

Division and Unit Histories are “yearbook style” books published after the Great War that contain information on the orders, movements, and soldiers of the book’s focus. Sometimes lists of soldiers’ names or even pages of soldiers’ photographs can be found in these histories. I recommend searching WorldCat, Hathi Trust or Google to learn whether there was a history written on the specific division or unit your ancestor was a part of.

Civilians

Just because someone didn’t serve in the military during the war, doesn’t mean they didn’t serve in some capacity which would have created a record for you to look for! From civic groups to Victory Gardens, there is probably a group or cause that your ancestor participated in. Think outside the box in your searches.

Women’s Organizations

There were many women’s organizations already in existence at the start of the Great War and many more formed during the war to support the war, military personnel, war relief effort, home front efforts, and women’s suffrage. It’s recommended that you search the histories of your ancestor’s area to determine which organizations existed in their area during the time period you’re researching.

Enemy Aliens

Many people automatically equate the term enemy alien with World War II, however, once a country declared war, natives from belligerent countries were immediately considered enemy aliens. Non-naturalized enemy aliens were required to register with U.S. authorities after the U.S. entry into the war. This included women of both foreign birth and American birth who were married to enemy aliens.

Conscientious Objectors

With any war comes strong opinions and political beliefs. The concept of conscientious objectors is not a new concept. There were approximately 64,000 people who claimed conscientious objector status. Approximately 80% of those who claimed conscientious objector status still went to war. Others were court-martialed or placed into non-combatant roles. When the government is involved and requests are made, records exist!

Publications about women's roles during the Great War:

- **Women, War, and Work: The Impact of World War I on Women Workers in the United States** (Maurine Weiner Greenwald)
- **In Uncle Sam's Service, Women Workers with the American Expeditionary Force** (Susan Zeiger)
- **American Women in World War I: They Also Served** (Lettie Gavin)
- **Women in the War Zone: Hospital Service in the First World War** (Anne Powell)
- **I Was a Yeoman (F)** (Mrs. Henry F. Butler [Estelle Kemper]), available to be viewed online at <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/i-was-a-yeoman-f.html>.
- **Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution** (Jeanne Holm)
- **Two Colored women with the American Expeditionary Forces** (Addie W. Hunton and Kathryn M. Johnson): available to be viewed online at <https://archive.org/details/twocoloredwomenwoohuntiala>.
- **Lady in the Navy: A Personal Reminiscence** (Joy B. Hancock)
- **Into the Breach: American Women Overseas in World War I** (Dorothy and Carl J. Schneider)
- **Women Marines in World War I** (Linda L. Hewitt), available to be viewed online at <http://bit.ly/2BWbGA2>.
- **Cultivating Victory: The Women's Land Army and the Victory Garden Movement** (Cecilia Gowdy-Wygant)
- **Fruits of Victory: the Women's Land Army of America in the Great War** (Elaine F. Weiss)
- **Answering the Call, The U.S. Army Nurse Corps, 1917- 1919, A Commemorative Tribute to Military Nursing in World War I** (Lisa M. Budreau and Richard M. Prior)
- **A History of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps** (Mary T. Sarnecky)
- **Highlights in the History of the Army Nurse Corps** (Carolyn M. Feller and Debora R. Cox)
- **The First, the Few, the Forgotten: Navy and Marine Corps Women in World War I** (Jean Ebbert)

- **Finding Themselves: The Letters of an American Army Chief Nurse in a British Hospital in France** (Julia Stimson)
- **The Hello Girls: America's First Women Soldiers** (Elizabeth Cobbs)
- **World War I's Hello Girls: Paving The Way For Women In The U.S. Army** (Elizabeth M. Collins): article available to be viewed online at <http://bit.ly/2wwfUIN>
- **Mobilizing Minerva: American Women in the First World War** (Kimberly Jensen)
- **Women Workers in the First World War** (Gail Braybon)
- **Serving Proudly: A History of Women in the U.S. Navy** (Susan Godson)
- **American Women and the World War** (Ida Clyde Clark)
- **Disloyal Mothers and Scurrilous Citizens: Women and Subversion during World War I** (Kathleen Kennedy)
- **Rosie's Mom: Forgotten Women Workers of the First World War** (Carrie Brown)
- **The Backwash of War** (Ellen N. La Motte)
- **The Second Line of Defense: American Women and World War I** (Lynn Dumenil)
- **War Girls: The First Aid Nursing Yeomanry in the First World** (Janet Lee)
- **The Radium Girls: The Dark Story of America's Shining Women** (Kate Moore)
- **The Great War: a guide to the service Records of all the World's Fighting Men and Volunteers** by Christine K. Schaefer
- **Women & the U.S. Navy**
(<https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/OnlineLibrary/photos/prs-tpic/females/yeoman-f.htm>)
- **Women Marines History, Women Marines Association**
(<https://www.womenmarines.org/wm-history>): a short history and list of milestones of women Marines

Additional resources about women in the Great War can be found on my website at <https://talkingboxgenealogy.com/resources-and-reading/>