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The Campus Experience of Hope College Women During World War II

By Brooke Carbaugh

Research into women at Hope College in the 1930s and 1940s began with observations regarding the female takeover of the *Anchor* during World War II. As a female researcher who attends Hope College, a school with a majority female student body, this period appeared significant in the current trends of the college.

World War II marked a unique time for women at Hope College since most of the male students enlisted and the women became the majority on campus. Their lives changed as the Hope community adjusted to support the war effort. I began my research in the military training program files in the Joint Archives of Holland, a collection of first-hand accounts compiled in the book *Hope at the Crossroads: The War Years*, oral history interviews, and collections on female faculty members at Hope College in the 1940s.

Many changes occurred on Hope's campus beginning with the draft, followed by the arrival of an Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), and ending with the post-World War II boom and return of veterans to the campus. The female students once again became a minority at Hope following the post-war boom, yet their experience diverged from the typical female college experience. These women remained on the homefront and continued their education, unlike the majority of their male peers, yet they experienced fear and instability that shaped their lives and altered the way women saw themselves on campus. World War II was a pivotal time

for women at Hope College because they assumed control of campus and illustrated their capability to lead, contribute to the war effort and support their peers.

When World War II began in September 1939, Hope College continued to be relatively untouched as the



United States did not enter the war until 1941. Even with the Selective Service Act in 1940, men enrolled in college, with a few exceptions, often could defer enlistment in the military. Editions of the *Anchor* in 1940 acknowledged the war, but generally the articles simply speculated about if and when the United States would enter the war.¹ The bombing of Pearl Harbor marked a turning point in the war for the United States. Eileen Nordstrom and George Zuidema compiled memories from

people at Hope College during World War II in the book *Hope at the Crossroads: The War Years*. December 7, 1941, became a memorable day and many alumni recalled where they were and what they were doing when they learned about the attack on Pearl Harbor. After Pearl Harbor, most men chose to voluntarily enlist instead of waiting for the draft. This permitted them to select their branch of service that aligned with their future career path. The male students who remained on campus prepared to quickly enter the medical, chemistry, and pastoral fields following an accelerated program or stayed because they failed the physical exam for enrollment into the military.²

(continued on page 2)

From the Director



The winter season continues here in Holland but we are warmed daily by fresh research questions from the community members, and Hope College students, faculty, and staff. This issue includes a World War II era article penned by summer 2021 research student Brooke Carbaugh while studying our collections for a much larger project. That project is

now a website called *Women at Hope College During the 1930s and 1940s* (<https://hopewomen.hopedla.org/hope-women/index>) and is a true joy to read.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Hope College Women (continued from page 1)

The U.S. involvement in World War II prompted the women to get more involved in the war effort as well, and their lives adjusted. The *Anchor* featured the fundraising efforts by the Women's Activity League (WAL). Women sponsored everything from book collections to relief drives to bond and stamp sales to sandwich sales in various campus buildings. The chapel housed boxes for monetary donations and barrels



Betty De Vries and Betty Van Lente delivered telegrams at the WAL penny carnival, April 1945

collected items for war relief. The American Red Cross and WAL sponsored courses in knitting, first aid, and home nursing. Additionally, there was extensive gas and food rationing that limited off-campus activities and the availability of sugar, butter, and other supplies. The few on-campus activities left often became less extravagant than in past years. Financial records from the Sigma Sigma sorority indicated the largest expenses during the war years went towards rush, while the magnitude of social events composed a large portion of the budget during a normal year.³ Sorority events evolved into a time to knit and sew for the American Red Cross, and even academics merged with the war effort. Pinks Mulder Dudley recalled knitting, even in Professor Boyd's German class. Instead of reprimanding her for knitting during class, Boyd announced that knitting would be permitted, as long as the yarn was "khaki-colored and clearly being transformed into socks or gloves or scarves for the troops."⁴

In addition to fundraising and service support, some women worked in the factories on summer break filling

the demand for workers. Rosey Maatman, a student at Hope in the early '40s, worked at the Chris Craft factory, which transformed from a boat factory to a Navy landing craft manufacturer. Her work earned her the nickname "Rosey the Riveter" after the famous propaganda in favor of women in the workforce.⁵ It should be noted that some women did serve in the military. For example, Jeanette Rylaarsdam, a former Hope College student, became a member of the U.S. Navy W.A.V.E.S (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency

Services). Rylaarsdam's husband, Jack "Russell" Baas, also attended Hope and served in the military, but Rylaarsdam ranked above Baas in the military.⁶ Regardless, the majority of women at Hope College continued to attend college and support the war from the home front. Despite the diminishing social activities, women felt fortunate to continue attending school and dominating campus. On September 15, 1943, the *Anchor* wrote, "You're really lucky, cause it isn't everyone who can attend a girl's school at \$125 tuition... So, gals, let's really get together and make this a red-letter year for Hope womanhood, huh?"⁷ For several years during the war, the women were the primary focus on the campus. They contributed to the war effort in numerous ways and proved their ability to hold down the home front. World War II caused the women to divert their attention from the usual college experience, dominated by academics and social life, toward the war. The women showed their support by fundraising, occupying jobs in factories, and using time spent in class or sorority meetings to aid the troops.

In addition to fundraising efforts, the remaining women on campus worked to boost the morale of servicemen by sending letters. The majority of men left campus, thus female students assumed control of the *Anchor*, the student newspaper, and featured addresses for former Hope students now in the military. This allowed the remaining students and faculty to keep in contact with those across the country or overseas. The editors sent copies of the *Anchor* to men overseas in a "Camp to Campus" campaign designed to keep them in touch with life at Hope and give them a taste of home. The *Anchor* published a piece thanking those responsible for gathering the addresses of Hope servicemen, mailing approximately 400 issues of the *Anchor* a week, and the YMCA for paying the postage bills.⁸ In the article, "*Anchor* Goes Worldwide," the staff printed a letter from



Sergeant R.L. Burger, who frequently read the *Anchor* publication that his friend, James Hasbrouck Bevier, received. Burger states, "I wish to say thank you for your thoughtfulness for sending your paper to the boys in the service — this is for Jim and myself."⁹ The female takeover of the *Anchor* and the "Camp to Campus" campaign allowed the women to express their views and continue supporting the war effort. Women controlled the voice of the Hope College student body, the newspaper, and received gratitude from both Hope College students and those who read the paper through friends.

Articles in the *Anchor* and firsthand accounts indicate the women may have felt guilt or regret that they were not doing enough in comparison to their male counterparts. In *Hope at the Crossroads: The War Years*, Pinks Mulder explained, "And our part seemed very small— sending care packages of cookies and candy, knitting scarves, huddling around radios for the latest news."¹⁰ One article entitled "I'm a Coward" references the difficulty associated with establishing the foundation of the war effort on the home front. The writer of the article asserts that being on the home front is more taxing than being in the service as a woman. This article demonstrates there are a lot of ways for women to help the war effort, but remaining on the home front requires a woman to stay hopeful and courageous despite the unknown. The writer asserts, "I haven't the dauntless, undying courage that survives under the stress of the somewhat serene life of a quiet town. I don't want to be on the bottom, straining to hold things up; I want to be on top, warding off danger."¹¹ This article contains a note explaining the editors did not endorse the opinions in the article, but found the argument thought-provoking. These articles are significant because women realized their new influence occurred because the men sacrificed their time at Hope to serve in the military. While both males and females served their country during World War II in valuable ways, it seems the degree of participation in the war effort was on the mind of these women.

Gendered relations also shifted in the 1940s. World War II caused many women and men to become engaged or get married since the men rapidly departed campus. Myra Berry stated, "As men were being sent around the world, there appeared to be an urgency in establishing permanent ties with loved ones left waiting at home."¹² This rush to solidify relationships increased the stress on women back home. The women who got engaged or the few who got married, then had to worry about the safety of their fiancé or husband until they returned from the war. Pinks Mulder recalled excitement surrounding passionate goodbyes and promises to wait for their partners, but also fear. Mulder states, "We saw those newsreels. We knew that some of those we hugged goodbye would be wounded, and some would not be coming back at all."¹³ Many of the women traveled to the train station in the evenings or on weekends hoping a soldier came through with news of a loved one.¹⁴ It



Local servicemen leaving Holland during World War II, ca. 1943

wasn't just the women's sweethearts leaving either because brothers, cousins, etc. were also called into duty. Deaths from the war came in the newspaper or in letters from family, peers, or others in the Hope College community. Pinks Mulder Dudley recalled the day the Hope community learned Dr. Kleis's son, John, died in active duty. She states, "I will never forget sitting for a few minutes in his living room, feeling the weight of trying to think of something to say to help lift the deep sadness and finding no words at all."¹⁵ Loss impacted all members of the Hope community, such as the remaining students and the faculty, either directly and indirectly. News on loved ones arrived slowly, which paired with the stories of loss likely created a feeling of camaraderie but also a heavy mood on campus.

As the war continued and so many men left the college, Hope suffered from the decrease in students paying tuition. The student population decreased by almost half and Hope struggled to remain open. An Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) solved this problem in 1943 by contracting Hope College to train soldiers for specific careers in the military. Formerly, Hope College housed an Army Pilot School in 1942, so the college was prepared to continue working with military troops and brought income into the school.

This program impacted the academic experience of women by changing the dynamics on campus in both positive and negative ways. President Wynand Wichers asserted civilian education was not neglected in light of this change.¹⁶ Yet, it is likely the ASTP contributed to a hierarchy on campus. The campus needed the income from the ASTP to remain open since the tuition from the female students no longer sufficed. This program also appealed to members of the Holland and Hope College community. One alumni wrote to Wichers stating, "All of us are shouldering additional responsibilities with the hope and prayer that this war may end soon, and it certainly gives me a real 'lift' to know that Hope College is taking such an active and important part in the war effort."¹⁷ Furthermore, the ASTP occupied physical space in nearly all areas of campus but Voorhees Hall, a long-standing all female dorm. Despite efforts by Wichers to prevent the use of Van Vleck by the ASTP,



ASTP servicemen marching to class, ca. 1943

this building served as both a female dorm and the infirmary. The school required financial and alumni support and this program provided both of these elements. Additionally, each day as the soldiers marched along the sidewalks, the women were required to make way for them. Trudy Vander Haar recalled, “Every morning, two columns of Army men came ‘Hup-two-three-four’ ing up the walk in the opposite direction. We students obediently made way for them, stepping off the sidewalk if necessary.”¹⁸ Overall, many women remembered the ASTP troops boosting morale on campus. Myra Berry reflected, “One would not suspect that with the above negative comments, there actually was good rapport between the G.I.s and the civilian student body. Spirits sagged when it was announced that the ASTP program would end before the expected time.”¹⁹ The ASTP was a priority on campus because the college needed financial resources, but lightening the mood on campus and adding variation to life was positive for the civilian women as well.

The ASTP men altered the social life at Hope College, even though the civilian and military courses were separate and the ASTP men followed busy schedules. Libby Hillegonds maintained that the lives of the ASTP men and Hope women were relatively separate, but some interactions did occur because five marriages resulted from the mixing of the ASTP and Hope women.²⁰ Most of the interactions between Hope students and the ASTP men occurred either on Sunday, when both the men and the women had time off, or at the all-college mixers sponsored by either Hope or the Army. The Army hosted a ball when they were there, which promoted mingling between the groups. The ASTP men impressed Wichers with their excellent character, fine scholastic ability, and religious attitudes.²¹ Yet, they still were not “Hope men.” When the ASTP men arrived, Barbara Bilkert Mulder recalled Coach Hinga, the football coach at Hope, saying, “Now, girls, don’t get involved. Just wait until ‘our boys’ come home!”²²

The opinions of individuals like Coach Hinga failed to prevent mingling between the ASTP and civilian students. The ASTP men altered the social life at Hope College. Jennifer Hill argued in her paper, “‘A Miss Amiss?’ Dorm, Dress, and Dating of 1940s Hope College Women” that women in the 1940s came to Hope College to find a Christian husband with similar values.²³ Most of the male Hope students left for the military, so the ASTP provided a different way to meet the opposite sex. An anonymous writer in the *Anchor* reprimanded the Hope community for having a “priority rating” and treating the ASTP men with greater interest than past Hope men.²⁴ However, there were also indications of mixed feelings between the Hope women and ASTP men. The *Anchor* printed views from the women and some appreciated the male presence while others expressed complaints against the ASTP:

“Things I don't like?—being jostled off the sidewalks into the snow—they don't whistle at me enough — I like to throw snowballs, and they won't have snowball fights—some of the fellows are too fast, although I can think of one who is o. k.—I don't get enough telephone calls; they never call.”²⁵



ASTP servicemen and Hope coeds at a social function, ca. 1943

In the next edition, the ASTP men replied with their opinions on Hope college women. These thoughts varied as well. For example, one ASTP man stated, “I think they are a swell bunch of girls, but there is an adolescent element present.”²⁶ The ASTP were not enrolled in Hope, so the women remained the majority, but they did bring variety to the campus. The articles tended to be lighthearted, but presented relevant feelings. The women spearheaded the *Anchor* at the time, thus they initiated the string of comments published and opened themselves up to the critiques from the ASTP men. This indicates a desire to voice their opinions and a willingness to receive honest opinions in return.



Students registering for classes outside Graves Hall, September 1946

The ASTP troops left in March 1944, and the men began to return from the war in May 1945, while more returned in August 1945 after victory in Japan. The G.I. Bill permitted veterans to return to college with stipends covering tuition and living expenses, thus Hope College entered the post-World War II boom in enrollment. The 1945-1946 school year witnessed a 75% increase in enrollment. Enrollment increased again in 1946-1947, thus requiring Hope College to expand and accommodate the increase in enrollment.²⁷ Libby Hillemonds stated, "All the profs were glad to see the servicemen come back to campus to raise the academic level a notch, finish their education and get on with their lives. They had a little different perspective after their war experiences and were more serious about life."²⁸ Metta Ross, a professor at Hope, also noted this change impacted the women as well. In an oral history interview she explained, "The girls' attitude toward their men friends changed, not because of me but because of the changes in life, these men coming back from wars mutilated and nerve sick."²⁹ This caused an evolution in classroom atmosphere and focus because veterans wanted to know why things happened as they did.³⁰ World War II remains the most costly war in terms of loss of life and the veterans witnessed this firsthand. The trauma from World War II changed them, which would have impacted the females in classes and through their relationships with their peers.

World War II signifies a period where women dominated campus and made attempts to support the war effort. Women were able to remain at Hope College during the war, but their lives changed in order to support the war effort and their peers in the military. Usual campus activities like social events or dating became sparse, the ASTP overtook the campus, and women faced the fear that their loved ones would not return home from the war. Women tended to be a minority on campus and World War II caused a reversal of this trend. By being the majority on campus, the female students gained influence and proved their ability to lead.

Endnotes

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- ¹¹"I'm a Coward," *Hope College Anchor*, February 9, 1944.
- ¹²Nordstrom and Zuidema, *Hope at the Crossroads*, 39.
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- ²⁴"Why Priority Ratings," *Hope College Anchor*, November 10, 1943.
- ²⁵"The Firing Line, or Revealed Opinions," *Hope College Anchor*, February 23, 1944.
- ²⁶"The Firing Line," *Hope College Anchor*, March 8, 1944.
- ²⁷Nordstrom and Zuidema, *Hope at the Crossroads*, 132.
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- ²⁹Dick and Phyllis Huff, "Metta Ross Oral Interview," March 15, 2002, Ross, Metta J. (1890-1984). Papers, 1896-1984 (H88-0131), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.
- ³⁰Metta Ross, February 20, 1945, Ross, Metta J. (1890-1984). Papers, 1896-1984 (H88-0131), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.

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The ball held for ASTP servicemen and Hope coeds, ca. 1943