

EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

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A Senior Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

by

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Greenville, NC

May 2014

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Senior Honors Thesis

1 May 2014

The Evolution of Women's Roles in the United States Air Force

The United States Air Force is a prestigious military branch whose mission is to fly, fight, and win in air, space, and cyberspace. It became its own branch of service on 18 September 1947 and was formerly the Army Air Corps, a combination of what is now the United States Army and United States Air Force. At that time, women were allowed to serve as civilian secretaries and support roles back home, but were not permitted to fight in battle in any of the service branches or even serve as Active Duty members. Women have played a vital role in this country's defense relations throughout history and this paper will explore how women's efforts and roles have evolved from the start of the United States Air Force as volunteers, secretaries, and nurses, into today's combative heroes. Some of the women that will be discussed at length in this paper include Staff Sergeant Esther McGowin Blake, the first woman to join the Air Force when it became its own branch of service; Lieutenant Colonel Jacqueline Cochran who was the first woman to break the sound barrier; and the Honorable Sheila Widnall who became the first female Secretary of the Air Force. Although their impacts do not have direct links to each other, they have each set stepping stones that set each other up for success as well as having raised the bar high for the women succeeding them.

World War II ended on 2 September 1945 when Japan surrendered. At that time, the military in the United States was becoming more advanced and there was an increase in the use

of separate air power and ground forces during wartime scenarios. This gave the United States the need for a military branch dedicated to air power. The Air Force did not permit women to join the nation's newest branch for the first year. This was a time period in which patriotism was at an all-time high in America, and women were just expected to sit on the sidelines and observe the war time efforts state-side. These women were so dedicated to helping with the war efforts and creating a stronger national defense, that they went on to create the WASP, Women Airforce Service Pilots, until branches like the United States Air Force would permit them to hold more combative roles. Today, the WASP is not necessary since there are many female pilots and navigators serving in the Air Force. Within the last year, women are now eligible to serve not only on the front lines of duty in their current career options, but also in combat specific career fields that were previously only open to men. Although these changes started during the World War II era, the way in which gender roles are defined and perceived has constantly evolved. The military is no longer considered to be only for men. After all, both men and women have sacrificed their lives for our country throughout history, including 38 women pilots that were killed in action during World War II. In more recent times, "a total of 143 women deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kuwait have lost their lives in service to America" ("Grim") since the attacks that took place on 11 September 2001 in the United States. It is clear that women are just as willing to lay down their own lives to support and defend the Constitution and to protect the freedom of United States citizens.

Aside from the creation of the temporary WASP, the Women's Armed Services Integration Act was the first step that the Air Force as a whole made towards women's rights. This law was signed by the executive order of President Harry Truman then passed by Congress on June 12, 1948, just one year after the Air Force's creation (DoD). Senator Margaret Chase

Smith of Maine was the driving force behind the new change. She felt that it was unnatural for a democratic nation to be fighting in a war “for freedom and liberty overseas and ignore the principles of justice and opportunity at home” as she quoted; “America's democracy just won't let you do that” (DoD). With a very convincing argument, she was able to get Congress on board with her conviction. Once the law became official, it meant that women would become permanent, regular members of all armed forces branches unlike the World War I and World War II eras, when women were only allowed to help in efforts during times of war.

On 17 June 1998, there was a 50 year anniversary ceremonial event to commemorate the passing of the Women's Armed Services Integration Act. It was held at the Women's Memorial in Arlington, Virginia National Cemetery where the Master of Ceremonies, Deputy Defense Secretary John Hamre, spoke profoundly. He talked about how “women who, during World War II...Back on the home front, kept factories running and offices humming, yet in the aftermath of the war were told it was time to return to the kitchens and parlors of America's homes” (“Esther”). America's politicians, soldiers, and husbands were telling women helping with wartime efforts that the war was finally over and they had to go back to being solely house wives and mothers. Now that the women had a taste of work life, making a living, contributing their share to society, and becoming more equal to the ranks of their male counterparts, they did not want to go back.

There were many great women in history. Because of such great women, there were multiple advances in the roles in which women were involved in the United States Air Force. The first woman to join the US Air Force was Staff Sergeant Esther McGowin Blake in 1948. She was very excited and eager to join as soon as she heard about the Integration Act that had recently passed. It was quoted that she enlisted “in the first minute of the first hour of the first

day regular Air Force duty was authorized for women on 8 July 1948” (“Esther”). She entered active duty as an enlisted member and eventually achieved the grade of E-5, the fifth of nine ranks in the Air Force enlisted structure. She joined when she found out that her oldest son, a B-17 Flying Fortress Pilot, was shot down over Belgium and reported missing during World War II. She decided she wanted to speed up the efforts of the war in any way possible, especially in hopes that her son would be brought home safely. She also had anticipations of “helping free soldiers from clerical work to fight, thus speeding the end of the war.” Since women were not allowed to fight in combat, she wanted to serve as an Active Duty member in any way possible, even if it meant doing paperwork all day. To her, a product of her generation, she wanted to take the men out of the desk work so they could focus their efforts on combat. She was also quoted in the Miami Herald as saying “If I can do this, my efforts will be worthwhile (“Esther”). She remained on active duty for ten years until disabilities prevented her from further service. Luckily for her she was eventually able to see both of her sons return from combat alive, heavily decorated, and with only minor wounds (“Esther”). Currently there is a dormitory named after her at the Air Force Senior Non Commissioned Officers Academy at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

A few years after Staff Sergeant Esther McGowin Blake joined the Air Force, Lieutenant Colonel Jacqueline Cochran became the first woman to break the sound barrier in 1953. She was encouraged by then Major Chuck Yeager to begin pushing her limits further than she had ever done before. They shared a lifelong friendship and she felt comfortable enough to trust him. Lieutenant Colonel Cochran was a great role model for women during the World War II era. She earned her private pilot license in 1935 and participated in the Bendrix Transcontinental Air Race several times, managing to set the transcontinental record in 1938. She then focused her

efforts on advocating for female aviator involvement in WWII, and led the WASP training program (“Jacqueline”). For her courageous efforts, Lieutenant Colonel Cochran was given the Distinguished Service Medal in 1945, but is most known for what she accomplished on 18 May 1953. At Rogers Dry Lake, California, Lieutenant Colonel Cochran flew a Canadair F-86 Sabre jet borrowed from the Royal Canadian Air Force, maintaining an average speed of 652.337 miles per hour thus breaking the sound barrier (“Jacqueline”). What is even more incredible is that after accomplishing this feat, she pushed her limits even further and nearly doubled her previous speed in 1964, shattering her previous record. In total, it is believed that Lieutenant Colonel Cochran set more than 200 records during her career (“Jacqueline”). Every day that she served she pushed herself and her peers to not only succeed, but excel. The work that she completed led to further improvements in the way aerospace is utilized by the Air Force, and is still evident today.

Chief Master Sergeant Grace Peterson became the first female to become a Chief Master Sergeant in 1960, the highest rank attainable for enlisted personnel in the Air Force. Not only was she the first female to hold the rank of Chief Master Sergeant, she was among the original group of senior Non-Commissioned Officers to be selected for the rank of E-9 (*Air Force's First*). She joined the Air Force while in New York City, soon after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on the infamous date of 7 December 1941, which thrust America into World War II. She could not believe the horrors that occurred that day, and felt that immediate action was necessary. In turn, she joined what was then known as the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, WAAC, in 1942 (*Air Force's First*). In her words, she was “not only proud of [her] personal good fortune, but [she] felt an immense pride of [her] sex. Many of the volunteers she and her colleagues received, some a great deal older than her, were college graduates and had established

civilian careers but chose, instead, to serve with the armed forces” (*Air Force’s First*). To her, it was very humbling and impressive to see that so many women dropped everything so quickly to help with war time efforts. That in itself gave her the motivation to remain in the Air Force for a career, despite her gender never allowing her to deploy to be able to fight with her fellow brothers in arms. If not for this lone factor, she would have been able to travel internationally, and make an even more distinct impact on the defense of her country.

Major General Jeanne Holm became the first woman to be promoted to the General ranks on 16 June 1971. “In October 1948 during the Berlin crisis, General Holm was recalled to active duty with the Army and went to Camp Lee, Virginia, as a company commander. The following year she transferred to the Air Force and was sent to Erding Air Depot, Germany. There she served as assistant director of plans and operations for the 7200th Air Force Depot Wing, and later was War Plans Officer for the 85th Air Depot Wing, during the Berlin airlift and the early phases of the Korean War” (*Major General*). When she transferred to be an Active Duty Officer in the Air Force, she was already destined for greatness. After returning home from her overseas assignment in 1952, she became the first woman to attend Air Command and Staff School at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama (*Major General*). Upon graduation and at a later assignment, she was the congressional staff officer for the director of manpower and organization in Washington, D.C. where she was awarded the Legion of Merit. Later in her career, she was “appointed director, Women in the Air Force, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, Personnel, in November 1965” (*Major General*). She was extended in that position twice, and not only made history for women, but for the armed forces as a whole.

As the director she was “responsible for overall staff cognizance of and advice on matters concerning military women in the Air Force. During her tenure, policies affecting women were

updated, Women in the Air Force (WAF) strength more than doubled, job and assignment opportunities greatly expanded, and uniforms modernized. She was an active proponent for expanding the opportunities for women to serve in the Armed Forces and a catalyst for changing their roles and career opportunities within the Air Force. For her exceptionally meritorious service in this assignment; she was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal” (*Major General*). This was, and still is, a huge deal for advances in opportunities available to women in not only the Air Force, but in the armed services. Her decisions, determination, and actions created a more uniform force, evening the gap in the gender playing field. She retired as a Major General on 1 June 1975 and passed away on 15 February 2010 (*Major General*). With 33 years of service in the United States Army and United States Air Force combined, she truly embodied the Air Forces three core values; Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do, and can easily be seen as a role model to both men and women alike.

The first General rank is a Brigadier General, O-7, of the 158 people in the Air Force that hold their rank, 12 of them are female. Out of 100 total Airmen with the rank of O-8, Major General, only 13 are females. Next is Lieutenant General, O-9, with only 3 females out of 46 as of the census that was completed and published on 30 September 2011 in the Air Force Magazine. The next publication of rank by gender will be released in September 2014. As of the census taken in 2011, only 13 males held the rank of O-10, General, and absolutely no females (“Active Duty”). On 5 June 2012, the Air Force promoted its first ever female four-star General, General Janet C. Wolfenbarger. At the time of appointment she was assigned to take command of the Air Force Materiel Command at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, within the same month. She was even among the first group of female cadets to graduate from the Air Force Academy with a degree in engineering sciences in 1980 (“Janet”). Before her promotion,

she was working in the Pentagon as the deputy in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition. While assigned to this position her duties entailed overseeing production and modernization of an annual \$60 billion budget in Air Force programs. She also managed research, development, and testing operations with the branch (“Janet”). When the Air Force Times asked General Wolfenbarger about the new promotion she exclaimed, "I am honored to have been confirmed by the Senate for promotion to the rank of general and to serve as commander of Air Force Materiel Command. Until I take command of AFMC, I will continue to focus on the important Air Force acquisition work here at the Pentagon” (“Janet”). The dedication she displays during every assignment is outstanding, from the highly technical degrees she earned, her oversight of a \$60 billion budget in her newest assignment, her work with F-22s, B-2s, and C-17s, to her concentration on what is best for the Air Force. She advanced quickly through the General ranks, which is evident in her serving as a Major General for only six months, which typically this promotion takes a few years to earn. General Wolfenbarger is an inspiration for women everywhere. She proved that even in today’s military environment, there are always limits and boundaries to be conquered and accomplishments to be made.

The first female Chaplain, a religious leader working for the military, was Major General Lorraine K. Potter in 1973 (*Chaplain*). Such jobs were traditionally only reserved for men. She served over twenty years in the Air Force, became a Chaplain when she was only a First Lieutenant, and retired as a Major General. Not only was she tasked with mentoring, promoting religious spirituality, and helping Airmen with personal problems, she was a “member of the special staff of the Chief of Staff, whom she [advised] on all matters pertaining to the religious and moral welfare of Air Force personnel. More importantly, she [was] responsible for

establishing an effective total chaplain program to meet the religious needs of all members of the Air Force” (*Chaplain*). As a staff member of the Chief of Staff, she was the pastor for over 850,000 people at approximately 1,300 locations in the United States, and overseas. That number includes members serving on active-duty, in the Air Force Reserves and contracted civilians (*Chaplain*). At the time of her retirement, she was stationed in Washington, D.C. where she and other members advised the Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff on religion, and ethical and quality-of-life concerns (*Chaplain*). Major General Potter proved to everyone how capable women can be, and provided a great service to her country. Her awards, decorations, and achievements are all extremely impressive which supports the fact that no matter what career field women were serving in or assigned to, they not only fulfilled their duties, but went above and beyond all required performance factors.

On the operational side of the Air Force, Lieutenant General Leslie H. Kenne became the first female test pilot in 1974 (*Military*). This was a very new concept. The only flying roles women had ever served in before 1974 were during World War II, as members of the aforementioned WASP. Getting women involved with the operations of the Air Force was a nice change of pace for that time period, and in today’s Air Force, although not a 50/50 split it is very common to see a woman amongst air crews.

In 1975 the Air Force welcomed its first wave of female Basic Military Training instructors (*Military*). They were now allowed to train enlisted men and women at boot camp, eliminating a male only training faction. Consequently, sexual harassment and assault cases were greatly reduced among BMT instructors since men did not have to go into the female barracks so often during certain training periods. Along with training; females were finally allowed to attend school at the Air Force Academy as cadets, with the acceptance of Cadet Joan

Olsen in 1976. In 1977, the first ten women were enrolled in and graduated from Air Force Undergraduate Pilot Training for the first time at Williams Air Force Base, Arizona (*Military*). Such accomplishments might have seemed small at the time, but they were gateways for women's rights and expanded opportunities available to women in the military.

After the women mentioned prior had blazed a trail in training roles, it gave other women the confidence to venture into political aspects of the military less than 20 years later. The Honorable Sheila Widnall was appointed as the first female Secretary of the Air Force in 1993. The Secretary of the Air Force is the link between the United States Air Force and the President, and occasionally the Senate. It is a position held by a civilian who works directly under the Secretary of Defense, and has the authority to conduct internal affairs of the Air Force. Although the position is held by a civilian, it is an honor and extremely high achievement to be appointed as such. In this role she was responsible for the current and future readiness of the Air Force to accomplish its missions...and was further responsible for planning, justifying and allocating the service's annual budget of approximately \$62 billion. Her other responsibilities included logistical support, maintenance, research and development and welfare of personnel (*Dr. Sheila*). She served as Secretary of the Air Force from 6 August 1993 to 31 October 1997. The Honorable Sheila Widnall was also internationally known for her work in fluid dynamics, specifically in the areas of aircraft turbulence and spiraling airflows. She has served on many boards, panels and committees in government, academia and industry (*Dr. Sheila*). Her hard work has not gone unnoticed. Over time, she proved that women were and still are very strong, independent, trustworthy, and respectable hard working people, and that no job should be restricted to males only, no matter the level of responsibility of the job.

Captain Martha McSally became the first female to fly combat missions in 1995 (*Military*). Bringing women into combative roles was the building block to women operating overseas in deployed environments, and was a gateway to opening the front lines to women. Captain McSally was the first to command a fighter squadron into combat, earn the Bronze Star, and earn six air medals for her courageous efforts. She amassed over 325 combat hours in the single-seat A-10 “Warthog.” She was a fighter pilot and eventually retired as a “full-bird” colonel. She is currently running for office to become Arizona’s next senator.

Another notable accomplish for women came when Senior Airman Jennifer Donaldson graduated from sniper school in 2001. At the time, she was a member of the Illinois Air National Guard and jumped at the chance to enroll in the first class to allow females to attend sniper school. On 14 April 2001, she graduated from the National Guard Sniper School's first counter sniper course for Air Guard security forces personnel. She was nicknamed ‘G.I. Jane’ at Camp - Robinson in central Arkansas, near Little Rock (*Military*). Having women as snipers proved that women can handle pressures physically and mentally equal to men. Although not all women could attend sniper school, neither could all men. Therefore only the elite of both genders have what it takes to receive acceptance and graduate from sniper school. This accomplishment could also be seen as a gateway to the new regulations allowing women to compete for acceptance into career fields that were previously open only to men such as Special Forces, Combat Control, and Tactical Air Control Party Specialist.

Within the past year women have been accepted into limited front line combat career fields. By allowing women to serve in dedicated combat positions, they will be entitled to receive extra pay and will have even more opportunities for promotion. Before this right was given, women were already actively supporting combat operations and being put in harm’s way.

Women have proven throughout history that they can handle the pressures of front line combat while being effective leaders, but they were unable to receive the same career advancements, recognition, or satisfaction of fully serving their country as men serving in combat operations.

In recent years, battles have become less traditional and more unconventional. Previously, battlefields were more clearly defined with two opposing sides with differing uniforms. Now, the war zone is not just open fields. It threatens the safety of everyone, whether deployed in combat, serving on a base, or in the comfort of their own home. Random attacks of violence are more common than ever before. Fighting has evolved from swords to guns and cannons, to bombs made out of ordinary household items and simple technology found on the internet. Both men and women are just as likely to be attacked while performing a support role in the new unconventional style of warfare. Since the dangers are ever present, women should not be denied the benefits of serving in combat, when the battlefield is no longer as clearly defined as it once was.

More than likely there will never be a fifty-fifty split of men and women serving in the military; as it will always be a physically and mentally demanding career field that not all women will even take interest. Below is a table from the Air Force Magazine with a survey posted on 30 September 2011. It shows the differences in the gender of Airmen on Active Duty broken down by rank.

Active Duty Airmen by Rank

(As of Sept. 30, 2011)

Rank	Men	Women	Total
Officers			
General	13	0	13
Lieutenant General	43	3	46
Major General	87	13	100
Brigadier General	146	12	158
Colonel	3,130	426	3,556
Lieutenant Colonel	8,612	1,304	9,916
Major	12,027	2,497	14,524
Captain	18,351	4,875	23,226
First Lieutenant	5,592	1,627	7,219
Second Lieutenant	5,195	1,534	6,729
Total	53,196	12,291	65,487
Enlisted			
CMSAF	1	0	1
Chief Master Sergeant	2,337	278	2,615
Senior Master Sergeant	4,400	748	5,148
Master Sergeant	21,415	4,330	25,745
Technical Sergeant	33,378	8,230	41,608
Staff Sergeant	55,933	14,226	70,159
Senior Airman	40,913	10,487	51,400
Airman First Class	42,401	9,515	51,916
Airman	3,949	844	4,793
Airman Basic	8,508	1,649	10,157
Total	213,235	50,307	263,542
Academy Cadets	3,387	954	4,341
Total Personnel	269,818	63,552	333,370

But just as history has proven, women will continue to break through stereotypes and taboos to make the future of the Air Force a better organization. There will always be certain jobs that mainly men will fill, such as combat search and rescue and special operations units like Delta Force.

Air Force General Daniel ‘Chappie’ James once said “the power of excellence is overwhelming. It is always in demand, and nobody cares about its color.” There is a good reason that every cadet in the AFROTC program at East Carolina University must know such a quote. It explains that being excellent is an act, no matter what race, ethnicity, religious

background, or gender of the person that is performing such a great feat. Women are always raising the bar and excelling in the tasks that they are given, which has been proven time and time again over the last 66 years of the Air Force's existence.

Women currently make up only 18.9% of the Air Force, but still make a significant contribution to mission accomplishments. We have come a long way from the day of the Air Force's creation in 1947 when zero women served, or were even eligible to serve. As a female candidate for a commission into the United States Air Force, I am very proud of the accomplishments achieved by the women before me. I am thankful that I will be serving in a branch of the military that provides equality to both men and women and have many great opportunities that I can pursue in the near future.

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The Evolution of Women's Roles in the US Air Force

By: Kathleen Tcherkezian

Thesis: Women have played a vital role in this country's defense relations throughout the past century and into the present. This paper will explore how women's efforts and roles have evolved from the start of the United States Air Force as volunteers, secretaries, and nurses, into today's combative heroes.

Background:

World War II ended on September 2, 1945 when Japan surrendered. At that time the military in the United States was becoming more advanced and there was an increase in the use of separate air power and ground forces during wartime scenarios. This gave the United States the need for a military branch dedicated to air power. At that time women were allowed to serve as civilian secretaries and support roles back home, but were not permitted to fight in battle or serve within any of the branches.

Summary:

Just a few examples of truly extraordinary women that created history through time include Staff Sergeant Esther McGowin Blake who was the first woman to join the Air Force when it became its own branch; Lieutenant Colonel Jacqueline Cochran who was the first woman to break the sound barrier, and the Honorable Sheila Widnall who become the first female secretary of the Air Force.

Conclusion:

Women currently make up only 18.9% of the Air Force, but still make a significant contribution. This has come a long way since creation of the Air Force, when there were not any women serving in 1947. Not only have women set such high standards for those in following generations, the Air Force has allowed for the change to occur over time and adapted to the growing need for a diverse force.

