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What Job is Mine on the Victory Line?

By Karen Westerberg

It was still dark outside, and the rest of the family was asleep as Virginia Snow Wilkinson got ready for work. The year was 1943, the United States was at war, and Wilkinson was helping her country by working as a ship fitter at the Kaiser Shipyards Company in Richmond, Virginia. Prior to the war, she had been a housewife with three teenagers, but during the war, she got up at 5:30 every morning to go down to the sea to build ships.

Before the United States entered World War II in 1941, most Americans believed that a woman's place was in the home. One week after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, all that changed when the call went out for women to support the war effort by joining the work force. Only six months later, more than two million women had jobs outside the home, and by 1943, more than three million more women had been added to the labor force. Many were employed in war plants, while the rest worked in civilian trades and services necessary to maintain the wartime economy.

As war-production needs increased, the call went out for even more women. "Now that the war has really entered the active offensive...we need more and more munitions," said War Manpower Commission chairman Paul McNutt. "That is why we need more and more workers."

As U.S. Army engineers left for combat work in Europe, thousands of women were recruited to take over the jobs the men had left behind. These jobs included navigation and flood control, surveying, designing, building, and river and harbor work. During the war years, women also ran trains and were steelworkers, welders, riveters, and munitions workers.

At the beginning of the war, skeptics were concerned about the capabilities of the women, and some women themselves doubted their ability to do "men's" work. But the skeptics soon found that in factory jobs not requiring great strength, women could turn out half again as much work as men. In fact, women performed just as well in more than 6,000 jobs traditionally held by men.

Mothers in Overalls

"What job is mine on the Victory Line?"

If you've sewed on buttons or made buttonholes on a machine,
you can learn to do spot welding on airplane parts.

If you've used an electric mixer in your kitchen,
you can learn to run a drill press.

If you've followed recipes exactly in making cakes,
you can learn to load shell.

To read more about life in the United States during World War II, pick up a copy of *COBBLESTONE's World War II: The Home Front* (December 1985) issue.

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