

Vought Women in the Workforce

By. Christopher Soltis - CASC Curator



Introduction – World War I

When Women First Entered the Workforce in Significant Numbers



While World War II became ubiquitous with the iconic imagery of “Rosie the Riveter” and the empowerment of women in the workforce, it was actually World War I that saw women enter into many new occupations for the first time. At the time of the First World War, most women were barred from voting or serving in military combat roles. Many saw the war as an opportunity to not only serve their countries but to gain more rights and independence. With millions of men away from home, women filled manufacturing, war production, and agricultural positions on the home front. Britain stepped up its arms production by expanding the employment of women. By July 1917 4.7 million women worked in paid employment in Britain.

Women also provided support on the front lines as:

- **Nurses**
- **Doctors**
- **Ambulance Drivers**
- **Translators (*In rare cases, on the battlefield*)**



One observer wrote that American women “do anything they were given to do; that their hours are long; that their task is hard; that for them there is small hope of medals and citations and glittering homecoming parades.”



Beginning of World War II

A New Generation of Women Discover the Workforce



American women played a crucial role during World War II, both at home and in uniform. Not only did they give their sons, husbands, fathers, and brothers to the war effort, they gave their time, energy, and some even their lives.

Reluctant to enter the war when it erupted in 1939, the United States quickly committed itself to total war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. That commitment included utilizing all of America's assets—women included. The Axis powers, on the other hand, were slow to employ women in their war industries. Hitler derided Americans as degenerate for putting their women to work. The role of German women, he said, was to be: *“good wives and mothers and to have more babies”* for the Third Reich.

As the men fought abroad, women on the Home Front worked in defense plants and volunteered for war-related organizations, in addition to managing their households. Rosie the Riveter helped assure that the Allies would have the war materials they needed to defeat the Axis.



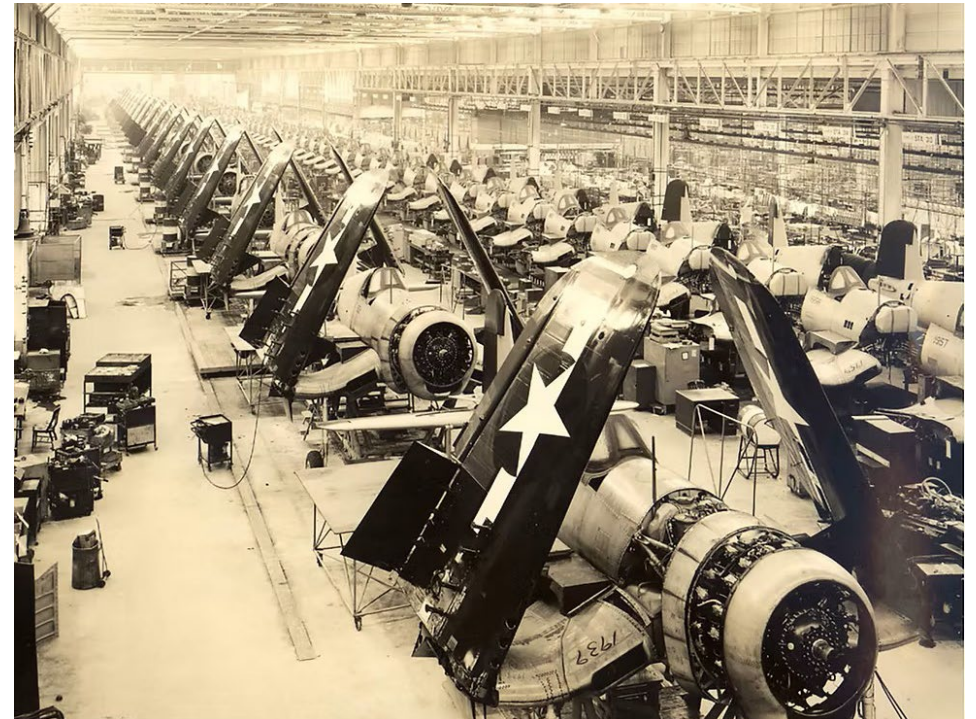
Chance Vought F4U Corsair

Connecticut's Official State Airplane



The Vought F4U Corsair is an American fighter aircraft that saw service primarily in World War II and the Korean War. Designed and initially manufactured by Chance Vought, the Corsair was soon in production under Goodyear and Brewster Aircraft. The XF4U-1 prototype first flew on May 19, 1940 from Stratford, CT. On October 1, 1940, the XF4U-1 became the first single-engined U.S. fighter to fly faster than 400 mph by flying 405 mph from Stratford to Hartford.

It quickly became one of the most capable carrier-based fighter-bombers of the war and achieved an 11:1 kill ratio. The Corsair served almost exclusively as a fighter-bomber throughout the Korean War and during the French colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria. In addition to its use by the U.S. and British, the Corsair was also used by the Royal New Zealand Air Force, French Naval Aviation, and other air forces until the 1960s. From the first prototype delivery to the U.S. Navy in 1940, to final delivery in 1953 to the French, over 12,571 F4U Corsairs were built in 16 separate models. Its 1942–1953 production run was the longest of any U.S. piston-engined fighter. Today roughly 80 airframes survive with around 20 to 25 being airworthy. Numerous projects are under restoration around the world.





Rosie the Riveter

A Legendary Icon is Born

"We Can Do It!" was a World War II poster produced in 1943 for Westinghouse Electric as an inspirational image to boost female worker morale.



The model is Naomi Parker, and was strictly internal to Westinghouse, displayed only during February 1943, but was rediscovered in the early 1980s and widely reproduced, often mistakenly called "*Rosie the Riveter*". The poster is one of the ten most-requested images at the National Archives and Records Administration.



The term "*Rosie the Riveter*" was first used in 1942 in a song of the same name written by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb. The song portrays "Rosie" as a tireless assembly line worker, who earned a "Production E" doing her part to help the American war effort. The identity of the "real" Rosie the riveter is debated. Candidates include:

- Rosina "Rosie" Bonavita - Convair in San Diego, CA
- Adeline Rose O'Malley – Boeing in Wichita, KS
- Rose Will Monroe – Ford in Willow Run, MI

But we at CASC believe the original inspiration was...



Rosalind P. Walter



The Real "Rosie the Riveter"

Rosalind Palmer was born on June 25, 1924, in Brooklyn, New York to a well-to-do family. Raised in New York City, she was educated at Connecticut's Ethel Walker School. After graduating, she applied for a night shift position at Chance Vought as a riveter on Corsairs, where she apparently broke records for speed on the production line and advocated for equal pay for her female co-workers. In 1942, she inspired Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb to write the song, "*Rosie the Riveter*".



After the war Rosalind married Henry Thompson in 1946, but divorced in 1954. In 1956, Rosalind wed Henry Glendon Walter, Jr. Throughout their marriage, they were active in philanthropic organizations, including serving as trustees for the American Museum of Natural History and Long Island University.



She might be best known for underwriting numerous PBS documentary series. In recognition of her history of giving, WNET appointed Rosalind to its board of directors in 1989. She was also a member of the Grenville Baker Boys & Girls Club, National Committee for Inner City Drug Prevention, International Tennis Hall of Fame, North Shore Wildlife Sanctuary, and others. She passed away in her home in Manhattan on March 4, 2020.



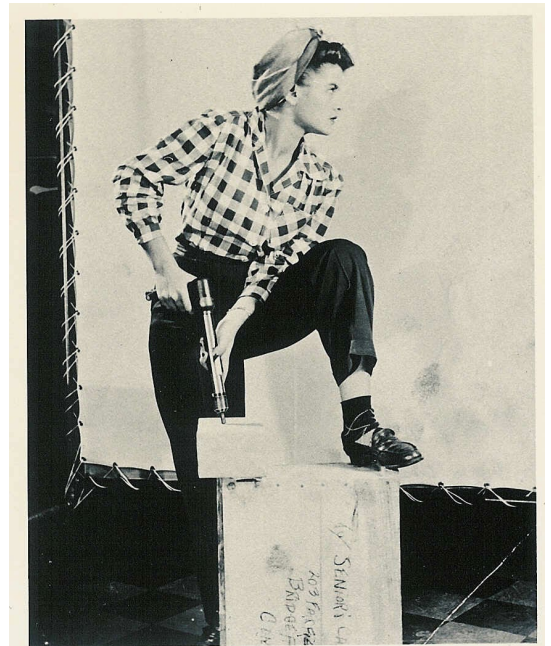
Valerie Opshinsky Snowden

Vought's Faux "Rosie the Riveter"



Valerie was born and grew up in Scranton, PA. In 1942 she heard about other women working at Vought in Connecticut making excellent wages. Initially seeking office work, she found that there were no openings, but there was a messenger position, running blueprints from Engineering to the plant and back.

"Right away, I was making \$30 a week- really good money! One day, [my boss] Mr. Daley came over to me saying that they were looking for someone to pose to advertise in newspapers and billboards. I went down to the factory and walked around, noticing what the women factory workers were actually wearing so I could look as much like them as I could. I wasn't given any instructions on what to wear, although he told me I would be posing as a riveter. The photographer had me pose with the rivet gun with my foot on a box. I wasn't paid any extra money for posing. I continued to work at the factory until Bob Snowden asked me to marry him in 1944. He was then in a squadron in Norfolk, Virginia, flying Corsairs.



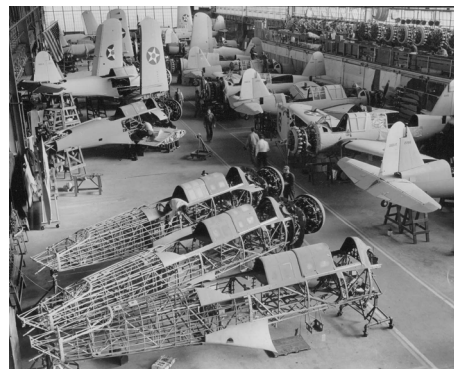


Mary Mcaleany

Riveter / Assembly Line

Mary Mcaleany was a Riveter at Vought-Sikorsky originally starting out on the Kingfisher production line before the US officially entered World War II. Here in this beautiful snapshot of 1940's life on the home-front, Mary's workbench has been decorated by coworkers and friends for her surprise bridal shower in 1941 to Edward Erbter (who also worked at Vought-Sikorsky).

Mary had a custom metal Vought-Sikorsky license plate made up, which was attached to their car, and certainly made the car stand out when he picked her up at work. It can be found today in one of our cases here at the CASC!





Mary H. Ostrowski

Landing Gear Technician / Assembly Line

Mary applied for a job at Chance Vought Aircraft during World War II after hearing on the radio that women were needed for the war effort. Originally seeking a typist role in an office, she instead inquired for a job working with her hands, thinking the time would go by faster. She was assigned to the task of assembling the landing gear for the Corsair and had to purchase her own tools for the job at a local hardware store. She recalled, *“The vice grip tool they gave me didn’t grip the way I liked. I owed it to our fighting men to give them the best landing gear ever, so I bought my own.”*

She also wore a handmade gray-green blouse and matching pants to wear to work. At age 90, Mary got to see a Corsair again saying, *“It was the first time I had the opportunity to see a Corsair up-close and fully assembled! During the war, no one on my portion of the assembly line was allowed to view the finished Corsair planes.”* Of course, she immediately walked under the airplane to inspect the landing gear!





Victoria Serritella Corvino

Riveter / Assembly Line

Victoria remembered hearing the song: *'Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition'* playing in the cafeteria the first day she started working at Chance Vought as a riveter. She had to wear regular outfits of blouses, hairnets, and slacks. But no sweaters.

"My riveter was hand-held. Others worked at a machine. I also worked with red, white, and blue explosives. You had to be careful when those little sparks would fly around, but I was never burned. Two of us would work on one, big wing section: one on either side of the wing. I was always on the riveting-side while she pressed an iron bit up against the other side. One day, a worker from the hangar looking for a small person with small hands. He took me into the hangar and asked me to put my hand through a little hole where a nut had fallen off a bolt. They said I was the heroine of the day! It was a nice place to work. They used to kid us a lot, but when the war ended, we women were laid off. On our last day, we got a standing ovation from the men as we left the building. It was quite an experience, and I was proud of the work I did."





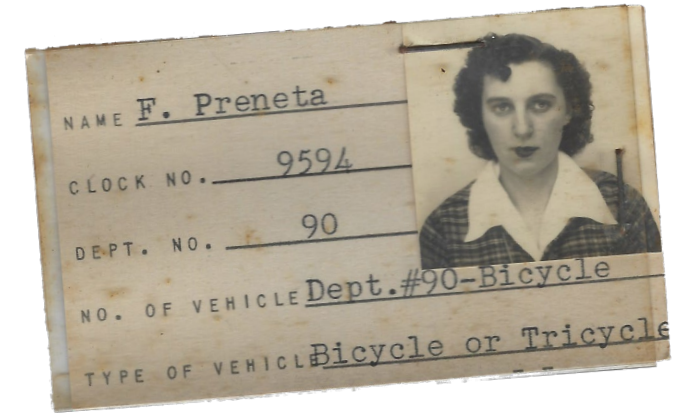
Frances Preneta Karako

Department 90 - Control Station

Frances Preneta was born in Derby on September 19, 1922 to Kathryn and Martin Preneta. She started working at Vought-Sikorsky in 1941 to help out the war effort and do her part. She worked in Department # 90 at a control station, and it was there that she met her future husband, Frank Karako. Frank was the supervisor at Control Station #2 during this time.

Frank and Frances were married on April 23, 1945. An interesting note is that Frances had clearance to ride company bicycles or tricycles throughout the plant. A time saving device inside the vast factory.

Later in life, Frances raised three daughters, and was very active in the Ferry School PTA in Shelton, and Girl Scout Association. She also helped operate Karako's Package store along side her husband, Frank. She passed away on November 6, 1987.





Gloria Mainiero Seperack

Mail Delivery

Gloria was born and grew up in Bridgeport. After graduating from Central High School she got her first job at Chance Vought around 1943. It became a family affair as her father, sister, and brother-in-law all worked at Chance Vought too.

“They told me I was too short for the assembly line. ‘You’re not tall enough,’ they said. I got a job working the first shift in the mailroom and rode a 3-wheel bike, bringing mail to engineering in another building. I got paid to bring the mail—that was all right! The factory would open a window every so often to sell cigarettes which were hard to get, so the lines would get long. I didn’t smoke much, but my sister did, so I would ride my 3-wheel bike across the factory to that window. On V-J day, I got laid off. We all did, except for my father. He worked at Chance Vought as a machine operator.

Gloria eventually moved to Trumbull to raise her daughter and son. Gloria’s brother, Lt. Nick Mainiero, a decorated WWII hero, flew Corsairs in combat with the Marines in the Pacific during 1943-44 and was even wounded on his final mission of the war.





Mary Balestrini Schembari

Welder / Assembly Line

Mary Balestrini was a 17-year-old senior in high school living in Sunbury, PA when the United States entered the war. Mary and her friends were offered the opportunity to learn how to weld. In the summer of 1943, Mary showed up at the Chance Vought plant, took and passed the Navy welder's exam, and went to work for \$1.25 an hour to help build Corsairs. She purchased tools, a tool box, and settled in at a welder's bench to learn how to join seams in the airplane's aluminum ductwork. Eventually Mary was introduced to her friend's brother Jimmy Schembari, a sailor in the Navy. Before returning to duty, he bought a pair of gloves. Both held onto one glove each in case they got "cold feet" and would send their glove to the other. Jimmy served the rest of his time on a ship in the Pacific and was on hand in Tokyo Bay for the Japanese surrender. On leave in November of 1945 Jimmy and Mary married.

In 2010 Mary while attending the Wheels & Wings: Corsairs over Connecticut Airshow at the Sikorsky Memorial Airport. A lifetime ago, she had constructed parts of these airplanes with her own hands. Back then, she was only dimly aware of the significance of her work. But at the event, she said: *"I didn't appreciate what I did until I stood there. I got choked up, and I thought, 'My God, this is what I did.'"*





Helen Crouthers Handy

Fabrication Department



Helen was able to apply her experience as a seamstress to the war effort. She went to Chance Vought, where after being assessed for her skill level, was assigned to the fabrication department. She would use blueprints to lay out patterns onto giant sheets of aluminum—the pieces would then be cut out and assembled into the skin of the Corsair. Helen was a master at figuring out the most efficient way to arrange the patterns, sometimes reversing the shapes to minimize wasting precious aluminum. She didn't drive, and with fuel being scarce during the war, her family's only car was put onto concrete blocks. She and her friend, Mrs. Hennessey, traveled to work together by bus, both of them working the day shift until the end of the war.

Helen's grown children all took an active role in the war effort. Her eldest son, Elmer—nicknamed "Bus"—served in the Navy and was stationed at the Squantum Naval Air Station in Boston. Her daughter, Priscilla Handy, worked for Vought Sikorsky as a helicopter flight test observer. Helen's other son, John—nicknamed "Jack"—was in the Army as a combat engineer.





Katherine “Kay” Budzinski

Paint Dept. & Expediter

Kay was the first of the sisters to work at Vought-Sikorsky. She turned eighteen years old in May of 1941, graduated from New Haven’s Hillhouse High School several weeks later, and within a week, was at work--and would remain there for the next six years. When Kay first started, she was hired in the Paint Department to do masking work. After a few weeks Kay found the job tedious and boring and was transferred to the Expediting Department. When the assembly line found they were short a part, expediting would, in turn, find where the part was in the manufacturing process and then personally chase it through every remaining step until it was finished, and bring it to the line. Sometimes, it was a missing part needed on the assembly line, or material, or tooling that needed rushing from the loading dock to the machine shop. Sometimes, it was a replacement part needed across the street on the flight line. Kay loved the variety of the work, the different people, the chance to see every inch of the factory, and the fast pace. Over time, she got security clearances to move parts in and out of some of the classified project areas.



Vought-Sikorsky “Rosies” at Savin Rock Amusement Park, West Haven, CT. Pictured in center is Katherine “Kay” Budzinski



Anne Budzinski

Inspection Department

Anne was hired into the Inspection Department and remained there for the duration at Vought. Specifically, Anne's job was dimensional inspection work. Using equipment like micrometers, calipers, height gauges, thread gauges, comparators, etc. she would verify the exact measurements of the various parts being manufactured by the shop. Any time a part she hadn't seen before came across her bench, her boss would take her down to the assembly line and show her exactly where the part went on the aircraft, and he explained what it did. Anne said that getting these brief lessons always gave her a renewed sense of the importance in her job.

Anne once said that she used to go dancing with some of the girls who worked in the cockpit and gauge painting area. These girls had access to the glow-in-the-dark paint that we now know contained high levels of radium. These girls would paint their fingernails with the paint to garner a little more attention out on the dance floor. Although Anne's position didn't give her much leeway for wandering the factory, she had a great variety in her work, and she always felt a strong sense of responsibility for keeping the pilots safe.





Elinor O'Connor Vincent

Subassembly Manufacturer

Elinor was 23, living with her family and working at Hope Drug store in Brewster, NY when the United States entered WWII. Eventually they moved to Bridgeport and she found a job at Chance Vought in 1944 where she assembled small parts for the Corsair. When war ended soldiers returned looking for employment, and Elinor was let go from Vought on August 17, 1945. But Vought came back the following year with another job opportunity, but Elinor was already working elsewhere.

Soon after, she married Fred Vincent, who served with the Medical Detachment 99th General Hospital, European Theater of Operations. They opened a meat market in Stratford (Vincent's Market: 1948-1981), settled in Stratford and had 6 children, all of whom attended SHS.

When her grandson took an aviation course at Sikorsky Airport, she loved to go along for the ride to pick him up so that she could see the Corsair on the pedestal. Elinor lived at her home in Stratford until she was nearly 96 years old.



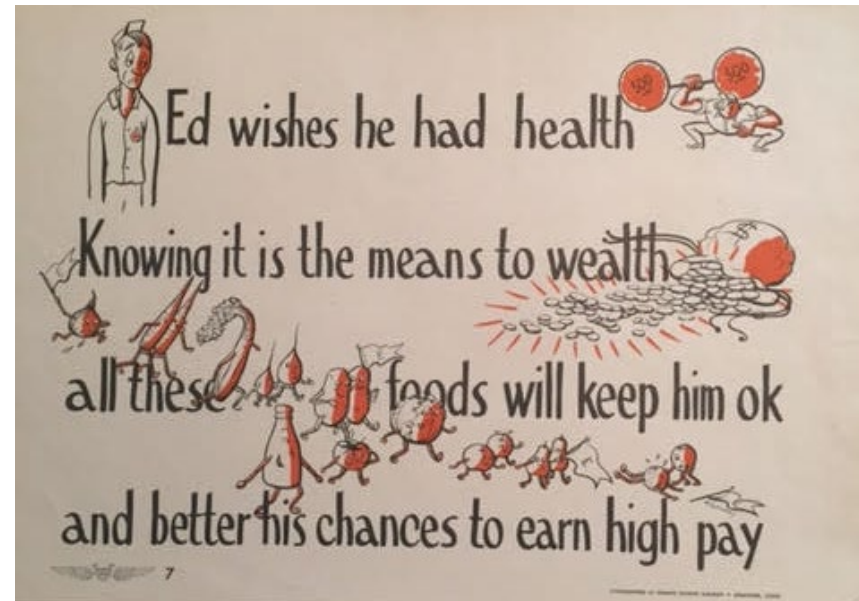


Mabel Saloomey

Artist / Designer

Mabel was born in Bridgeport, CT on April 19, 1908. She was a graduate of the Yale Art School with a Bachelor Degree in Fine Arts in 1931. During World War II she was hired by Vought to work in the Design / Print Shop to create internal and external advertisements and motivational posters. After the war she was a self employed artist until her retirement. Mabel was a Milford resident for over 73 years where she was a member of the Ladies Guild of Christ the Redeemer Church and the Carmelite Order.

In 2023 the CASC received a collection of prints, sketches, and some original artwork from Mabel's estate to preserve and share with the public.





Jean (Hunt) Tucker

Engineering Department

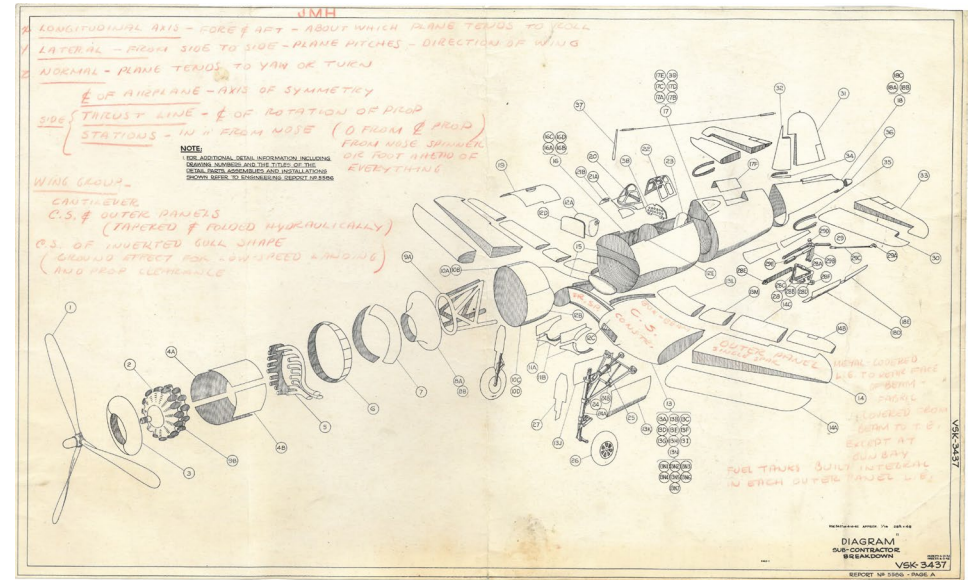


Jean was in the Class of 1941 at Staples High School and was attending college in Ohio when World War II started.

Her initial goal was to join one of the Women's Military groups, but instead she decided to leave college and attend a Bridgeport State Trade School to learn drafting and then apply to Chance Vought, as soon as she turned 18. Jean started working at Vought in 1943 in the 'Change Group' in the Engineering Department where there were very few women, mostly secretaries and clerks.

She was fortunate to find an elderly gentleman in the Group that helped guide her, which was to make design changes on drawings of aircraft parts. At times Jean's skills were also used by other departments.

"I loved going to work. Chance Vought is dear to me. There were fourteen Groups in Engineering Drawing Department. I was soon transferred to the Electrical Group and spent my days bent over a large drafting table. It was more comfortable to wear slacks, and there was a liberal dress code. I made drawings of parts for electrical installations. We never saw the actual equipment being installed but were given the dimensions of a "black box"."





Jean (Hunt) Tucker - contd.

Engineering Department



Soon there was need for more women, and Chance Vought started a training program at the Academy of Aeronautics near LaGuardia Airport on Long Island. Jean was sent there and embarked on an intense study of aeronautics, with some mathematics and drafting. She remarked: *“If I could go back now, I would love to have been a pilot!”*

As the war was winding down, Jean enrolled in a five-year work-study program at Northeastern University in Boston. She was in the very first class to accept women.

“Chance Vought agreed to let me work one semester and then exchange places with another student while I returned to school. We did this until 1949, when I married. The company eventually moved to Dallas, and it was impossible for me to follow.”

Jean received her degree in Industrial Engineering in 1950 and later pursued a teaching career (mathematics) for 38 years in three states and two foreign countries. Last year Jean visited our museum with her family where she was the guest of honor and received the CASC lifetime achievement award and a standing ovation from a grateful packed hangar of guests.



Priscilla “Pat” Handy Swenson

Helicopter Flight Test Observer & Helicopter Pilot

Pat wanted to fly since she the age of 8, watching from Beardsley Park as airplanes would fly out of the Stratford Airport, and she never doubted that she would one day become a pilot.

In 1941, at 17, Pat and two of her girlfriends earned their pilot’s licenses. Pat had plans to continue her training to become a commercial pilot, but her dreams were dashed as the United States entered the war. She first tried to join WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots) but she was disqualified by being one-half inch too short.



In 1941 Pat was hired by Vought-Sikorsky as support staff for the engineering department. But soon afterwards, a different position opened up—and Pat left her job as a secretary in the engineering office in favor of a seat in early Sikorsky helicopters. Her new position as a Helicopter Flight Test Observer put her in the front seat of the helicopters during test flights in order to record flight information. The test pilot sat behind her in a tandem seat set-up of the early designs of Sikorsky’s helicopters. Pat continued to work 40-hours a week as a Helicopter Flight Test Observer at Sikorsky throughout the war, as well as afterwards. The people she worked with became life-long friends.





Priscilla “Pat” Handy Swenson - contd.

Helicopter Flight Test Observer & Helicopter Pilot

“The pilots were encouraging me to do it since they knew my work.”

Pat was also third of thirteen charter members of the Whirly Girls, a group whose purpose was to advance women in helicopter aviation. When asked what she would like to tell a young girl today regarding her wartime experience, Pat said:

After the war, Pat became Sikorsky’s first female helicopter pilot when she received her rating on July 10, 1947. However, prior to that on May 28, 1946, Pat made history by being the first American woman to fly solo in a helicopter. Pat explained how she made the transition from an observer to a licensed helicopter pilot.



“Everyone contributed to the effort. We all worked together for the good of the country. Follow your dreams. I wanted to fly since I was young—about 8 years old.”





Conclusion

As a foreman of Consolidated Aircraft once told the Saturday Evening Post,

"Nothing gets by them unless it's right."

The United States Department of Labor even stated that when examining the number of holes drilled per day in the aircraft manufacturing industry, a man drilled 650 holes per day while a woman drilled 1,000 holes per day.



Two years after Pearl Harbor, some 475,000 women were working in aircraft factories. An impressive feat that changed the course of history for women being able to access new and exciting fields that were previously off limits to them. Today their spirit lives on.





Thank You - Questions?