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WOMEN IN THE AIR FORCE
1970 THRU 1994
by
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BACKGROUND PAPER
ON
WOMEN IN THE AIR FORCE

We all know how women have proved that they can perform the same work as men. This was proved during World War II, in the factories which churned out war material. Aircraft were many of these materials, and women toiled night and day in the production effort. Women built, repaired, and ferried aircraft to operational bases to deliver them to the men who would employ these aircraft in carrying on the war effort. Men employees of these companies, who were not able to serve in the war, trained these women in building and maintaining the aircraft. The women constituted the bulk of the workforces and concentrated training programs were utilized. The abilities of these women are recorded in history. I'm sure many of us have heard of 'Rosey the Riveter' who was just one of the thousands of women employed in the aircraft manufacturing business. When the war ended and the men were mustered out of the services, women gave up many of their jobs to the returning men. Women then returned to more domestic jobs of homemaking and child caring. During those times, it was considered proper, for women to be in the home taking care of these duties and the men were to be the major bread winners. All was well with the money coming in from old 'Dad', but then came the sixties.

As we entered the sixties, it became more and more difficult for a family to survive on just the income of the man of the house. Because of this, women, in increasing numbers, entered the workforce in search of additional income to support their families. Many of whom returned home after work to find their domestic duties unsatisfied. When 'mom' had her fill of these

unsatisfied domestic duties, we children were given the chance to learn new skills around the house. This chance to acquire new skills was received by us kids with mixed emotions. But, believe me, mom prevailed. The sixties also brought with it, the 'me' generation, who were now adults and doing things their way.

Young women began to realize that they could no longer depend solely upon a husband's income. Some were finding themselves the sole bread winner due failed marriages and other circumstances. Since women were now becoming more career minded for means of survival, they tended to advise their daughters and other young women to acquire college degrees or technical skills. This would better prepare them to support themselves and their children. A college degree was not obtainable for many young women so they searched for and acquired skills. Women became a formidable part of the civilian workforce.

As we entered the seventies, the military suffered somewhat in its recruiting of able bodied men. Let's face it. As a young boy growing up in the sixties, with the morbid news from Vietnam on our nightly news program, the military didn't hold much promise. In 1970, women comprised 1.4 percent of the military force. (8:22) The Air Force was leading in these numbers slightly and the military saw women as an untapped resource. Recruitment efforts were increased by opening up career fields which were previously closed to women. Young women took advantage of what an enlistment offered in education, technical skills, and travel opportunities. The door was open and increasing numbers of women enlisted.

The associated career fields in aircraft maintenance were opened and women began to appear on the flightline, hangars and backshops. Still vastly outnumbered by men, these women encountered many obstacles to their careers.

Some women were placed in administration positions within the workcenter. These positions were not authorized, but supervisors shuffled them into these duties due to outdated views of women's capabilities in a predominantly male job. Their training and skill development within the AFSC suffered because they were expected to stay in the office and handle the typing and filing duties. Although they completed their 5 level training, this consisted mainly of book knowledge and on-the-job experience wasn't acquired. The results of these actions produced technicians who couldn't perform the task. Hopefully, a PCS or a change of supervisors would correct this deficiency. Of the women who were actually placed in maintenance jobs, some encountered men trainers who would shield them from obtaining experience by not actually letting them perform maintenance tasks. Although the women were trying, they only aided the men and were never allowed to actually complete jobs. The result of this type of half-baked training was an individual who could not perform unless being closely supervised by other personnel. Some of the men coworkers around these women actually went out of their way to make things hard on them. When women technicians required some help in maintenance tasks, some men refused. These were the same jobs where they would gladly assist their men cohorts. These men wanted the women to fail. But some women were lucky enough to be assigned a trainer who instructed and motivated them to achieve. These women were observed and, through their demonstrated ability to perform, quickly became able and qualified in their AFSC. They gained the respect and admiration of their coworkers who accepted them as part of the team. They proved that they could be counted on to pull their weight and get the job done. This proved that women, with the proper training and motivating environment, could perform outstandingly. This was no surprise due to the

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fact that training men requires the same efforts. While some women emerged from training unqualified, it is also important to point out, that this also applied to some men. Young recruits, both men and women, were coaxed into some jobs that they really new nothing about and were dissatisfied with the work requirements and conditions that the career field demanded.

Not only did women encounter obstacles to their careers from associated men personnel, the Department of Defense provide some too. In 1973, the Supreme Court dictated that the Department of Defense (DOD) had to pay a female the same as a male in regards to dependents.(3:10) Women, up until then, had to prove they provided over fifty percent to their dependent support, before they were given allowances for dependents. These allowances included BAQ, Dependent travel allowance (PCS), dislocation allowance, over-sea station allowance, family separation allowances and medical benefits.(3:10) The DOD implemented the change in entitlements only for women with civilian husbands. The impact of the Supreme Court decision on military women married to military members was still being reviewed by DOD at the same time. Women even had to get parental consent prior to enlistment if they were less than 21 years of age.(3:5) Also in 1973, a Federal Court ruling said that a woman could not be involuntarily discharged if she became pregnant or if she had dependents less that 18 years old.(6:12) As women prevailed in these rulings the reenlistment rate correspondingly climbed. There were 15,023 enlisted women in the Air Force at 30 June 1973, representing 2.6% of the total Air Force enlisted strength. Women reenlistment rates for 1973 were impressive. 47.9% of first term women reenlisted compared to a first term male reenlistment of 19.9%. Second term women reenlisted at a rate of 77.4% as compared to a 72.4% of second term males.(3:7)

Women's performance, in 1976, is worthy of mention. Commanders of remote sites in the Alaskan Air Command reported to command headquarters that:

- they had encountered no personnel problems with newly assigned women
- the women were good workers
- the presence of women were a great morale booster
- please send more(2:25)

Women have risen in the ranks of their profession, have held positions of authority and continue to do so. There are more and more in supervisory positions especially in the field of aircraft maintenance. With these women in supervisory positions, they will be able to provide role models for young ladies choosing the Air Force as a career. This may be a factor in increasing the number of women enlistees which will provide a better workforce for the Air Force in the future.

In March of 1994, women comprised 15% of the total Air Force active duty force. These numbers have more than doubled since 1975 with a total exceeding 66000.(1:01) There is also more than 20,000 military couples in the Air Force. We have greatly benefited from the vision that the Air Force had back in the early seventies. We have an more capable Air Force now than we ever had and much of this can be contributed to our women members. The future holds much promise.

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