

Cornelia Fort and the Changing Roles of Women during World War II

Essential Question: How did the roles of women change during World War II?

Prior to World War II, women who wished to enter the workforce faced a number of challenges. Many types of work such as construction and heavy manufacturing closed to women because it was assumed women were not strong enough to do the work. Women were routinely paid less than men for the same work. African American women faced even greater challenges. Often the only work they could find was as janitors or housekeepers. Few women were able to break out of these limited roles.

One woman who defied the accepted norms was Cornelia Fort. Fort was born to a wealthy Nashville family in 1919. She attended exclusive schools including Sarah Lawrence College where she excelled. After graduation, Fort reluctantly returned to a life of civic activities and social functions in Nashville. In 1940, Fort visited Nashville's airport and immediately fell in love with flying. Fort soloed in less than a month and went on to get commercial and instructor ratings. In 1941, she took a job in Honolulu, Hawaii. Fort was giving a flying lesson on the morning of December 7, 1941 when Japanese Zeros flew past her to begin the attack on Pearl Harbor. Fort returned to the mainland and traveled around the nation telling about her experiences to sell war bonds.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor pushed the nation into war and brought women new opportunities in the workforce. Men were volunteering or being drafted into military service at the same time that factories were being asked to double or even triple production. Women, once shunned in heavy industry, joined the workforce in record numbers. At the Vultee aircraft plant in Nashville one out of every three workers was female. These female factory workers were immortalized by Norman Rockwell as "Rosie the Riveter" on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

While thousands of women worked in aircraft factories, a few like Cornelia Fort, were uniquely qualified to contribute in other ways. In September 1942, a new organization called the Women's Auxilliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) was formed. The name would later be changed to Women's Air Service Pilots or WASPs. (Female pilots were recruited to ferry planes from factories to military bases. Their efforts would free pilots for combat. Fort was one of the first to report for duty. She was part of the pioneering group of female pilots who established a record of excellence despite substantial resistance. In January 1943, Fort was transferred to Long Beach, California. While ferrying a plane from Long Beach to Dallas, Fort was killed in a mid-air collision.

Following the war, some women were happy to return to their previous roles as wives and mothers. Other women wanted to remain in the workforce, but found themselves forced out in favor of returning soldiers. The so-called “glass ceiling” that kept women from rising in the workplace had returned.

During World War II, women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers. They built airplanes, tanks and jeeps. They canned food, sewed uniforms and enriched uranium for the atom bomb. Some, like Cornelia Fort, served in branches of the military as WASPs, WACs (Women’s Army Corp) and WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service). All contributed to the war effort in substantial ways. Their service and sacrifices were essential to the United States’ victory in World War II.

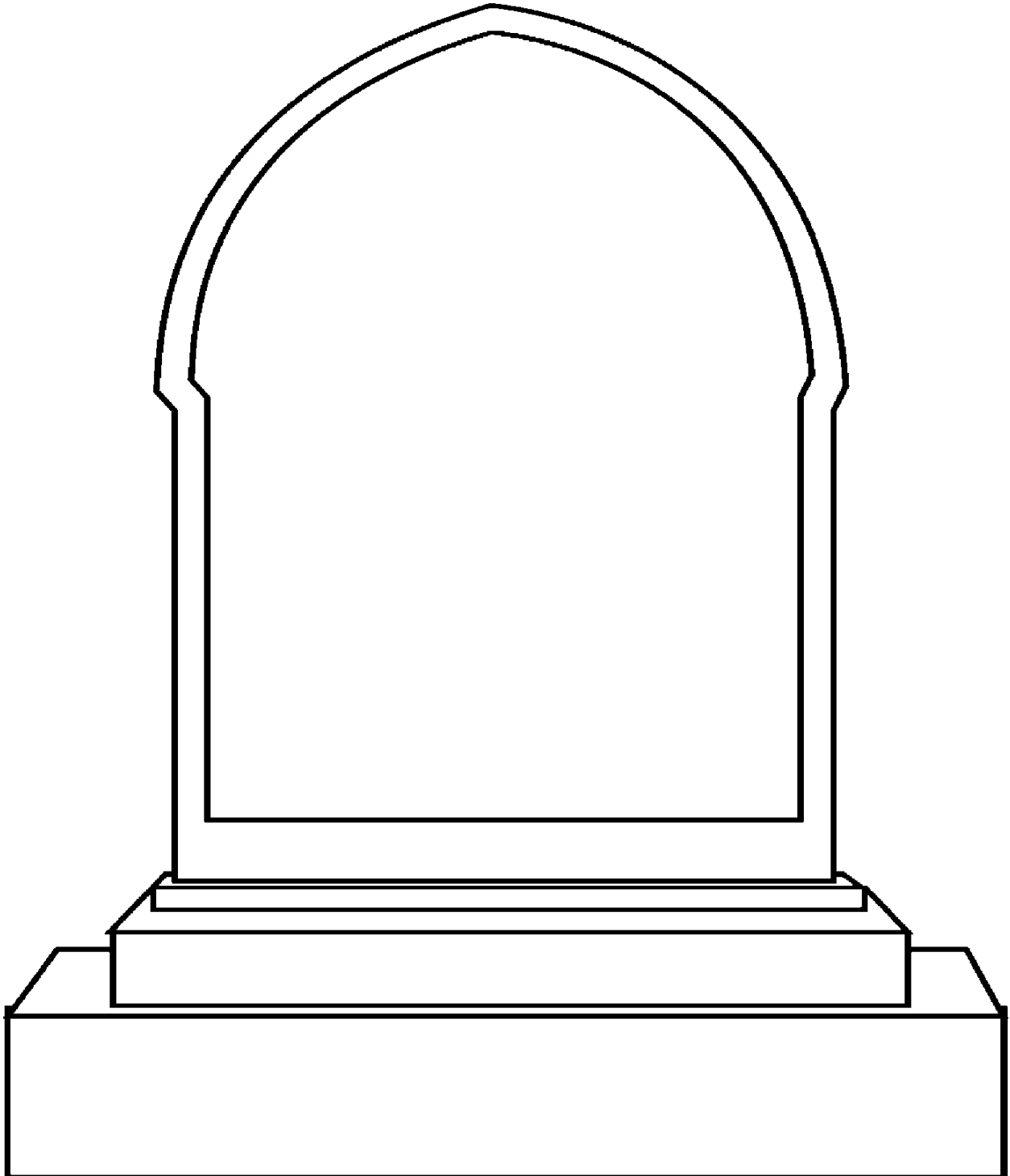
Source: “Women Working.” *tn4me.org*. The Tennessee State Museum. n.d. Web. 27 July, 2014. <http://www.tn4me.org/article.cfm/era_id/7/major_id/9/minor_id/72/a_id/218>

“Cornelia Fort.” *Tennessee Encyclopedia and History and Culture* 1st edition. 1998. Print.

Cornelia Fort

Summarize the text to write an epitaph for Cornelia Fort.

An epitaph is a brief statement about the deceased person, sometimes in the form of a poem.



Changing Roles for Women

Use the text to provide examples of how things were changing for women both leading up to and during World War II.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

