

War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: Mary Morgan

Current home town: Yellow Springs, Ohio

Age: 86

The history of World War II, the war that we won, is always writ large, (the “Flying Fortress”), with heroic action (D-day), bringing world changing events (the Atomic Bomb). Is there any space in The Good War’s history for a 17 year old girl who was never taught to kill or fly and was never on a ship, but who still believes she played a part in that war?

There was only enough money for me to have one year at West Virginia Tech. My father had been furloughed from his job “for the duration” while his corporation was absorbed into the War Department. I saw flyers posted on campus “Young Women Needed to Work in The War Effort”. Was this the answer to my money problems and I could be patriotic too?

The recruiter described all the “perks”—engineering training, safe new housing, vacations and regular pay increases. The Dean of Engineering had told me “Girls aren’t ready to be engineers” but now I was being courted to become an “Engineering Aide” at Wright Field, the aircraft development site of the Army Air Corps, in Dayton, Ohio. I signed on.

The ten week training course was intense. The 200 girls and the two conspicuous handicapped men came from Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia and Ohio. In 1943 we did not notice that all of us were white. Classes began at 9 am and finished at 9 pm, six days a week. I found the courses fascinating: Strength of Materials, Aeronautical Engineering, Mechanics; all except one: model building. I had selected the P 47 kit because my brother was flying one in North Africa. I could sew, knit, can food and bake cakes, but I had never built a balsa wood model airplane. It went to Dayton with me in two parts, the fuselage and the wings, never to be joined together.

The safe housing, which sprung up overnight, was a totally new development being built on the famous Miami River levees. The “working girls’ dormitory” was not yet complete, but 175 Engineering Aides needed the promised safe housing. Portable toilets, aluminum wash pans and a sidewalk water tank arrived, and with an elderly night guard substituting for doors, we moved in.

Monday morning, at the appointed time, we arrived at the Wright Field Identification Quonset, which was way too small to handle such a sudden crowd. The fingerprinting, the picture-taking and forms created a madhouse. Suddenly, the door flew open and an Air Corps Colonel called out “What the Hell is going on here?”

A Lieutenant replied, “It’s another group of God-damn hillbillies from that training program in West Virginia.”

I was stunned. It was the first time I heard the classification Ohio would give me: “hillbilly.” My new friend and roommate immediately spoke up, “We’re not all hillbillies. I’m from Cincinnati.” I was

impressed with her bravery to correct the officer, but my heart sunk to know that she had agreed that I and most of the others were indeed “G__d__ hillbillies.”

My job was to carry out mathematical computations for three aeronautical engineers in the Aircraft Laboratory. I was issued a 20” slide rule, a Marchant calculator, a mathematical handbook with logs, square roots, etc., legal size yellow tablets and pencils with erasers. My salary leaped from a trainee’s \$105 a month to a Computer-Class 1’s \$120 a month. I was now “Working in The War Effort”.

My first assignment took me three weeks to compute. I handed it to the design engineer. He had forgotten who I was or what he had given me. Soon he took out his slide rule and began looking at charts and tables from a 3-ring notebook, then finally cleared his throat and said, “I don’t think your airplane is going to make it.” Every engineer in the office turned to look in our direction. “It seems that your plane disintegrated from flutter at an altitude of 30 feet and a speed of 15 mph.” It was comedy central time. There was knee slapping, guffawing and smart responses from every desk. I was mortified. My first job and I couldn’t do the work. I would be fired. My father had died in a hospital accident. I was an 18 year old orphan. What would I do?

“Take this back to Betty.” the engineer said. “She’ll show you where you made your mistake. Run it through again and then bring it back.”

Betty had been the only computer there when I arrived. She had 20 months’ experience. She immediately found where I had gone off the tracks and also showed me a series of check points that I could use along the way to detect errors. “Don’t mind the guys,” she added. “They were just razzing the engineer—they do it all the time.” I tried to believe that the humiliation was for him. Soon I was completing an assignment in two weeks’ time with no more razzing. Day after day after day, I filled the yellow tablets with computations.

Working girls’ dormitory life was not too different from the college dorm. One of our favorite Sunday recreations was hiking down the levee to The Dayton Art Institute, which had a big banner across its face reading “Dayton’s Living Room.” We would sit on the marble floor in one of the galleries and listen to 78 rpm classical music records. It was wonderful to hear, in that beautiful setting, after a busy, noisy week of listening to radio news from the battlefronts.

Each evening we wrote v-mail letters to our brothers or our friends who were scattered around the world. Together, we rejoiced when the captured were freed or the lost found. We cried when the first brother was killed and his sister, our classmate, was given a few days leave to be with her family even though there could be no funeral. Our work consumed our lives. We were participating in World War II.