

Search for your next job from  live vacanci

Search N

[Go to old article view](#)

The Journal of American Culture

Volume 37, Issue 4

December 2014

Pages 419–429

Article

Uniform Matters: Fashion Design in World War II Women's Recruitment

[Kathleen M. Ryan](#)

First published:

3 December 2014 [Full publication history](#)

DOI:

10.1111/jacc.12272 [View/save citation](#)

Cited by:

0 articles [Check for new citations](#)

Enhanced Article Feedback

They were showing the audience that we had gotten together. They were showing how the women in the Navy were still women. And ladies. The whole thing was to let society know that our girls were their girls... They were daughters and sisters.

Dorothy Turnbull ([Stewart](#)), World War II WAVE Recruiter¹

Tailor-made. Ladylike. Gorgeous. These terms echo through the oral histories of women who served in the Navy and Coast Guard during World War II. The women are talking about the uniform they wore while in the service. It was couture-designed, in contrast to uniforms for the other women's service

branches.

Fashion theorists note that uniforms are classic examples of authority in clothing, with connotations of power conferred upon the wearer (Vining and Hacker; [Fussell](#)). Couture style, far from frivolous, gives women substance, allowing them to construct a uniform identity while at the same time expressing their difference from other women. Even before the first training class for women began during World War II, military brass in the Navy and Coast Guard were discussing the uniform the women would eventually wear. There were high expectations. The uniform would, after all, become the public face of the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) and SPARs (from the Coast Guard motto *Semper Paratus, Always Ready*), communicating both the image and the identity of the female volunteers. It would also become the focal point of the Navy's public relations campaigns, seen in posters, photographs, and film. To understand the meaning of military service for the more than 100,000 women enlistees in the two service branches, it is necessary to understand the powerful image presented by the uniform, and what that uniform meant to volunteers.

The Navy and Coast Guard² could not draft women during wartime; they were forced to rely on the willingness of women to volunteer for the service branches, which were separate units within each branch of the military. By looking at how the military used the uniform as part of a larger identity campaign to entice women, one can also explore how—or if—the recruits embraced that same identity during their military careers. Through oral history interviews and textual analysis of the uniform itself, I explore how Navy and Coast Guard recruits remember the uniform and use it within their storytelling to reinforce their wartime identities. Fifty-two women from across the United States were interviewed for this project; the interviews were supplemented with archival oral history interviews of officers with the WAVES and SPARs. Multiple uniforms were also examined, held in both archival (Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, the University of Northern Iowa Archives and Special Collections, the Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project at the University of North Carolina Greensboro Archives) as well as in personal collections. Finally, publicity and recruitment brochures created by the Navy were also analyzed.

I argue that the designer uniform allowed the volunteers to position themselves as a more “elite” force than those in other service branches such as the Army, which outfitted their recruits in off-the-rack styles. It was more “sophisticated” and “ladylike” than other uniforms, and so served as a tool to subtly reinforce those traditional qualities for female recruits. At the same time, the uniform allowed the women to subtly rebel against the constraints of their time. The women, most from working-class or farming families, used the upheaval of war to upend their own lives, and saw this never-before opportunity to serve in the “regular” Navy³ as a pathway to a college education and a solid middle class existence ([Ryan](#)). The designer uniform played a pivotal role in this transformation.

The Couture Connection

Paul Fussell notes that uniforms appear across all spectrums of life. Nurses, chefs, law enforcement officers, clergy, professional athletes, and other groups of people all don traditional uniforms when heading to a place of employment, but uniforms are often present in other places as well. Fussell argues that uniforms can be found in any places where people opt to dress in similar ways, even if the

details of the “uniform” differ from person to person. In his view, the traditional business suit, tennis wear, formal wear for brides and grooms, and even swimsuits and the “business casual” trend all are uniforms of a sort, albeit somewhat removed from more traditional employer-mandated outfits (5). Military uniforms, while often offering protection for troops within battle, also can “signify the authoritative use of power in the service of the state” and offer “visual, shorthand forms of communication” via the insignias worn on the shoulder, arm, or breast for service branch, rank, and job duties ([Eicher, Evenson, and Lutz 246](#)).

WAVE leader Mildred McAfee had little to do initially with selecting the Navy women's uniform design, but she would quickly exert her influence. As she recalled, the first uniform presented was a deep navy blue, with a bit of patriotic braiding on the shoulder, “a red, white and blue stripe... it looked just like a chorus girl, you know. And I was simply struck, and I said, ‘We cannot do it’” (Horton and Sargeant 67). The braid was eventually changed to blue, with gold buttons for the officers and blue for enlisted women. McAfee also successfully argued that the women would be more comfortable wearing flesh-toned, rather than black, stockings; flesh-toned hose were considered highly fashionable at the time.

McAfee immediately understood, much more than the men running the Navy, the importance of appearance for young women. Hence, a seemingly insignificant design element like braided trim or an accessory like black stockings for women can be the difference between a refined image and that of a “chorus girl.” [Elizabeth Hawes](#) has discussed part of the appeal of clothing, noting, “It is not very difficult for a designer to understand the motives of wearing clothes for physical protection. The hard thing is to grasp how important it is to many people to get *psychological* protection from their clothes” (37). Part of that psychic protection would include the confidence that comes from looking good (or chic). Elegant clothing could, in essence, give the wearer the authority to act in a certain way. Hawes believes people wear clothes for self-satisfaction, but also to project an image to others.

For the WAVES, the uniform helped to establish the image that the women were “high class” and “refined.” It is an image that was internalized by the recruits. The women acknowledge that the WAVES (and later SPARs) were somehow different or more selective than other branches of the service. Margaret Anderson said they “thought that the WAVES were the elite branch of the service.” In part, this was a transference of the sartorial reputation of Naval men; it was commonly known, as many of the women commented, that the Navy men's uniform was the “smartest” in the service. But also, and perhaps more importantly, this message was conveyed through the couture-designed uniform that the women received.

Each woman with whom I've spoken not only mentioned the uniform, but was aware of its couture provenance. “A famous designer designed them for us and they fit beautifully,” said WAVE

[Virginia Gillmore](#) . “You felt so comfortable. It was probably the most expensive thing any of us had ever had. Well made. Beautiful material. And besides, it had two pockets just inside where you could put Kleenex and look better [motions towards chest and laughs].” Other women offered the couture designer's name as a way to associate the uniform with quality. As WAVE [Dorothea Sudomir](#) noted, “The most important thing it was designed by Mainbocher. And that was the top designer at that time.” Mainbocher was a Chicago-born, New York-trained, and Paris-refined fashion designer.

He was born Main Rousseau Bocher in 1890. Bocher studied art at the University of Chicago and the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. The former Army man remained in Europe after World War I and began working as an illustrator for *Harper's Bazaar* . After a stint as editor of *Paris Vogue*, he opened

his own design atelier on Avenue George V in 1929, adopting the mononym "Mainbocher." He brought an almost messianic view to fashion, saying, "I don't believe that dressmaking is an art but I do think that dresses are an important part of the art of living, just as important as food, surroundings, work and play" ([McConathy 111](#)).

His fashions drew a sophisticated, self-assured clientele, including film stars, royalty, and American divorcee Wallis Simpson; he created Simpson's trousseau when she married former King Edward VIII (McConathy 135). WAVES and SPARs were aware of this celebrity connection. "It was put out by Mainbochers [sic], which was the company that made all the designs for the movie stars. And I'm sure if you talk to very many military women who were in the Coast Guard or the WAVES, the one thing they remember about their uniform is it's Mainbochers [sic]," recalled SPAR Jane Ashcraft ([Fisher](#)).

As the war came to Europe, Mainbocher shifted his base of operations from Paris to New York. American socialites were instrumental in getting him to design the WAVES and SPARs uniforms, especially Josephine Forrestal ([Horton](#) ; [Horton and Sargeant](#)). The former *Vogue* writer was married to the Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, and had close personal ties to Mainbocher. But her fashion sense presented a small problem in the uniform design: she encouraged Mainbocher in high style and not in how the uniforms would actually be used. McAfee recalls the initial blouse design was "simply impossible to iron," useful for a socialite with a personal maid, but not so for women expected to work and iron their own clothing (Horton 52). This was soon fixed with a more practical blouse, but this personal connection gave the Navy women entrée into the high fashion world.

McAfee recalls going to Mainbocher's New York salon to be fitted for her uniform. As she tells the story, she was a bit out of place.

When I went in, I will never forget it, because I remember it so vividly, the awful gabardine tan suit which I had worn on the Wellesley campus with a big box pleat on the front and back, and a very casual blouse. I had taken it to Washington, knowing it would be hot, but as my only suit because I knew that I was going into uniform pretty soon. I walked into Mainbocher's studio with black shoes, a tan gabardine box pleat skirt with a funny looking little jacket, and a silly little black hat. I had never been in such a salon. The carpets were such thick velvet that you sank into them up to your ankles, and these wonderful looking women, selling, wore beautiful, gorgeous black gowns. It was so awful that it was positively funny, it was ridiculous. Mainbocher was very nice, and they were too, to this waif off the street who thereafter was dressed properly in the blue uniform. (Horton and Sargeant 70–71)

That blue uniform featured an a-line skirt and a trim matching jacket. Even when examined in archives or personal collections years after the war ended, the material was still soft and supple, evident that it would hold its shape without fuss or a need for constant ironing. This quality was pointed out repeatedly during the interviews, often in descriptions of the durability of the coats, skirts, and jackets. Dot [Bougie](#) said that the uniforms were made of "very good material. And the lines were good. Of course, we had topcoats, too, for wintertime. And I wore that topcoat after I got out of the service for several years." The lines were classic and designed to flatter a variety of body shapes. The uniform tie

was a lightweight cotton or silk in either an almost-black blue or a robin's egg blue color, again designed to remain in place with little muss (depending upon the uniform, the tie could be a button-on version, with the buttons hidden by the crease of the collar).

The Navy would eventually offer the women four uniform options: the blue jacket and skirt, blue pleated slacks in the same fabric (typically worn without a jacket, but with one of the uniform blouses and tie), a white linen jacket and skirt, and a “summer” uniform of navy blue and white seersucker. The white uniform was cut in the same lines as the blue uniform and typically worn by officers as a “dress” uniform; the seersucker featured a flared box-pleated shirt-waist dress and a tailored jacket and was worn year round in warmer climates. Enlisted women would wear one of two hats (a soft, rounded “bucket” hat, which was worn with either a white or seersucker insert or the “overseas” hat; see Figure 1). The women also had a choice of blouses. One was a lightweight white cotton blouse, one was a light blue color in a similar fabric, and the third a heavyweight dark navy blue, which matched the skirt and pants (typically worn in colder climates during the winter months with the light blue tie).



Figure 1.

[Open in figure viewer](#)

“Where Did You Get That Hat?” Naval Air Station New Orleans, Louisiana, US Navy, c. 1944–45 (80-G-K-3292, Naval Historical Center, National Archives). WAVES try on the Overseas Cap. They are (left to right) Yeoman 2nd Class Bernice Elliot, Yeoman 3rd Class Martha Dietlin, Seaman 1st Class Kay Magee.

A short excerpt from the multiple interviews I conducted with WAVE [Eileen Horner](#) provides evidence of how the WAVES and SPARs rationalized their uniform's appeal, and offers a direction of how to analyze its value to the female military volunteers:

Mainbocher. M-A-I-N-B-O-C-H-E-R was a well-known dress designer at the time. And I knew I would never have designer clothes, so there was my opportunity. So when someone says, “Why did you join the Navy?” I say, “Well, number one, blue is my color.”

[laughs] I don't look that great in khaki or green. Olive green or whatever the color was. But I have blue eyes so that helped that. And it was a nice looking uniform.

The appeal is complicated. Horner spelled out the designer's name to make sure the interviewer (and future readers) correctly identify him. She established his couture connection (“a well-known dress designer”) as well as the lack of accessibility she would have to his fashions were it not for the Navy. But then also she slyly noted that “blue is my color.” The seeming throw-away line (brushed aside by a laugh during the interview) points the researcher to the importance of an aesthetic appeal (nice color, good lines) in the recruitment of this group of women.

Fashionably Sophisticated

While McAfee was aware that women would want a stylish uniform, she admittedly was a bit oblivious to the importance of fashion to those outside of the military. During a press conference in New York to announce the uniform, a journalist asked who the designer was. When McAfee blithely announced it was Mainbocher, “Almost at once, everybody shot out of the room to report that Mainbocher had designed the uniform” (Horton and Sargeant 70).

The journalistic reporting about the uniform was seen by the women at the time in magazines, newspapers, and newsreels. “I had seen pictures. Yes, because, at that time it was fairly well established. And it was Mainbocher that had designed it. It looked pretty spiffy to me,” recalled WAVE **Virginia Benvenuto**. But even with their pride in the designer/uniform design, the women nonetheless offer errors when discussing the uniform's creator. Jane Ashcraft called him “Mainbochers.” WAVE **Helen Edgar** offered a different recollection of the designer's name:

Oh my god, they were gorgeous. They were a navy blue serge made by Handmocher [sic], a well known designer back then. Those uniforms, you could do anything in them and they took it. Even – I fell in the Corpus Christi bay one night and [laughs] it was dry off and go home. They were nice looking and we felt – they made us feel good. They made us feel worthy and like really distinguished women... Magnificent uniforms. They made us stand better, walk better and feel prouder. They really know how to do it [laughs].

WAVE **Edna Jean Clark** similarly recalled that the uniforms were made by the “pretty famous designer” Handmocher, adding, “it was very smart. But in Seattle most of us went into the store and got a fitted uniform, because we had changed size a little bit and needed a different uniform. But we still got the Handmocher [sic] uniform. But it was fitted to us then. It was right.”

This type of misuse was consistent across interviews. Even in their praise, the women almost universally mispronounced or changed the designer's name, turning it into the French sounding “Man-boo-shay” over the Dutch pronunciation “Main-bock-er” (the second syllable rhymes with “dock”), which the designer preferred. When women did use the ä/o sound for the second syllable of the

designer's name, they changed the first syllable, transforming the name to “Handmocher.” Only one woman interviewed accurately pronounced the name; another, WAVE [Laura Patton](#), hedged her bets:

It was designed by Man-boo-shay or Main-bock-er. It was navy blue. It was plain, but it was well designed. Skirt, jacket. We had two colors. White shirt and blue shirts. And the blue shirts were working shirts and the white was for dress. So, pretty soon we were into those and we were marching.

Most insist the designer was not American at all, but was rather of French descent.

As [Alessandro Portelli](#) points out, errors in memory are interesting to oral historians because of how they challenge and transform the notion of historical truths. Errors can be useful in understanding the meaning of an experience to participants. For the women who served, the transformation of the Chicago-native Mainbocher to the sophisticated Parisian “Man-boo-shay” was to a degree inevitable. Even though New York was the center of American fashion, Paris still held allure. As Hawes wrote in 1942, “For years and years American women labored under the shadow of what ‘they’ were wearing in France” (6). French design equaled style. As the WAVES and SPARs viewed their uniform as stylish—McConathy notes, “The Mainbocher suit became the trademark of subdued elegance in the forties” (171)—it is logical that many of the women would have “known” that Mainbocher was French. The fact that Mainbocher spent many years in Paris only served to strengthen that knowledge.⁴

It is important to remember that this group of women was venturing into new territory, entering the previously male arena of the military. [Ruth Rubinstein](#) observes that uniforms are traditional images of authority in clothing, with a connotation of power over other, nonuniform wearers (83). Uniforms can serve not only to delineate class differences (between a household servant and the lady/man of the house) but can also “be used to construct and signal differences *within classes*” ([Barnard 113](#), emphasis added). The WAVES and SPARs had little or no actual power, either inside or outside of the service; while they trained men in various operations, they did not command any mixed-sex troops, nor did they have any role in military planning. However, the uniforms offered them *social* power over other women, including other military women, due to the couture design. The advantage of the Army (women could travel overseas) was offset by the stylistic advantage offered by the Navy and Coast Guard uniform. As SPAR Jane Ashcraft said, “I’ll be honest with you. I looked at the snappy uniforms. I mean those, those Army they still are, they’re so drab and so dull. [laughs]. That old khaki brown plain. I don’t know. It just didn’t turn me on.” Similarly, WAVE [Phyllis Roberts](#) recalled, “People said, ‘Why did you choose the Navy?’ I said, ‘Cause I figured I’d look better in navy blue and white than I would in the other colors’ and that’s the truth [laughs]. Absolute truth.” The mispronunciation of Mainbocher’s name may be a move on the part of the women to solidify their own roles as part of the Naval “elite.” As Winifred Quick Collins recalled, the Navy wanted a “‘classy’ image to reflect a special group of educated, prestigious women. The result was a uniform which was closely identified with the traditional Navy and yet was feminine as well” (44). The Mainbocher uniform branded the women as something different and apart from the other services. They were fashionable simply by donning the uniform.

The women I interviewed seem almost embarrassed to admit the smart navy blue uniforms were a

draw over the Army's more drab khaki (and ill-fitting) clothes, which were originally designed by transforming the men's uniform into a skirt and jacket. "There was just something about the Navy uniform I guess I was attracted to, so that was Navy for me," said WAVE **Phyllis Jensen**. WAVE **Betty Bernard** said she and her sister "went into the WAVES because we liked uniform best [laughs]. My father had been in the Army, but the WAVE uniform was much better looking." She continued, "In the first place it was blue which was more flattering. We were both blondes. It was trimmer. It was just nicer [laughs]. Anyway, we liked it." This preference for blue may not have been simply a gendered bias. Fussell observes that Army had what he dubs "color shame" for even the men's uniforms in the World War II years (57). The khaki, while useful as a camouflage tool during wartime, was considered by men to so aesthetically and socially unappealing that it led many to shun the Army in favor of the more "gaudy" uniform of the Marine Corps, and by 1946 the Army "set about devising a wholly new uniform that might reinvigorate recruiting" (Fussell 57). The women's articulation of this "color shame" manifests itself in a type of tension: the WAVES and SPARs were pulled between the fashion of the uniform and the more lofty goals it represented, i.e., the service, status, and patriotism affiliated with military volunteerism. This tension is clear in WAVE **Betty Peterson's** discussion of her uniform-based selection of the Navy over the Army. "At that time in my life, those things were important," she said. "I thought they (the uniforms) were a lot [laughs] better than the Army. So I guess that's really the reason. Which is a pretty shallow reason for going in. But it made me decide which way to go."

Thorstein Veblen may have criticized the "conspicuous consumption" of the fashionable woman, but as Hawes and others have argued, fashion can be a powerful way to establish and confirm identity.

Hillary Radner goes one step further, arguing that fashion is itself a form of authority, a way for a woman to "establish and maintain her position within the social hierarchy" (93). In other words, it is through fashion, specifically clothing that is well made and well designed, that women can express power. The Mainbocher uniform, with its flattering color, fabric, and design, subtly communicated authority (see Figure 2). It allowed this group of women, many who came from working-class or farming families, to be held in the same esteem as the elite: movie stars, socialites, and even royalty.



Figure 2.

[Open in figure viewer](#)

Dorothy “Dot” Forbes with Two Friends, Atlanta, GA, 1945 (from the personal collection of Dorothy Enes). Forbes and her friends were out shopping one Sunday while in training to become LINK instructors (trainers for pilots). She said as they were a blonde, brunette, and redhead, they were “the personification of the poster that shows all things.” Dorothy Forbes is in the middle, wearing the summer seersucker uniform; all three were wearing the “bucket” or cloche hat with a contrasting inset.

The Navy used the uniform liberally in its own recruitment efforts. Promotional and recruitment booklets pointed out specifics of the design as well as its couture pedigree and were directed at both the recruit as well as the audience back home. For instance, one photo booklet,

[A Letter From Naval Reserve Midshipmen's School \(WR\) Northampton, MA](#) , was designed to be mailed by a WAVE officer candidate to family and friends. While pictures of the WAVES in action (and, by extension, the uniform) are scattered throughout, five of the thirty-two pages in the booklet are devoted just to describing what the women wore. Mainbocher's name is mentioned twice. The uniform “of which we are so proud,” is described as “soft but trim” with “extremely glamorous lines.”

But the Navy also seemed to want to be cautious not to place too much emphasis on the uniform. Again, the Navy learned from early mistakes by the Army. When the WAAC uniform was announced,

newspaper writers focused as much on the Army-issued girdles as on the uniform the recruits would wear. By contrast, the WAVES didn't discuss undergarments and attempted to present a dignified image (“ [The Waves' Uniforms: 'Womanly, Workmanlike](#) ;” [Baldwin](#) ; [Associated Press](#) ; “ [The Shock of Females as God Made Them](#) ;” “ [US at War Women: No Glamor Girls](#) ”). In a September 1942 radio interview, WAVES Public Relations office Louise Wilde mentioned the “deep respect and pride” Navy women would feel about their uniform, but she also cautioned, “If I may make bold to speak for all my fellow officers it's the work to be done and not the martial airs that count with them” (

[transcript of LT. JG Louise K. Wilde, Public Relations Officer of the U.S. Naval Training School, Smith College](#)

). In other words, the work the women did was far more important than the accoutrements they wore.

But the interviews demonstrate that this tension was never fully resolved. Instead, they (unintentionally) illustrate the challenge the Navy faced during the war years. For the women, admitting the seemingly “frivolous” reasons for choosing the Navy/Coast Guard was almost as if each of the women was sharing a deep, dark secret with me—a secret oftentimes paired with the more “correct” response. The “color shame” the men felt, for the women was turned on its head, a type of “fashion shame” of sorts. Margaret Anderson insisted she joined the WAVES because she was patriotic. Then she added, conspiratorially, “Besides that, one of my boyfriends said I would look good in navy blue.”

One reason for this embarrassment may be that the uniform was tied in the women's minds to their own personal enrichment: a sense that through enlisting they could be different from the women they left behind. Anderson mentioned several times getting a special dispensation to purchase something she could never have justified buying during wartime rationing: black leather pumps. Being part of the Navy enabled her to be “unique” in a time of rationing, allowing her access to a coveted item. Other women talked about being the envy of their non-Navy colleagues because of their access to “military stockings.” The military-issued stockings for the WAVES were in fact a heavy cotton lisle, which tended to sag around the ankles after a few minutes of wear; the stockings were the most complained about part of the uniform. But the WAVES and SPARs interviewed would instead save their military pay to buy the much desired (and difficult to get) silk hose, darning the flattering stockings carefully to extend their wear. In warmer climates, the women would forgo stockings altogether, sidestepping uniform requirements to wear hose by painting a “stocking line” up the back of their legs.

The uniform became desirable not only to recruits but also to women outside of the military. By September of 1942, just weeks after the uniform was announced, the *New York Times* reported women who wore clothes copying the WAVE uniform would be subject to a three hundred dollar fine and 6 months in jail (“ [Warns Against Copying WAVES](#) ”). In 1943, the WAVES (along with other women in uniform) were named as *Vogue's* “Best Dressed Women in the World Today.”

Uniform Identity

It was assumed the uniforms would garner attention. One recruiter described one of her job duties as walking around downtown areas in her uniform and simply talking to people who asked about it. Recruiters also made pitches at schools, college campuses, the local YWCA, or even the beach. One

event included WAVES in modest, but fashionable, bathing suits, with the recruiter alongside in her crisp summer seersucker uniform (see Figure 3) . **Mary Ada Cox** remembers of another promotional event, “A darling girl came out in her WAVE uniform, a little blonde, cute as she could be. She was a recruiter. I think I made up my mind that minute that that is the way to go.”



Figure 3.

[Open in figure viewer](#)

WAVES Recruitment Drive, Galveston Beach, Texas, US Navy, c. 1944 (Official US Navy photograph, from the personal collection of Dorothy Stewart). Dorothy Turnbull (Stewart) is at top center with various unidentified WAVES.

For many of the women, the uniform offered a taste of glamour after the hard times they experienced during the Depression. Jane Ashcraft remembered wearing clothes made out of feed sacks. While she said she always had the latest fashions made from patterns, she also proudly remembers the first “town” dress she bought. Doris Mansfield and Phyllis Jensen recalled wearing hand-me-down clothes. Edna Clark described buying a used fur coat with her first full salary as a teacher in late years of the Depression. When entering the Navy or Coast Guard, the women received an allotment to cover the cost of uniforms and tailoring. **Dot Forbes** said,

They said we paid for our uniforms. But what they did, they gave us the money. And so that when we were measured and everything, we paid for it ourselves. We didn't have to buy the uniforms, per se, but we had to take care of any alterations. We were given two hundred dollars. Some people really had to have a lot of alterations. I didn't. So I came out ahead of the game. [laughs].

While the women described sewing their own clothes at home during the Depression years, as WAVE

Ali McLaughlin recalled, custom-tailored clothing was a novelty:

I don't know if the other services were as fussy, but we were tailor made. When I went into the Navy, at Hunter, they fitted us for our uniforms. And most of the people were more or less the same size. After all, we were all very young. But they made sure that the waist fit right and the shoulders and what have you. So we had – you know, when you got your uniform it fit you as if it were made to order. They were. We always looked nice.

The women not only were able to “free a man to fight,” but they were expected to wear new, personally fitted, designer clothes.

The uniform was not only a chance for the women to wear designer clothing but it also offered a readily recognizable group identity to the women, allowing them to stand out from the crowd. WAVE Virginia Gilmore said,

My WAVE uniform was the best piece of clothing I think I ever had because it felt so comfortable. The fabric itself was wonderful. Smooth. The color was great. And then it fit so well. I had never had something specially tailored to fit. In fact, they encouraged us to really be, take pride in our uniform, which we did.

The uniform provided women with what Entwistle defines as two markers of class identity. “Quality” can be one marker, through well-tailored and crafted clothing made with elegant fabric and fine details such as good seams, lining, and buttons. But identity requires a second element. **Entwistle** says, “How one wears these things, indeed how one ‘wears’ the body, is equally important. The body is the bearer of social status not just in how it is dressed, but in how it is held, how it moves, how it walks and talks” (134). For the WAVES and SPARs, it was as important to be different from other members of society as it was to be identified as part of a larger group.

For women reservists, like the WAVES and SPARs, the military uniform can offer a sense of validation. **Vining and Hacker** write, “By wearing uniforms as members of voluntary organizations, women identified themselves with the same principles of military order and discipline as men” (371). Women became part of something larger within the war effort, more identifiable than “Rosie the Riveter” due to their uniforms. In a study of uniforms, Paul Fussell says he has found “[a]ll but universal pride in a uniform of any kind... The uniform, no matter how lowly, assures its audiences that the wearer *has* a job, one likely not to be merely temporary and one extorting a degree of respect for individual, being associated with a successful enterprise. The uniform attaches one to success” (5).

For the WAVES and SPARs, pride didn't just mean that you looked good as an individual, but also as a group. Dot Forbes remembered, “It was just attractive on everybody.” “Your uniform it fit you as if it were made to order,” said Ali McLaughlin. Helen Edgar called the uniform “gorgeous.” Jane Ashcraft described the “snappy uniform.” The Navy and Coast Guard encouraged the women to identify with the uniform as a means of building group identity and morale.

But that uniform identity can also be taken away. **Virginia Gillmore** remembered being called to assembly one morning with a large group of young women; as they watched, another young woman was marched to the front of the group, her shiny brass buttons with the Navy's insignia (the "fouled anchor") were cut off, and she was escorted out of the assembly. Gillmore was not sure if the event was staged for their benefit or not, but she said, psychologically, it helped the remaining women to bond together as a unit. She is the only woman in this group to remember something like this happening, although written descriptions exist. She compared the incident to the combat training young male soldiers need to go through to be able to kill the enemy. For a WAVE, nothing could be worse than losing the uniform.

A Uniform Legacy

Looking at the Mainbocher uniform today, it is easy to understand why it engendered such passion in the women who served. To contemporary eyes, it is a fairly conservative style, but even sixty-five plus years after the uniforms were made, the quality is evident. Although the women would have worn the blue serge nearly every day, I have yet to see one that has become shiny and worn as happens in cheaper fabrics. The seams are generous. The lining is soft and made from a durable silk. The color is flattering. The dress whites and summer seersucker show equal quality.

Nearly every woman saved at least one item from her uniform and made a point of showing it to me. I met one woman at the WAVES National Convention in 2006 who wore her uniform daily to every function. Because of illness, her memory had faded, but she still glowed with pride when talking about the outfit. Others wore their hats, or kept their uniforms protected in garment bags. Merrilee Hewitt had multiple uniforms (blue, dress white, three summer seersucker) plus the raincoat, numerous gloves, several shirts, and two hats (the bucket or "go to hell" hat and the overseas cap). Virginia Gillmore still had her Navy-issued handbag. Jane Ashcraft, who served as a SPAR, proudly slipped into her Mainbocher uniform, including the heavy wool topcoat, for me. It was just a little bit snug (she couldn't button the top button of the skirt). Ashcraft was 82 years old at the time.

The memories demonstrate how effective the military was at using the designer uniform to establish group identity. The women were proud of how their uniforms made them feel and how their units looked as a whole. This identity was so entrenched that losing the uniform would be one of the worst things the women could imagine experiencing. Mainbocher may have provided the "fashion" in the uniform, from material to design, skirt length to shoulder braiding, but it was the individual WAVES and SPARs, such as Virginia, Jane, and Ann, who provided the style. The women and the fashion joined together for a uniform purpose: to demonstrate that they were the elite who served in the World War II effort, clothing and citizens who were a cut above.

Joan Angel wrote of the uniform in 1942:

I looked at myself in the long mirror. By heavens, I *did* look impressive. The suit was beautifully cut, trim and efficient-looking without being stiff and masculine. It was the kind of tailored outfit I might have bought in civilian life—but in navy blue, with the fouled-anchor embroidery on the collar and black regulation buttons, it gave me the bearing of a woman

in whom great responsibilities were vested. Unconsciously, I straightened and got a look of fire in my eyes. (68)

That fire was evident 60 years later, at the WAVES National Convention. During the last day at sea, the women posed for a group picture. More than two hundred veterans, from World War II through the Gulf War, crowded into the cruise ship's atrium; unlike the women from other wars, each World War II veteran was wearing a piece of her uniform. As they gazed upward toward the camera, posture perfect, the women broke into spontaneous song, first singing "God Bless America" and then a song sung by the women during World War II: "And when you come home you'll find ashore your man-sized chore was done by a Navy WAVE."

Notes

- 1 The interviews for this project followed Human Subjects protocol. The women were found via the National Sea Services organization WAVES National. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 4 hours in length, and were conducted either in the woman's home or aboard the Carnival Cruise Ship *Conquest* during the 2006 WAVES National Convention. Women are identified by the name they used in the service, with married name(s) in parenthesis, as appropriate. If a woman enlisted using her married name, that name is used.
- 2 The US Coast Guard fell under Naval jurisdiction during World War II. While the SPARs would have a separate leader and some slight uniform modifications, the overall administration of the group was under Naval command.
- 3 Women served unofficially in the Navy during World War I as Yeomanettes; this was the first time women's service was government sanctioned for jobs other than nursing.
- 4 Their knowledge is bolstered by published accounts about the uniform. [Helen Gunter](#) describes in detail the design created by the "famous Parisian couturier," adding "as civilians we had never dreamed of owning a Mainbocher design, and we thought the two shades of blue were feminine and flattering" (33). Even when Mainbocher is noted as American, as in [Winifred Quick Collins'](#) book, his name is given as "Main Rousseau Bocher," which has a distinctly French flair (43). [Wikipedia](#) and [Voguepedia](#) sites similarly list him as "Main Rousseau Bocher." However, biographer Dale McConathy argues there is no evidence in that "Rousseau" was actually the designer's middle name (115).

Biography

Kathleen M. Ryan, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the College of Media,

Communication, and Information at the University of Colorado Boulder. She is an active documentary filmmaker and her research interests include visual communication, oral history, and how cultural practices inform identity.

Works Cited

Wiley Online Library

[Help](#) [Browse by Subject](#) [Browse Publications](#) [Resources](#)

[Agents](#) | [Advertisers](#) | [Cookies](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#)

[Privacy](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Media](#)

WILEY

[Wiley.com](#) [About Wiley](#) [Wiley Job Network](#)

Copyright © 1999-2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All Rights Reserved