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A New Heroine: Transforming the Public Image of the Army Nurse During World War II

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In the wake of the Great Depression, the United States found itself propelled into a world war of unimaginable proportions. Apart from its major political and economic consequences, the Second World War also considerably altered the role of women in society. With men off to battle, mobilization needs brought millions of women into the paid labor force and many of these women were actively recruited as army nurses. WWII accentuated the heroic characteristics of the army nurse and subtly transformed her image in wartime media. The army nurse had long been seen as an immaculate angel, but the media now portrayed her as a dignified heroine of war. In doing so, military films, news articles, and motion pictures challenged earlier feminine stereotypes. Novel portrayals of army nursing did not completely reject traditional feminine sentiments, but they did ultimately encourage the American public to reevaluate popular perceptions of the female role in society.

Media portrayals of WWII army nurses differed considerably from previously constructed images of nursing during WWI. WWI marked the “last glorious outpour of the ‘Angel of Mercy’” imagery that had existed since the mid-nineteenth century.¹ Several recruitment posters by the American Red Cross, for example, portrayed nurses as angelic and saintly figures. Hubert Chapin’s 1917 “Help Your Red Cross” shows a nurse helping a soldier with Christ, a Red Cross, and a cathedral in the background (Figure 1).² Albert Sterner’s 1918 “We Need You” poster depicts an angelic nurse urging a new recruit to help a wounded soldier (Figure 2).³ Motion pictures during WWI also drew on the feminine appeal of nursing, with nurses

¹ Beatrice and Philip Kalisch. "Anatomy of the Image of the Nurse: Dissonant and Ideal Models." *American Nurses Association Publications* (1983): 6.

² Chapin, Hubert. “Help your Red Cross "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these". 1917. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

³ Sterner, Albert. “We Need You.” 1918. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C.

primarily serving as romantic foils who angelically nursed their wounded sweethearts back to health. Thus, nursing “masked the novelty of female independence with traditional values”⁴ and prevented nursing from upsetting the conservative order.

The transformation in nursing’s public image stemmed from the American government’s dedication to increasing nursing supply and improving nursing education. As WWII loomed, the American Nurses Association formed a coalition in 1940 known as the Nursing Council of National Defense that aimed to recruit more nurses for military service. The council gained the support of Ohio Representative Frances Bolton, who had been pushing for a program that would train nurses at the government’s expense if students agreed to serve as army nurses for the duration of the war. This program came to be known as the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps and was formalized by the 1943 Bolton Act.⁵ While the bill genuinely did advance education for American women, it continued to appeal to traditional feminine sentiments to advertise nursing.⁶ By 1944, recruiting efforts had brought 77,000 nurses into the army.⁷ The constant need for more nurses was a major impetus to continue recruitment until the final stages of WWII.

⁴ Beatrice and Philip Kalisch. "Anatomy of the Image of the Nurse: Dissonant and Ideal Models." *American Nurses Association Publications* (1983): 9. Nurse “martyrs” like Edith Cavell furthered the nurse’s image as an angelic being. A further discussion of Edith Cavell and WWI nurse martyrs can be found on Page 9 of Kalisch’s text.

⁵ Egenes, Karen J., “History of Nursing,” in *Issues and Trends in Nursing: Essential Knowledge for Today and Tomorrow*. Gayle M. Roux and Judith A. Halstead (Sudbury, Mass.: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2009), 1-26.

⁶ Ibid. For a further discussion of the feminine sentiments in nursing recruiting campaigns of WWII, consult Doris Weatherford. *American Women and World War II*. New York: Facts on File, 1990.

⁷ Jackson, Kathi. *They called them Angels: American military nurses of World War II*. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000), 3.

As medical needs on the battlefield increased, the American government turned to documentaries as a means of recruiting additional nurses. Unlike earlier portrayals of nursing, wartime films revitalized the image of the army nurse by focusing on her bravery and dedication to saving lives. Military propaganda highlighted the dangers of army nursing but still appreciated nurses for their femininity. In *The Army Nurse*, a 1945 short produced by the U.S. Pictorial Service focusing on the daily life of the army nurse.⁸ Beginning with a battle scene with loud gunfire, the film transitions into a melodramatic dream-sequence with the narrator urging a wounded soldier to fight for his life. The soldier is told that he is with a nurse “who meant safety and comfort” and conforming to conventional portrayals, she is revealed to be a beautiful young woman with large eyes and a radiant smile.⁹

Such rhetoric and images aligned with traditional views of women, but the film also portrays WWII army nurses as being much more involved on the battlefield. “There was no glamour and her life was far from spectacular,” the narrator states.¹⁰ Her daily routine is described alongside footage of nurses with dirt on their faces using their army helmets as washbasins, sleeping in GI cots, overcoming obstacle courses, and managing emergency evacuations. Audiences used to seeing nurses in clean white robes were now exposed to the necessary battlefield grit that nurses faced in *The Army Nurse*. These scenes emphasize the bravery of the army nurse, who “asked for no more than a patient’s smile when his pain was eased.” Juxtaposed with patriotic music, the film thus boldly links army

⁸ *The Army Nurse*. Film. United States: U.S. Army Pictorial Service, 1945. *The Army Nurse* is available in full-length at <https://archive.org/details/ArmyNurs1945>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

nurses to service to country. This was a novel idea to American audiences, who had been so used to only seeing soldiers embody battlefield patriotism.¹¹

Above all, *The Army Nurse* portrays nurses as equal heroines on the battlefield. Early in the film, real footage shows army nurses covered in dirt as they dig and help build a mobile clinic alongside doctors and soldiers. These visual images challenge the traditional responsibilities of nurses, who had long been portrayed as completely removed from the combat line. The narrator reinforces these visuals with commentary. “She ate regular GI rations, the same as the rest of the army.... While in the air, the flight nurse was in complete charge,” he says.¹² In an era in which aviation itself was a novelty, images of women controlling flight evacuations introduced the notion that female nurses could stand equally alongside male soldiers. Such films may have inspired many young women seeking adventure to enroll in nursing schools and later enlist as nurses in mobile clinics abroad.¹³

The film also contains several patriotic quotes and couples army nursing with other army campaigns. Particularly memorable is a rhetorical question the narrator finally poses. “What words of praise can measure up to these women whose entire lives are given to nursing sick and wounded men?” he asks.¹⁴ Glorifying army nurses was not a new concept, but for the first time, nurses were largely being revered for their important contributions to the military instead of the angelic qualities cast upon them by their profession. As the film closes, it also features Col. Florence Blanchfield, superintendent of the U.S. Army Nursing Corps,

¹¹ Kalisch, Philip A., and Beatrice J. Kalisch. “When Nurses were National Heroines: Images of Nursing In American Film, 1942-1945.” *Nursing Forum* 20, No. 1 (1981): 16.

¹² *The Army Nurse*. Film. United States: U.S. Army Pictorial Service, 1945. *The Army Nurse* is available in full-length at <https://archive.org/details/ArmyNurs1945>.

¹³ Weatherford, Doris. *American Women and World War II*. (New York: Facts on File, 1990), 117.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

asking the American public to support the war through bonds. "Army nurses seldom ask for much," she begins, "...but today, they are asking you to buy a bond."¹⁵

Blanchfield's concluding statement equates the value of nursing to war bonds, solidifying the relationship between women, nursing, and patriotism in war.

The powerful messages of military films were reinforced by newspaper articles of the era. During the war, the *New York Times* published several pieces chronicling the adventurous lives of army nurses. One 1943 article by Eleanor Darton, titled "The Army Nurse Trains for Battle," drew American audiences into the daily training regimen of army nurses, much like *The Army Nurse* had shown life in the field.¹⁶ The article describes each part of a nurse's training routine, from waking early in the morning to learning malaria treatment techniques. Several photographs depict nurses emerging from a cloud of gas or learning camouflage techniques, supplementing these descriptions. Indeed, these images of nursing differed significantly from those of the immaculate nurse removed from battle. Referring to the dangerous test course nurses completed, Darton also challenges notions of male superiority, writing, "Once in a while a man 'freezes' on such a course...No nurse to date has ever frozen."¹⁷ These statements did not radically praise female nurses, but they were enough to demonstrate that nurses were equally capable and could even perform better than men. Nurses possessed intelligence and strength, and above all, could "handle any soldier with a firm and gentle hand." Her article is also not a singular piece; in fact, many other pieces, like Lucy Greenbaum's 1942 "This is No

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Eleanor Darton. "The Army Nurse Trains for Battle." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Oct 24, 1943. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/106661930?accountid=15172>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Place for a Lady,” details the benefits of joining the Army Nurse Corps.¹⁸ Both of these articles consolidated the positive images of nursing built in military films.

As the public became more aware of the heroic actions of army nurses, the image of the adventurous army nurse also came to populate Hollywood motion pictures. One such fictional film was *Parachute Nurse* (1942), which told the story of female nurses training to parachute into remote areas to provide first aid.¹⁹ Other films drew from historical events, like *So Proudly We Hail* (1943), which recreated the tragic events of Bataan and Corregidor.²⁰ These films showcased female nurses working together to maintain order and perform courageous feats. And by 1943, the image of the bold, decisive nurse had become dominant in the film industry.²¹

However, the army nurse never fully lost her traditional feminine aura. Beautiful young women were still cast as nurses and were involved in romantic plot lines, but romance and beauty were hardly the focus of WWII films. Instead, an ominous sense of danger now permeated nursing films, with nurses serving as intelligent figures working indefatigably to overcome the crises of war.

Though the elevated public image of the nurse transformed her into a heroine, nursing maintained its reputation as a gendered career. For example,

¹⁸ Greenbaum, Lucy. "“This is no Place for a Lady”." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Apr 11, 1943, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/106678050?accountid=15172> (accessed December 3, 2013).

¹⁹ Kalisch, Philip A., and Beatrice J. Kalisch. “The Image of the Nurse in Motion Pictures.” *The American Journal of Nursing*. 82, no. 4 (1982): 609. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3462973> (accessed 10/15/2013).

²⁰ Landry, Meghann L. *Fashioning the Future: The U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps, 1943-1948*. (MA thesis, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2012), 40. <http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-04152012-152439/unrestricted/LandryThesis.pdf>. For an in-depth analysis of *So Proudly We Hail*, consult the Kalischs’ “When Nurses were National Heroines: Images of Nursing In American Film, 1942-1945.”

²¹ Between 1937 and 1949, the overall image of the nurse gained an elevated status. This can be seen in films that included nurses on the domestic front like the fifteen Dr. Kildare films released during the war era. For a further discussion of nurses’ roles in Dr. Kildare, refer to Page 608 of the Kalischs’ “The Image of the Nurse in Motion Pictures.” This transformation very much fit into the “Golden Age of Medicine” in the media, with nurses becoming cultural heroes.

nurses are said to have “the tenderness... of mother, of sister, and friend” in *The Army Nurse*, and Darton’s article emphasizes that female nurses knew that the “soldier is the most important person in the world.”²² ²³ Portraying nurses in a more courageous light may have defied norms, but these quotes also demonstrate a conciliatory side to the media. Completely abandoning traditional feminine attributes in the image of the army nurse would have created a disconnect between recruitment efforts and a viewing public convinced of the essential femininity of the nursing profession.²⁴ For this reason, media portrayals consciously made the public aware of the fact that most nurses were women, who possessed the compassion of “mothers” or “sisters.” In Darton’s article, nurses are given an equally patriotic stance on the battlefield, but more importantly, she emphasizes that nurses knew their primary responsibility was to take care of male soldiers. Ultimately, then, WWII media portrayals did not completely challenge the existing order and also reinforced popular perceptions of traditional gender roles.

Army nursing’s altered public image perfectly complemented social transformations during WWII. Prior to the war, women had never worked in such sheer numbers. Wartime needs for machinery changed the gender segregation of labor and brought millions of women into traditionally masculine factory

²² *The Army Nurse*. Film. United States: U.S. Army Pictorial Service, 1945. *The Army Nurse* is available in full-length at <https://archive.org/details/ArmyNurs1945>.

²³ Darton, Eleanor. “The Army Nurse Trains for Battle.” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Oct 24, 1943. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/106661930?accountid=15172>.

²⁴ The widespread emphasis on femininity in the nursing profession carried on into the post-war era, in which many veterans returned with “combat fatigue” and populated psychiatric hospitals. For a closer look at the development of psychiatric army nursing, consult: Silverstein, Christine. “From the Front Lines To The Home Front: A History of The Development Of Psychiatric Nursing In The U.S. During The World War II Era.” *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 29, no. 7 (2008): 719-737.

responsibilities.²⁵ In an environment receptive to female labor, it made sense that nursing became an attractive occupation for women. Nursing was the highest-paid female profession, with the base pay for Public Health nurses set at \$6,000. The lowest salary for any nurse in the U.S. was \$4,500 during the war. These were significant incomes when compared to the 1942 average income per family in large cities, which at most was \$4,500 per year.²⁶ In addition, the Bolton Act appropriated \$5 million to the Public Health Service to subsidize nursing education. Nursing, then, provided women with both financial independence and a highly quality education. These social revolutions were accurately conveyed through the revitalized image of the army nurse in popular media portrayals of the time.

With the sexualization and feminization of nursing in recent years, the lasting impact of WWII media portrayals has become a controversial issue.²⁷ Images of nursing in *The Army Nurse*, *New York Times* articles, and Hollywood films all introduced courageous heroines, representing a subtle but powerful shift from the WWI “Angel of Mercy.” The viewing public accepted these altered notions because they never fully lost their feminine aura. Unfortunately, the image of the independent nurse did not survive the war. With a post-war emphasis on feminine domesticity, the number of women in the labor force declined by 5% between 1945 and 1950.²⁸ Nurses also took on subservient roles, romantically involved with doctors and

²⁵ Weatherford, Doris. *American Women and World War II*. (New York: Facts on File, 1990), 116.

²⁶ Landry, Meghann L. *Fashioning the Future: The U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps, 1943-1948*. (MA thesis, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2012), 86.
<http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-04152012-152439/unrestricted/LandryThesis.pdf>

²⁷ Beatrice and Philip Kalisch. "Anatomy of the Image of the Nurse: Dissonant and Ideal Models." *American Nurses Association Publications* (1983): 17. The sexualization of nurses in modern media is also thoroughly explored in Suzanne Gordon's "Nursing against the Odds: How Health Care Cost Cutting, Media Stereotypes, and Medical Hubris Undermine Nurses and Patient Care."

²⁸ *Ibid*: 14.

patients, or always ready to do a doctor's bidding. While the image of the strong, courageous army nurse did not survive these post-war regressions, it did have a substantial impact. Wartime portrayals of nursing influenced the ambitions of women and formalized nursing as a respectable profession. The U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps trained over 100,000 new nurses, improving the quality of nursing education as well.²⁹ These lasting effects brought about by the army nurse's shifting image demonstrate how powerfully the media influenced public perceptions in WWII. Media portrayals of WWII army nursing depicted what exactly women were capable of on a traditionally masculine battlefield, and in doing so, paved the way for future movements towards gender equality in the later twentieth century.

²⁹ Landry, Meghann L. *Fashioning the Future: The U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps, 1943-1948*. (MA thesis, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2012), 95.
<http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-04152012-152439/unrestricted/LandryThesis.pdf>

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Appendix



Figure 1: "Help Your Red Cross" – Hubert Chapin, 1917

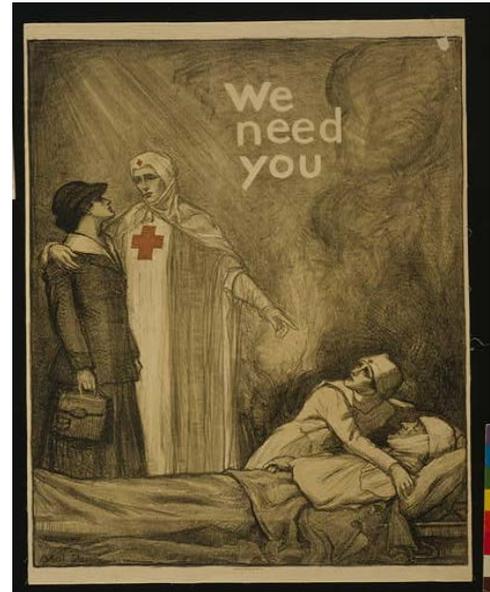


Figure 2: "We Need You" – Albert Sterner, 1918



Figure 3: *Parachute Nurse* (1942). Photograph from Beatrice and Philip Kalisch's "When Nurses Were National Heroines: Images of Nursing In American Film, 1942-1945."



Figure 4: Still from *The Army Nurse* with nurses in uniform.

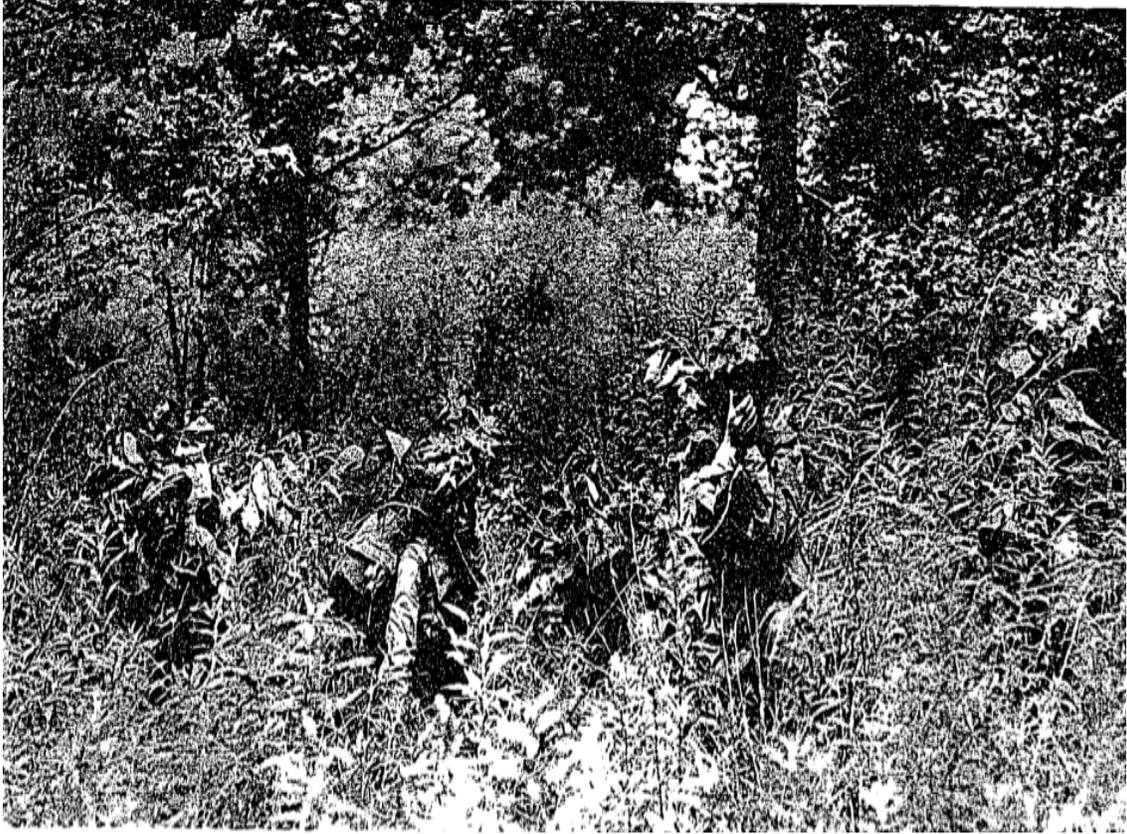


Figure 5: Army nurses undergoing camouflage training in Darton's "The Army Nurse Trains for Battle."



Figure 6: Still from *The Army Nurse* with close-ups on individual nurses to highlight their patriotic heroism.