SAILORS IN SKIRTS:
MAINBOCHER AND THE MAKING OF THE NAVY WAVES

by
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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in American Material Culture

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PREFACE

This thesis got its start as a mannequin at the Chicago History Museum. In my time working in CHM’s costume collection, I assisted in the mounting of an exhibition on the history of Chicago weddings. Called I Do! Chicago Ties the Knot, the exhibition featured wedding dresses from the 1830s to the present. One outfit stood out in particular—a white uniform worn by a Navy Wave in her World War II-era wedding to a Navy lieutenant. The photograph accompanying the mannequin showed the newly married couple in full regalia. Her white suit contrasted against his dark uniform while their similar anchor insignia glinted in the sun. An exercise in similarities and contrasts, the mannequin and the photograph begged the question: what did this uniform mean to the woman who wore it?

To complicate matters further, there was the label copy. The label read: “WAVES Uniform/ Designed by Mainbocher, 1942.” Designed by Mainbocher? The man known as the most expensive dressmaker of the mid-twentieth century? The fashion designer so obsessed with appearance and control that he stitched a necklace of his own design onto the gown of a high society client so that she would not be able to add her jewelry to the ensemble he had made for her? That Mainbocher designed military uniforms? How odd.

The question of how the “haute-est” of haute couturiers came to design a military uniform reemerged as I considered thesis topics in my first year in the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture. Interested in pursuing a twentieth century topic, decided I would try to get to the bottom of Mainbocher and his uniform
work. My thesis was to be an exercise in answering the question: why did Mainbocher design the uniform for the Navy WAVES?

I saw this research project as an opportunity to do more than answer that one question, however; I wanted to breath new life into the historical dialogue about Mainbocher. Considered one of the greatest dressmakers of his time, the craftsman-like Mainbocher had been eclipsed in costume history by his genius contemporaries. This was my chance, I thought, to remind the world—or at least the costume history field—of the man who invented the strapless dress, brought back the girdle, and coined the color name “off-white.”

My goal set, I began to research. I quickly realized, however, that my two-pronged plan to unravel Mainbocher’s uniform commission and reposition him as one of the great twentieth century designers was poorly thought-out. The material on Mainbocher was limited and little remained of his papers in the United States. Without more time and resources, Mainbocher would remain a mystery to me. What’s more, I came to recognize that the most compelling story in the history of the Mainbocher-Navy relationship was neither Mainbocher nor the Navy, but the women who wore his uniforms. Returning to the Wave who married her sweetheart in her uniform, I realized that the question I wanted to ask was more complicated than simply, “why did Mainbocher design the uniforms.” I needed to get at the root of the uniforms themselves, to position them as active agents doing work not only for Mainbocher and the Navy, but also for and on the women who wore them.

This thesis began as a defense of a forgotten twentieth century couturier and his uniform work and became a meditation on the ability of uniforms to shape women as both part of and separate from the military. From fashion studies to social
history, this thesis evolved in fits and starts to become what it is now: a hybrid of material culture, cultural history, and costume theory that argues for an understanding of garments as active agents in the lives of the people who made, commissioned, and wore them.

Acknowledgements

Given the topic of this project it is only appropriate to compare this thesis to a war, and if I went to battle with my thesis than my victory is due in large part to my advisor Rosemary Krill. In Rosemary I found a masterful combination of drill sergeant and field nurse. She forced me to stay organized and refused to let me indulge in my need to add more research and text. Her keen editorial eye and gently persistent reminders that punctuation is not the enemy were invaluable. I could not have completed this project without her, and I thank her for her unending support and encouragement.

I would like to thank Allison Russell at the Naval History and Heritage Command Center for her incredible wrangling of hundreds of uniform components. Natalie Elder at the National Museum of American History was endlessly helpful, while Britta Granrud and Robbie Fee at the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation helped me incorporate the voices of some of the thousands of women who wore the WAVES uniform. Beth Koelsch at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro was generous with photo permissions, while the University’s impressive archives at the Betty H. Carter Veterans Historical Project were an invaluable resource. Finally, Clara Berg in the Department of Special Collections and FIT Archives at the Fashion Institute of Technology’s Gladys Marcus Library helped me wade through the exhaustive Mainbocher scrapbook archive there.
At Winterthur, I want to thank Ritchie Garrison, Brock Jobe, and Greg Landrey for their leadership and support. The curators at the museum have been an invaluable source of research and knowledge to my classmates and me during our time here and I thank them for their dedication to teaching and mentoring us. There is no question that without the library staff I would have failed my first semester in the WPAMC program. A special thanks is necessary for all smiles and support I received from Emily Guthrie and Lauri Perkins during the thesis-writing process, and for their heroic and last minute help in locating the single Collier’s cartoon that eluded me throughout the writing process.

I would like to thank my classmates Abbey, Adam, Addie, Alice, Alyce, Amy, Anne, Ariel, Ben, and Kati for their friendship, good humor, and willingness to listen to me wax rhapsodic over uniforms. I would especially like to thank Abbey Chamberlain for hosting me so wonderfully in Washington, D.C., during my summer research trips.

Finally, I have to thank my family, and especially my mother. That they did not laugh when I announced that I would be moving to Delaware to study “stuff” is proof of their love for me, but their excitement and support has gone above and beyond what I could have ever imagined.
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ABSTRACT

The Navy WAVES were formed in 1942 in response to a wartime manpower shortage in the United States Navy. Meant to “free a man to fight,” the members of the newly formed women’s reserve became the first women to serve as full members of the US Navy. Their uniforms were designed by Mainbocher, an American couturier who established his career in France and returned to the United States when war broke out in Europe.

A close examination of the uniforms shows the many kinds of work they did. They legitimized Mainbocher in they eyes of a skeptical American public, rebranding him as a patriot and providing him with the opportunity to test out his theories of sartorial functionality and uniformity on a large scale. They served as an ideal recruitment tool for the Navy, attracting the “right” kind of women to service in the WAVES. Finally, for the Waves themselves the uniforms performed a double-act of gender progress and restraint, making women feel like militarized sailors even as they reassured the American public and male members of the Navy that the Waves were feminine, non-threatening, and unlikely to upset the masculine culture of the Navy.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In an act of patriotic boosterism, the January 24 1943 issue of the New York Times Magazine declared that, “the ‘best-dressed women of the year’ are the women who are wearing uniforms.”\textsuperscript{1} Disregarding the militaristic pandering, the New York Times was not too far off the mark. Women in at least one uniform, that of the Navy WAVES, were being hailed across the country as both fashionable and patriotic.

In 1942, young American women could choose from a variety of ways to serve their country at war. They could work in war production factories, fulfilling the promise of Rosie the Riveter and freeing male workers to fight. They could take up teaching positions left open by men who had enlisted or been drafted. They could ration food and collect supplies, sell war bonds, and participate in fundraisers. Or, for the first time in American history, they could serve their country in the armed forces.

Between 1942 and 1944, the main four branches of the United States military services gained an extra appendage: the women’s auxiliaries. Women had their choice of the Army WAAC/WAC (Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps/Women’s Army Corps); the Coast Guard SPARS (“Semper Paratus – Always Ready”); the USMCWR (United

\textsuperscript{1} New York Times, January 24, 1943, SM20.
States Marine Corps Women’s Reserve) or the Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service).²

As the first official women’s branch of the U.S. Navy, The WAVES were the forerunner to full integration of women into active naval ranks. With the formal addition of women into the Navy, however, arose a new and unexpected question: what would they wear? The answer to that question came from a surprising source: the New York atelier of the well-known fashion designer Mainbocher.

The uniforms Mainbocher designed for the WAVES occupy a space at the crossroads of fashion, gender and military history. They served multiple purposes, boosting Mainbocher’s career and helping Navy brass recruit more women. Most importantly, the uniforms had both social and political meaning. They gave agency to the new brand of female sailor while showing the world that the WAVES were no threat to the masculine arena of the military or to the status quo of domestic life. Depending on who was looking at them, the uniforms could turn women into sailors and sailors back into women.

When studying Mainbocher’s WAVES uniforms the most important primary sources are the objects themselves. This thesis will address the uniforms through two

² The auxiliary of the US Army was the Women’s Army Corps, known as the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps until 1943. In this paper, WAAC will be used to refer to the Army’s women’s reserve prior to 1943, while WAC will be used to refer to the unit after 1943, when the institution of legal changes by Congress prompted a name change.
collections: one at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution and another at the Naval History and Heritage Command Center (NHHC) at the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. Other primary sources include newspaper articles, personal letters, and scrapbooks belonging to Waves during the period. The majority of newspaper articles come from the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City, which houses a six-volume “scrapbook” about Mainbocher containing more than twenty-years-worth of newspaper clippings about the designer. The NHHC and the Women in Military Service for America Memorial (WIMSA) both hold personal materials. Autobiographical accounts of life in the WAVES, from published memoirs to transcribed oral histories, form another valuable source of primary information.

Secondary sources can be divided into three avenues of research: the WAVES, uniform theory, and Mainbocher. For the WAVES, texts such as Doris Weatherford’s *American Women and World War II*, Susan H. Godson’s *Serving Proudly: A History of Women in the U.S. Navy*, Melissa McEuan’s *Making War, Making Women*, and Leisa D. Meyer’s *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women’s Army Corps During World War II* provide a history of the WAVES and women in the military during wartime.³

Jennifer Craik’s *Uniforms Exposed*, Paul Fussel’s *Uniforms: Why We Are What We Wear* and Elizabeth Wilson’s *Adorned in Dreams* provide background in fashion and uniform theory.⁴ Craik and Fussel provide important insight into the role of uniforms in military culture and the construction of a masculine military identity, establishing the working definition of the “military uniform” that will form the basis of this thesis’ analysis. According to Craik, uniforms are garments that “shape who we are and how we perform our identities.”⁵ The performative aspect of Craik’s definition is vital, as a uniform is an outfit worn for doing a specific job. In the case of the WAVES, that job is being a female sailor. Craik goes on to define a uniform as shorthand for, “the kind of behavior exhibited by the wearer and expected by the observer.”⁶ In the case of the WAVES uniform, then, Mainbocher’s designs tell both the wearer and the observer what to expect from a female sailor. This idea is essential

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⁵ Craik, *Uniforms Exposed*, 4.

⁶ Ibid., 5.
to the uniform’s ability to function as an object that, depending on the identity of the observer, turns women into sailors and sailors into women.

For Craik, the military uniform in particular is as much an ideological instrument as it is a garment. She argues for an understanding of military uniforms as agents of cohesion, creating, “a persona in individuals and a powerful collective presence.” Military uniforms mark the transformation of individuals into groups and instill that group’s ideology in each wearer. Craik also sees military uniforms as imbued with the power of the state and an authority that comes from sanctioned violence. While this interpretation of military uniforms is both popular and legitimate, it is less compelling when looking at WAVES uniforms. The WAVES were not a fighting force but rather a domestic-bound administrative one, limiting their opportunity to commit government-sanctioned violent acts.

Fussel, meanwhile, provides a more practical definition of a uniform: they are garments worn by members of the same group that identify them as part of that group. That group is one that participates in activities that would lead the uniform to ennoble its wearer with associations with certain qualities. In the case of the military, traditionally those qualities are patriotism, courage, and trustworthiness, though power and authority are equally applicable. “Masculine” is another quality that can be

7 Ibid., 30.

8 Fussel, Uniforms, 4.
associated with military uniforms, and Fussel identifies three sites of masculinity on
the military uniform: the shoulders, the waist, and the hips. Design features on
military uniforms highlight masculinity through those areas, whether by making
shoulders appear broader through shoulder boards and epaulettes or emphasizing the
slimness of the wearer’s hips through the cut of the trousers.9

Using Craik and Fussel as groundwork, this thesis defines a military uniform
as one that identifies the individual as part of a larger group and in doing so eclipses
the individual’s personality with the group identity. It associates the individual with
the military group, which is itself associated with qualities of patriotism and military
authority. Finally, it instills in its wearer and its observers expected behaviors and
viewpoints. In the case of Mainbocher’s uniforms, the expectations of the wearer and
of the observer were often different and even oppositional.

Elizabeth Wilson’s arguments relate to fashion theory rather than uniform
theory, but her writing provides a conceptual foundation for the discussion of the
uniforms as clothing. She argues that costume is laden with “uneasiness and
ambiguity,” and that it connects a physical body to social identities. “This makes it
uneasy territory, since it forces us to recognize that the human body is more than a
biological entity. It is an organism in culture, a cultural artifact even, and its own

9 Ibid., 11.
boundaries are unclear.” The idea of “unclear boundaries” speaks to the variety of work that the uniforms did and the ways in which they could act in multiple ways on the same person. As will be shown in chapter five, many Waves had conflicting feelings about their service, and that “uneasiness and ambiguity” played out in relationship to their uniforms.

Craik, Fussel, and Wilson provide a working definition of a military uniform and of the role of costume in daily life, but other words used commonly in this thesis require defining as well. “Feminine” and “femininity” are two words that will appear often in this text. It is important to note that this thesis defines “femininity” in a very specific way. A basic definition for femininity could be the trait that describes behaving in ways considered typical for women. In the context of this thesis, “femininity” refers to those qualities that popular American culture identified with women in the wartime period—and in some part continues to identify with women today—including domesticity, sensitivity, gentleness and passivity. While this thesis treats femininity and sexual appeal as different concepts, there is also a quality of sexual objectification inherent in this definition of femininity.

“Masculinity” is an equally complicated concept, though for the purpose of this thesis the working definition is similar to that of femininity: masculinity is the

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10 Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 2.
trait that describes having the qualities considered ideal for men in wartime American society, including strength, authority, heroism and aggression.

Secondary sources dealing with Mainbocher are few and far between. The most significant scholarly examination of the designer is “Mainbocher: Veiled Innovation,” Bethany Morris’ 2003 master’s thesis at the Fashion Institute of Technology. Other secondary sources used in this thesis include American Fashion: The Life and Lines of Adrian, Mainbocher, McCardell, Norell, and Trigère, which includes an essay on Mainbocher written by Dale McConathy in 1975.¹¹

Any discussion of American military and politics brings up a veritable alphabet soup of acronyms. Every organization that uses an acronym is written out once with the acronym in parentheses. For each following mention of the organization, the acronym alone is used to identify it. A complete glossary of acronyms and other important military terminology is included in the appendix, but the most important acronyms used in this thesis are as follows:

OWI: Office of War Information, the government agency formed to coordinate all wartime public communications, including recruitment efforts and propaganda campaigns;

SPARS: Semper Paratus—Always Ready, the women’s reserve for the US Coast Guard, named for the Coast Guard’s motto. The SPARS were formed in 1942 after the WAVES and, as a branch of the Navy, had uniforms almost identical to the WAVES. As the WAVES came first, however, Mainbocher designed the uniforms for the WAVES and later altered it slightly for the SPARS;

USMCWR: United States Marine Corps Women’s Reserve, the women’s reserve for the Marine Corps. The last branch of the military to accept women, the Marine Corps was famously opposed first to women’s service and then to the trivializing of said service, refusing to adopt a what might be perceived as an infantilizing nickname for their women’s corps. The USMCWR was retired in 1948 when women were permitted to join the general corps;

WAVES: Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, the women’s reserve of the US Navy and the subject of this thesis;

WAAC/WAC: Women’s Army Corps, formed as the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps in 1941 as the first women’s reserve in the United States Military. The name changed in 1943 in response to bureaucratic issues with maintaining an auxiliary force that received some yet not all the benefits of military service.

Along with a sea of acronyms, any discussion of women’s corps in this period brings with it the challenge of differentiating between service and service member. For the purpose of this thesis, the word “WAVES” will denote the Women’s Reserve while the word “Wave” or “Waves” will refer to a woman or group of women serving in the service. The same rule applies for “WAC” and “Wac” as well as with the SPARS. As they lacked a nickname, members of the USMCWR will be called “women Marines,” the term used for them in the period.
This thesis is divided into six chapters, including this introduction and a conclusion. Chapter two, which is titled “The Whole Look,” provides an in-depth description of the uniform and its various accessories and addresses a basic history of the WAVES and Mainbocher. Chapter three, “Right, not Chic,” explores the role that the uniforms played in Mainbocher’s career, both as a platform from which he could reassert his American identity and as an opportunity to realize his design philosophy of suitability and conformity upon the bodies of thousands of women.

Chapter four, titled “You in Navy Blue,” explores the way the Navy leveraged Mainbocher’s uniforms for recruitment purposes, analyzing printed material and poster art and exploring the social circles responsible for the WAVES uniform commission. Chapter five, “Women into Sailors and Sailors into Women,” explores the political and social work of the uniforms, addressing how they worked to make women feel like Waves even as they reaffirmed the status quo of a masculine Navy. The final chapter concludes with suggestions for further research and an assessment on the state of uniforming military women today.

In a letter to the editor published on June 10, 1946 in *LIFE Magazine*, a woman responded to a previous article that had profiled the famous designer and his wealthiest clients. Specialist Second Class Ernestine Gulley wrote, “Although I shall probably never own a $600 creation of Mainbocher… I should like to boast that the
navy-blue suit which I have worn for nearly two years was Mainbocher-designed! Compliments of Uncle Sam!”

Gulley’s enthusiasm for her uniform betrays the pride she felt in both her service and her stylish appearance. This combination of emotions inspired by the uniform illustrates the ways in which Mainbocher’s designs transcended the standard requirements of uniforms to provide a consistent appearance and serve as functional garments. These uniforms did more—they became agents of social and political work for all the players involved, legitimating Mainbocher in the eyes of the American public, recruiting ladies for the women’s service, and ultimately turning women into sailors and sailors back into women.

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Chapter 2

“THE WHOLE LOOK”: THE UNIFORMS, THE WAVES, AND MAINBOCHER

The Uniforms

The uniforms designed by Mainbocher have three primary models: the blue service dress uniform [Figure 1], the white service dress uniform [Figure 2], and the gray and white seersucker working uniform [Figure 3]. For the purpose of this thesis, these three models will be considered the standard “uniform suite.” Women might purchase additional uniforms depending on their position; Waves who worked as riveters on production lines, for instance, would likely purchase the standard-issue coverall or work trousers and shirt. Other uniform components could be traded out for standard elements in the uniform suite. For example, Waves had the option of wearing navy wool trousers with their blue service dress uniform, though not for more formal events. Every woman who enlisted in the WAVES purchased the required three sets of suits, however, making them a uniquely consistent standard by which to measure the complicated relationship between fashion, the Navy, and women’s bodies.

13 In the Navy, the standard name for service dress uniforms is “service dress blue” or “service dress white.” For the purposes of this thesis, however, the uniforms will be called “blue service dress” or “white service dress.” As the majority of the readers of this thesis are non-military, organizing the uniforms with the color first will help to quickly distinguish between the uniforms.
The details of the uniform, from the placement of seams to the design of the hat, all play a role in understanding how the uniforms functioned in their social and historical context.

The blue service dress uniform was the primary day-to-day uniform worn by Waves who served in a bureaucratic, administrative, or scientific position. It was the standard uniform worn by Waves who did not do heavy physical labor as part of their service. It was also worn by all Waves in dress situations such as formal inspections, social events, and any environment in which they were representing the WAVES amongst civilians or other government officials. Different shirts were worn depending on the situation in order to make distinctions between every-day work uniforms and a more formal appearance. The white service dress uniform was simply the summer version of the blue. Most Waves preferred the seersucker summer work uniform as their everyday summer uniform, however, and treated their white service dress uniforms as formal wear for special events.

The blue and white service dress uniforms are cut identically, with differences in material and color. The blue service dress uniform is made from a twill-woven wool, while the white uniform is made of cotton, Palm Beach, or tropical worsted wool. The uniforms are comprised of a jacket and a skirt which are meant

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14 The 1943 Women’s Reserve uniform regulations list the possible fabric materials for the blue service dress uniform as “woolen cloth, palm beach, cotton, or a similar fabric.” The navy cotton uniforms were the summer uniform prior to the introduction of the grey and white seersucker uniforms in early 1944, at which point the navy cotton uniforms were retired. For the purposes of this thesis, only the wool twill uniforms will be considered. Palm Beach was a trademarked fabric in a twill or plain weave, made of a cotton warp and mohair filling. It got its name from the Palm Beach resorts that first started selling clothes to visitors made of the material. While Palm
to be worn with interchangeable shirts (both short-sleeved and long) a necktie, as well as stockings and heeled shoes.

The uniform jacket is single breasted. Two seams run from shoulder to bottom hem of the jacket, equidistant from the center buttons and directly through the middle of the breast pocket flaps. The jacket torso is cut to curve in at the waist and flare out at the hips, a shape enhanced by the presence of vertical darts at the waist on the front panels of the jacket [Figure 4]. This cut emphasized the curve of a Wave’s waist, highlighting her gender by playing up ideas of a curvaceous body. The jacket falls to the hip of the wearer.

The most distinctive aspect of the jacket is the collar. The collar points are curved and rounded rather than angled, and fall free over the peaked revers of the lapels [Figure 5]. The WAVES uniform collar points will play a major role in this thesis. Not only were they a distinctive feature of the uniform, they were identified as one of its most stylish aspects. The collars will be explored in depth in chapter five, but it is important to note at this point that their curved design de-emphasized the broadness of their wearer’s chest. This tactic was one of many employed by Mainbocher to “feminize” the appearance of the Waves, making them look less like sailors and more like ladies.

Like the jackets, the blue and white service dress skirts are identical. They are six-gored with a flat front and are, according to the uniform regulations, to be cut
to a “conventional sweep and length,” which in the period meant knee-length.\textsuperscript{15} Two slant pockets are set into the front of the skirt, four inches wide and six inches deep. The pockets are small and hold very little, a deliberate design feature that will be explored further in chapter three as an example of Mainbocher’s obsession with control over appearances. The skirt has a side zipper and button tab entrance, creating a flat front uninterrupted by a fly.

The blue and white service dress uniforms were worn with a range of shirts. Long sleeved shirts came in three standard styles and were required to be one of three colors: white, navy blue, or a lighter shade of blue called “reserve blue” by the Navy. The most traditional of the three shirt styles is the button-up blouse with a pointed collar. It has three vertical darts at each shoulder seam and is shaped at the waistline with a stitched tuck at each side of the front. The back of the shirt has a single vertical dart at the shoulder seams and two stitched tucks in line with the shoulder darts. These tucks and darts provided added shape to the shirt so that they could fit closer to a woman’s torso, reinforcing the curve of her waist much like the jackets.

Of the two alternate shirts, one features a horizontal yoke on each side that ends in a vertical seam extending from the yoke to the top shoulder seam, forming rectangular patches of fabric that extend from the shoulder to the upper chest with full shirring at the horizontal seam. The other alternate shirt was colloquially referred to

as the “V for Victory blouse,” and it earned its nickname for the horizontal yoke that extended from each side of the chest and met in a deep-seamed V in the center of the shirt [Figure 6]. The shirt collar on both shirts are pointed, but while the first alternate has a center row of buttons, the V for Victory shirt is a pullover-style and is accessed via a series of snaps along the lower side of the shirt. Both shirts are shaped at the waistline with six tucks on the front (three on each side), and another six at the back.

Other shirt options included short-sleeved shirts in white, navy, and reserve blue, though regulations determined who was allowed to wear what color and when. Officers could wear the white shirts, both short and long-sleeved, in both work and dress environments, while enlisted personnel could only wear the white shirts when they were in dress uniform. The navy blue shirt, on the other hand, was required for all personnel in dress uniform (enlisted and officer) if they planned to remove their uniform jackets.

The gray and white striped seersucker summer working uniform replaced the earlier and much less successful cotton summer working uniform, referred to by the Waves who wore them as “gremlins.” Cut identically to the wool service dress uniform but made of wrinkly, non-color-fast navy cotton, the failed gremlins were retired in early 1944 and replaced with the seersucker working uniform.

The summer working uniform is comprised of a dress and a jacket. Both are cut from grey and white striped cotton seersucker fabric. The dress is a short-sleeved shirtdress with a defined waistband and a kick-pleat at the center-front of the skirt. It is accessed via a zipper and button tab at the side of the waistband, while the bodice of the dress opens with a button at the neck to allow the wearer’s head through
the neck-hole. The dress is shirred at the shoulders, creating fullness in the chest that is brought in tight at the waistband. The collar of the dress is curved like that on the service dress jacket, though it has no lapel.

The lack of the lapel is made clear by the seersucker jacket, which is worn over the dress and has lapels but no collar. When worn together, the round dress collar and pointed jacket lapels create the same distinctive collared look as that of the service dress jacket, again emphasizing the femininity of the woman wearing it and undermining the inherent masculinity implied by military uniforms. The jacket has shoulder pads and three vertical darts at the back that work together to create a dramatic contrast from widened shoulder to the curved waist. As with the service dress uniforms, the contrast of shoulder to waist is an important feminizing feature of the uniforms. It emphasizes the curve of a woman’s chest and flare of her hips as compared to her narrow waist. The darts on both the service dress and the work uniform jackets also work to achieve this effect.

Ties were worn with all three standard uniforms. Made of silk or rayon, they were either black or reserve blue. The tie was worn in a square knot at the neck, with equal lengths of tie-ends on either side. While full single-piece ties were acceptable, most waves wore two-piece ties made of identical material. Cut to match the shape of a standard tie, they had tapered ends that culminated with a buttonhole. When attached to buttons beneath a uniform shirt collar, they could be tied at the neck and looked like standard ties while avoiding unnecessary bulk beneath the back collar of the Waves’ shirt.
No military uniform is complete without proper headgear. For the WAVES, headgear differed by rank; officers wore one kind of hat and enlisted personnel another. Officers wore ovoid hats with flat crowns, curved sides, and a black brim that turned up along the sides [Figure 7]. This created a look that mimicked late eighteenth-century naval officers’ hats. Considered a “combination cap,” officer’s hats had cap covers that could be traded out, changing the color of the crown when they were snapped into the brim. The cap, which was white at the base, could be covered with black, reserve blue, and gray and white seersucker cap covers.

Enlisted personnel headgear also had interchangeable cap covers, but the hat design was round with an arched crown and a flat brim that turned up at the back [Figure 8]. The hat served as the only official headgear of enlisted Waves until late 1944 when the straight-sided foldable garrison cap (also called an overseas cap) was introduced [Figure 9]. A regular hat option for Navy men, Waves were permitted to wear the garrison cap after naval administration acknowledged that their brimmed hats made enlisted Waves appear younger and more girlish and because women stationed at airfields and working in outside environments complained that the enlisted brimmed hat flew off with the wind.

The floppy-brimmed enlisted hat is a small-scale example of the primary point of this thesis. While making the Waves look uniformly martial to each other’s eyes, the enlisted hats also emphasized their youth and gender, highlighting their


17 Joy Bright Hancock, Lady in the Navy: A Personal Reminiscence (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 152.
“girlishness.” The introduction of the garrison cap allowed enlisted Waves to move beyond the feminizing appearance of their hats, but from 1942 to late 1944 enlisted women wore hats that feminized and even infantilized them and their military service.

It is doubtful that the Navy worried about giving their female sailors a girlish appearance. As will be shown in chapter 4, the Navy went to great lengths to emphasize the femininity and sometimes even juvenility of the women who enlisted in the WAVES. However, internal dislike of the brimmed cap, coupled with the impediment to work that it caused, meant that it would be replaced by the garrison cap.

Interestingly, the garrison cap is the only example of a WAVES uniform element that is identical to a male uniform component. Garrison caps were introduced as optional headgear for male officers and then enlisted sailors in 1943. When Waves complained that their enlisted brimmed caps made doing their work difficult, the Navy gave them a men’s cap. Rather than choosing the standard men’s sailor beret or the “Dixie cup” style hat that had been in use by the Navy since 1886, however, they assigned women a newly created hat option—the garrison cap. The new option not only did not resemble men’s uniforms, but many men actively disliked wearing the garrison cap and chose to leave it off. Thus, even when matching their male counterparts, Waves still looked distinctly different and un-sailor-like.


19 Marke A. Hensgen, "To Cap It All Off … A Fond Look at a Navy Trademark: Uses (and Abuses) of the 'Dixie Cup,'" All Hands no. 860, November 1988. 33.
While headgear was central to all military uniforms, the issue of women in uniform presented an unexpected requisition category—handbags. Male soldiers and sailors were issued military duffle bags or field packs, but women in uniform required a slew of accessories to maintain proper feminine standards of behavior and appearance. As was noted in the description of the skirt and as will be explored again in chapter three, Mainbocher gave the Waves only the smallest of pockets in his uniform skirt and jacket design. Done on purpose to limit women from overfilling their pockets and ruining the line of his designs, this move limited the functionality of the uniforms in favor of a ladylike appearance and demanded the addition of handbags to WAVES uniform requirements.

The Women’s Reserve regulations laid out handbag requirements. Purses were required to be made of leather, fabric, synthetic material or a combination of materials, designed in an envelope style with a removable shoulder strap and “shall contain envelope compartment at least 10 1/4 inches wide, change purse, comb and double-faced mirror.” Precise and stringent, the regulations went so far as to specify the measurements of the shoulder strap.

Official WAVES handbags were sold alongside the uniforms and came complete with the required comb and mirror [Figure 10]. The bag was offered in both black and white leather to match both uniforms, though the black was more popular.

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21 “Shall be of two thicknesses of self material with covered matching adjustable buckle. Shall be 7/8 inch wide and 45 inches long when extended to its greatest length. Ends of strap shall be formed into loops with metal snaps or other suitable devices. These ends shall pass through slits at top of side gussets.” Ibid.
That the uniform requirements demanded a comb and mirror is yet another example of the ways in which the Navy expected the women serving in the WAVES to maintain feminine standards of grooming and beauty while in the service. While maintaining a specific appearance is central to all military structures ("grooming standards" are some of the first rules learned by recruits in boot camp), the comb and mirror speak to long-standing stereotypes about female vanity and highlight the Navy’s insistence that its female recruits remain women first, sailors second.

Another question raised by the presence of women in the Navy was that of footwear—specifically, heels. The Navy originally mandated that service shoes be laced oxfords with four, five, or six eyelets. Heel height could not be higher that 1.625 inches, and the shoes were to be made of black leather with black stitching and no decoration. For dress occasions, shoes could be laced oxfords, pumps, or mary-janes, always with a closed toe and heels no higher than two inches. Waves were permitted to wear white shoes with the white service dress uniform [Figure 11].

As categories of uniform attire, stockings and undergarments suggested unique and complicated situations. In an attempt to create as uniform an image as possible, the WAAC created Army-issue undergarments for their women enlistees. This move brought on a wave of public mockery, disapproval, and panic that the Army was taking an undue and even licentious interest in the underwear of patriotic American girls.22

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The WAVES were established almost a year after the WAAC. Using the Army’s experience as a cautionary tale, Navy brass announced that the Navy would not be issuing undergarments or even making regulations regarding women’s underwear so long as they were not visible under the uniform. Captain Mildred McAfee, the director of the newly formed WAVES, was forced to announce time and time again during press conferences that the Navy was not interested in whatever was worn beneath the skirt. Recruiters, meanwhile, sold the lack of undergarment regulation as an incentive to join the WAVES, arguing that it proved that the Navy was interested in preserving the Waves’ individuality.

As will be explored in greater depth in chapter five, the Women’s Reserve allowed women to acquire their own undergarments in an effort to craft a reputation for the group as more feminine and more individual than the WAC. At the same time, however, the decision also speaks to the complicated ideas of shaping bodies. Uniforms are inherently conforming. Uniforms force their wearer into an appearance that is identical to her neighbor’s, shaping her public image and even her physical body in order to abide by pre-determined standards. The WAVES uniforms participating in this aspect of “uniforming” through the use of specific seams and cuts, yet the decision to allow women to wear their own undergarments would seem to undermine that mission. The special position of Mainbocher’s uniforms, however,

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and their mission of making women into sailors while still keeping them women required a balance between uniform conformity and femininity. The idea that women would wear the same thing on the outside but be permitted to express their individuality in their most “feminine” of clothing—their undergarments—allowed the Navy to maintain that balance.

As visible foundational garments stockings were not exempt from regulations. Women’s Reserve Uniform Regulations mandated that hose “shall be conventional long stockings, without clocks or decorations of any kind, neutral beige in color, of plain rayon, silk nylon, cotton or lisle thread. A standard sample of this color is maintained in the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts, Washington, D.C.” Grooming standards required that they be worn right side out, with stocking seams running in a straight line up a Wave’s leg. Grooming standards were as thoroughly enforced for female sailors as for male and many Waves found themselves scrambling to meet inspection expectations.25

That a military organization would have to maintain samples of women’s stocking material for official uniforming purposes illustrates the degree to which the presence of women in the military was altering the Navy in subtle yet pervasive ways. No military would ever worry about maintaining the “individuality” of male recruits by letting them choose their own undergarments. Military theory is based on the idea of stripping enlistees of their individuality in favor of building a cohesive, hive-minded whole. For women, however, the Navy thought it necessary to stress the

maintenance of independence and individuality, an indication of the different
treatment of women in the Navy and the refusal of the Navy, despite promises of equal
treatment, to accept women as permanent members of their military ranks. Due to a
combination of internal resistance to the presence of women and public fears over the
“masculinization” of Waves, the Navy instead emphasized Waves’ distance from the
conforming, de-individualizing structure of the traditionally masculine Navy through
issues like undergarments and stockings.

Final uniform components included overcoat, raincoat, havelock, and
gloves [Figure 12]. Specialized garments were required for specific activities, such
as gym clothes for the required physical education component of officers’ school and
enlistee training [Figure 13]. Slacks could be worn as an alternative to skirts in
specific work environments, while dungarees or coveralls were acceptable for
positions that required hard physical labor or extensive movement, such as riveting,
aviation training, and being a machinist mate [Figure 14]. They could not be worn in
formal or office situations, however, regardless of one’s work duties, because they
undermined the image of the feminine sailor and could not be seen to represent the
public face of the WAVES. All these garments, accessories, and requirements

26 The havelock was a rain protector that draped over a Wave’s cap and covered her
neck, creating a wimple-like appearance. The most famous havelocks were those
worn by the Foreign Legionnaires, whose white havelocks extended from their kepis
and protected their backs of their necks’ from the heat of the sun. The havelock got its
name from Major-General Sir Henry Havelock, a general in the British army who was
active in India in the nineteenth century. James W. Ryan, *Camerone: The French
Foreign Legion’s Greatest Battle* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group,
1996), 19.
resulted in a group of women entering a military unit, discarding their personal wardrobes and accessories and acquiring a standardized set of clothing that gave them a sense of unification and militarization while reassuring Waves and non-Waves alike of the women’s continued femininity.

**The WAVES**

On July 30, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt put his signature to Public Law 689, officially signing the WAVES into existence. The birth of the WAVES was the product of months of behind-the-scenes planning on the part of the Navy and members of Congress who supported the temporary presence of women in the military. Women had served alongside the Navy during World War I as Yeomen (F). Given the nickname of “yeomenettes,” these women wore hastily assembled uniforms and served as emergency stopgaps wherever they were needed [Figure 15]. By the war’s end in 1918 approximately 11,300 women had served as yeoman (F), working in positions as diverse as typists, stenographers, radio operators, chemists, torpedo assemblers, telegraphers, draftsmen, bookkeepers, and even camouflage.

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27 The full title of the law was “Establishment of Women’s Reserve, Public Law 689, H.R. 6807.” Technically an amendment to the Naval Reserve Act of 1938, it declared, “A Women’s Reserve is hereby established which shall be a branch of the Naval Reserve and shall be administered under the same provisions in all respects (except as may be necessary to adapt said provisions to the Women’s Reserve or as specifically provided herein) as those contained in this Act or which may hereafter be enacted with respect to the Volunteer Reserve.” The language regarding “same provisions” with the exception of necessary adaptations is important. Despite the declaration of equality, it allowed the Navy and Congress to make a number of rules that affected only the Women’s Reserve and not the larger Naval Reserve, including the decision to ban women from overseas service.
designers.\textsuperscript{28} Women were permitted to serve as reserve Yeomen (F) in the Naval Reserve under a poorly worded section of the 1916 Naval Appropriations Act. In 1925 legislators changed the act to close the loophole, mandating that only men could enlist in the Naval Reserve.\textsuperscript{29}

The newly restrictive language of the revised Naval Appropriations Act served as symbol of the Navy’s opposition to the presence of women in its ranks. In 1925 no Naval officer or legislator could imagine a situation in which manpower shortages would require the assistance of women in uniform. With involvement of the United States in World War II in 1941, however, the more progressive members of both Congress and the Navy realized that the phrase “all hands on deck” included feminine hands as well as masculine.

In 1941 Representative Edith Nourse Rogers introduced legislation to create the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps, the auxiliary women’s reserve that would eventually transform into the WAC. That the unit was formed as an auxiliary proved immediately problematic, with issues of equal pay, deployment, and discipline coming to the fore. Secretary of the Navy William Franklin (“Frank”) Knox, concerned that Congress might try to pass a similar bill regarding the Navy without naval input, took an informal survey of the Navy to see what roles women might be able to fill. The

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Lettie Gavin, \textit{American Women in World War I: They Also Served} (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1997), 15.
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answer from the majority of naval bases and departments was “none,” with only two departments and bases saying that they would be receptive to women workers.\(^{30}\)

Despite opposition, Knox recommended that the Navy form a women’s reserve in February of 1942. Many bureaucrats in the Navy and the federal government insisted that women could only be included as an auxiliary unit, one that served alongside rather than in the Navy. In March, however, members of Congress who were sympathetic to Knox’s goals presented two bills (one to the House, one to the Senate) for a proposed Women’s Reserve whose members had full naval status.

The distinction between a naval reserve and naval auxiliary was subtle yet important. Many of the issues that plagued the WAAC while in its infancy came from the inclusion of the word “auxiliary” in its name. As members of an auxiliary unit, Waacs were denied pay equal to their male counterparts. They were also barred from receiving veteran’s benefits. Their ranks were not standardized with those of men in the Army, leading to confusion and a lack of respect from enlisted soldiers. Even details such as the free postage that all soldiers received were up in the air for auxiliary army women. These complicated procedural issues eventually prompted Congress to amend the legislation creating the WAAC, dropping the “auxiliary” and changing their name to the “Women’s Army Corps” in July of 1943.

In the spring of 1942 Secretary Knox was determined to avoid the problems that were already plaguing the Army. He and other women’s service supporters pushed strongly for the full reserve status of the reserve. The House bill

\(^{30}\) Susan H. Godson, *Serving Proudly* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 110
passed in April, but the Senate resisted. David Walsh, the chairman of the Senate Naval Affairs Committee, insisted that women in the Navy would “break up American homes and be a step backward in the progress of civilization.”

The Senate eventually passed a version of the bill mandating that the Women’s Reserve be formed as an auxiliary unit along the same lines as the Army’s WAAC. As the House and the Senate attempted to come to terms with their different versions of the Women’s Reserve bill, the Navy began consulting with female educators to determine the structure of the women’s reserve. Barnard Professor Elizabeth Reynard became special assistant to Director of the Bureau of Naval Personnel (BUPERS) Rear Admiral Randall Jacobs, advising him on Women’s Reserve matters. Women’s college administrators came together with naval administrators to form the Women’s Advisory Council. It was this group that recommended Smith College’s campus as an ideal site for the forthcoming female officer training school.

From the outset, the connection between women’s colleges, female educators, and the WAVES revealed a difference between the Navy’s women’s reserve and the Army’s, a difference that would emerge in the respective organizations’ treatment of their women enlistees and in the attitudes of the public toward the WAVES and the WAC. The female academics and college administrators who were central to the organization of the WAVES marked the Navy’s women’s


32 Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 111.
service as a product of women’s networks as much as of a military organization. As will be explored in chapter four, this women’s network would eventually work together with another network—that of society women and Navy wives—to bring Mainbocher into the WAVES’ fold and create an image of the WAVES that was both part of yet separate from the larger Navy.

It was the Women’s Advisory Council that named the nascent reserve. Congress and the media suggested names like “gobettes”\textsuperscript{33} and “sailorettes,” but Elizabeth Reynard coined the nautical sounding “WAVES.” Recognizing that “Women” and “Volunteer” were both essential terms and looking to avoid both a patronizing name such as “sailorette” or a public relations nightmare like “WAAC,”\textsuperscript{34} Reynard picked “WAVES” and worked backwards to create the proper name for the acronym.\textsuperscript{35}

It was also the Women’s Advisory Committee that persuaded Eleanor Roosevelt to put her weight behind the women’s service, advocating that it should be formed as part of the Navy rather than as auxiliary to it. With Mrs. Roosevelt’s support came the President’s, and Admiral Knox was able to convince Senator Walsh to reconsider the status of women in his Senate Reserve bill. Congress’ version of the

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\textsuperscript{33} “Gob” is a slang term for male sailors.
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\textsuperscript{34} The WAAC had to contend with endless “wacky WAAC” (and later, “wacky WAC”) jokes from an unreceptive press and public.
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bill (with a non-auxiliary women’s reserve that was considered a full-status arm of the Navy) passed the Senate and was signed into law by President Roosevelt on the 30th of July, 1942.\footnote{Godson, \textit{Serving Proudly}, 112} After months of congressional wrangling and back channel planning, the WAVES were born.

The legislation stated that the purpose of the Women’s Reserve was to “expedite the war effort by releasing officers and men for duty at sea and[by] their replacement by women in the shore establishment.”\footnote{“Establishment of Women’s Reserve,” Public Law 689, H.R. 6807, July 30, 1942.} Besides barring women from serving overseas, that language also tied the existence of the WAVES to the war effort and the duration of World War II. Women would be able to volunteer for the duration of the war plus an extra six months, but the end of the war would bring about the end of the reserve in every real and practical sense.

The legislation placed other limitations on the women in the reserves. The WAVES could have only one lieutenant commander and thirty-five lieutenants, and lieutenants (junior grade)\footnote{Lieutenant junior grade is a rank level below Lieutenant. In traditional naval hierarchies lieutenants can be promoted to Lieutenant Commander, but the Navy permitted only one Wave to serve at that level at a time. By default of rank, the director of the WAVES held the position, meaning that lieutenant was essentially the highest rank level a Wave could hope to achieve at the time.} could not make up more than 35% of the officers’ ranks. The Navy anticipated a Women’s Reserve made up of one thousand officers and ten
thousand enlistees.\textsuperscript{39} By the end of the war in 1945, those numbers would have multiplied many times over.

With the WAVES established through an official act of Congress, it was time to implement the Women’s Advisory Committee’s plans. Besides locating training at Smith College, the committee’s most important move was to recommend Mildred H. McAfee, president of the prestigious women’s college Wellesley, to serve as head of the WAVES. On August 3, 1942, McAfee was sworn in as an “officer and a gentleman of the United States Navy” at the rank of lieutenant commander, becoming the first woman officer of the Naval Reserve and the first ranked woman in the Navy [figure 16]. Elizabeth Reynard of Barnard College soon followed, commissioned as a lieutenant.

Besides providing the gentlemanly inspiration for the WAVES determination to be the “lady’s navy,” the language of “an officer and a gentleman” reinforced the idea that the proper sailor was a male one. No matter how hard a Wave worked, no matter how well she learned her naval lingo or how thoroughly and properly she served her country, she could never truly be an “officer and a gentleman.” That did not stop thousands of women, however, from stepping up to the challenge of trying.

In the first months of the WAVES existence no one was quite sure what to do with them, McAfee included. It took two months for the Navy to determine the

\textsuperscript{39} Godson, \textit{Serving Proudly}. 112
scope of McAfee’s responsibilities and power, the role of WAVES officers in the various naval districts across the nation, and to establish a plan for recruitment.⁴⁰ Female officers assigned to naval districts lead regional recruitment campaigns, which McAfee stressed should be tasteful. When one Chicago newspaper ran “cheesecake” advertisements featuring pin-up girls in Navy-inspired clothing McAfee pulled them, angry over the representation of WAVES as sexually available women.⁴¹ The WAVES were determined to attract the “right” kind of woman, and that included using publicity that appealed to the more conservative elements of the American public. Publicity efforts were focused on the radio, newspapers, rallies, posters, and public appeal. All efforts had three elements in common: they stressed the patriotic duty of military service for women, the opportunity to train at prestigious women’s colleges, and the appeal of the stylish new uniform that would be designed for them by Mainbocher.⁴²

McAfee’s conservative approach to recruitment worked. By the end of 1942, the WAVES numbered 770 officers and 3,100 enlistees. Three years later, the WAVES would peak at 86,000 women, with over 8,000 officers. Ultimately, more

⁴⁰ Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 114


than 100,000 women would serve in the WAVES uniform, making them Mainbocher’s largest single customer base.\textsuperscript{43}

WAVES training took place at women’s colleges around the country. Officers trained at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Their training school was formally called the U.S. Naval Reserve Midshipman’s School (WR), Northampton, colloquially referred to as USS Northampton. Enlisted women were first shipped off to Hunter College in the Bronx (called USS Hunter) for basic training and then to a variety of schools across the country for more advanced technical training in their assigned fields. As recruitment increased, more basic training schools for enlisted WAVES were opened at colleges across the country [figure 17].

Training for both officers and enlisted women involved a crash-course in naval terminology and etiquette, military hierarchies, and physical behavior. Waves learned to march in formation, to obey orders and recognize rank, to call floors “decks” and refer to toilets as “heads,” and, of course, to dress correctly. Uniform acquisition was an important rite of passage for the newly entered Waves (called “Boots”). Rising midshipmen at the officers’ school were especially thrilled to receive their midshipman’s hats upon graduation.

Following training, Waves were assigned to any number of posts based on a combination of successful training and previous civilian experience. Waves served as secretaries and office assistants to naval bureaucrats; worked in personnel offices and with the Supply Corps; worked as air traffic controllers on naval air bases; served

\footnote{\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.}
as cartographers, metalsmiths, photographer’s mates, aviation machinist mates, gunnery specialists, parachute riggers, aerographer’s mates; and even worked as “pigeonmen,” training birds to carry silent messages from ship to shore [figure 18].

Waves interacted with male sailors in any number of capacities, from serving as bureaucratic staff to training male aviation recruits in aeronautics on Link flight simulators.

Waves were expected to comply with a very strict set of standards. Makeup was allowed, though expected to be restrained. Waves were required to comport themselves with the dignity and morality that the Navy believed was required of the first female sailors. Captain Underwood, a male officer who trained the first WAVES officers at Smith College, insisted that his Waves would behave morally and with circumspection, as they were well educated and lady-like. Unsurprisingly, he also believed that Mainbocher’s uniforms rightly emphasized the femininity of the Waves, claiming that they looked “feminine and soft-looking rather than square and masculine like those of the other organizations.”

Behaving appropriately did not mean forgoing all socializing, however, and Waves were allowed and even encouraged to date. In fact, the Navy leveraged dating and the opportunity to meet eligible young men in uniform as recruitment incentives. These efforts will be explored further in chapter four.


45 Poulos, *A Woman’s War Too*, 53.

While Wacs served overseas in limited capacities, Waves were banned from overseas service. The ban on overseas service was intimately tied up in the idea of the “proper” Wave and was spearheaded by the same congressmen who had tried and failed to ban Wacs from serving at the battlefronts. Yet again, the WAVES were influenced by previous WAC experiences. The congressmen’s argument was that no good American women should be forced to endure “the cruelty of war… from the Japs, for example.” As Doris Weatherford has shown, however, questions about where women would hypothetically be quartered overseas revealed more worries about their possible mistreatment by American servicemen than by enemy forces. WAVES finally made it off the mainland in 1944 when the ban was partially lifted, allowing naval women to serve in portions of the Western Hemisphere that were not active war zones. Practically, that meant that Waves could serve at bases in Alaska, Hawaii, and the Caribbean. The first Waves landed in Hawaii in 1945, only months before the war ended.

Many women were lured to the WAVES with the promise of eventual overseas service (the WAVES and their female supporters in Congress had long been lobbying government for a change in the ban) and were disappointed to learn that the end of the war meant no opportunity to serve abroad. For them, it was another example of how the Navy and the federal government took on an overprotective, paternalistic role in their lives and their service.

If the “proper Wave” was attractive, as her uniform suggested, ladylike, as her behavior suggested, and obedient, as her domestic rather than international service suggested, she was also something else—white. While women of Asian and Hispanic descent served in the WAVES from its formation, their numbers remained low throughout the existence of the Women’s Reserve. African American women, however, were explicitly banned from the WAVES until October 1944, when President Roosevelt ordered the Navy to begin incorporating black WAVES. Thus, African American women were permitted to serve in the WAVES only for the last year of the war [figure 19]. Unlike their equivalents in the WAC who had served in segregated units in the Army from the outset, black WAVES served in integrated units.48

The perceived “whiteness” of the WAVES was an important part of their public image. For the Navy, constructing a ladylike Women’s Reserve was necessary not only to match the organization’s reputation as the “gentleman’s military” but to sidestep the bad publicity that dogged the WAC.49

While the WAC experienced criticism and prejudice from its inception, 1943 marked a particularly terrible year for the Army’s women’s corps. That was the year that John O’Donnell, a conservative syndicated columnist for the New York Daily News, launched what would become a widespread slander campaign against the


49 Carol Burke, Camp All-American, Hanoi Jane, and the High-and-Tight: Gender, Folklore, and the Changing Military Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 20.
women’s services that focused especially on the WAC. He accused members of the WAC (then WAAC) of receiving government-issue contraceptives and prophylactics, spawning a drawn-out campaign that smeared the reputation of the women’s army service. Many Americans saw this as proof that the Army was luring young women into service as camp followers and prostitutes, while others claimed it was evidence that the Army would “masculinize” its women.

The rumors fanned the flames of misinformation, inspiring salacious accusations of widespread sexual promiscuity and lesbianism. Certainly some Wacs and Waves were lesbians, just as some of the male soldiers and sailors who served their country at war were gay. The whisper campaign cared little for accuracy, however, and while exact numbers of lesbians in the women’s reserves are unknown, the rumors painted the entire WAC, and other women’s services by association, with the brushes of promiscuity and masculinity.

The Navy defined the WAVES as a ladylike unit in contrast to the WAC, and the slander campaign and its disastrous impact on WAC enlistment served as


51 Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 43.

52 A year after the slander campaign the WAC experienced a fact-based scandal in 1944 at a training center at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. A WAC private and sergeant were discovered to have exchanged love letters. This prompted an attempt to enforce the rules regarding “homosexuality screening” that had technically been in place throughout the war. Despite the increased screening, however, lesbian Wacs continued to enlist and serve their country. Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 33.
proof that it has made the right decision. Mainbocher’s uniforms were primary players in conceiving and perpetuating the WAVES public image as the service for ladylike patriots who would retain their womanhood even as they entered into military service.

Women served in the WAVES from 1942 until the end of the war, but as the war came to a close women were discharged at increasing rates. By the time Japan surrendered in 1945 many Waves had returned to civilian life, taking their designer uniforms with them and repurposing them for civilian life. While some women remained in uniform, the number was small—by March of 1946, only 572 officers and 2,094 enlisted Waves remained in uniform.

In 1946, the Navy suggested to Congress that rather than disbanding the WAVES and discharging all remaining women, women could be permitted to stay on

\[53\] In his masterful history of homosexuality in the military during World War II, Allen Bérubé showed that the WAC was seen as the far more “masculine” force that was, stereotypically, more likely to attract lesbians. Many lesbians enlisted in the WAVES, however, though the exact number is unknown. Official response to Waves was immediate dishonorable discharge, but autobiographical and oral history accounts show a range of personal reactions. While some straight Waves reacted to the presence of lesbians in the WAVES with fear and distrust, others responded with a “live and let live” policy, explaining that the dangers of wartime showed them that life was too short to worry about the relationships of others. Helen Gilbert recounted one relationship in her autobiography, recalling that while she and her fellow heterosexual Waves were surprised when one of their sisters-in-arms dumped her boyfriend in favor of another Wave, she never heard a word of complaint. The Waves in her unit stayed in contact, and she wrote, “the last I heard they had moved to Seattle together after the war.” Helen Gilbert, *Okay, Girls—Man Your Bunks!* (Toledo: Pedestrian Press, 2006), 77.

\[54\] Susan H. Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 159.
in active duty permanently and be integrated into the larger Navy body. Legislation doing just that was brought to Congress in 1947 and passed in the 1948 session. The few women who stayed on as active Waves did so until 1948, when they were transferred to the larger Navy. The Navy was gender integrated, the Women’s Reserve was formally dissolved, and the name “WAVES” was retired. The acronym, however, continued to be used to describe female sailors well into the second half of the twentieth century, giving the WAVES a life beyond the Second World War and illustrating a continued ambivalence toward the role of women in the Navy.

**Mainbocher**

Main Rousseau Bocher was born on the Southside of Chicago in 1890 to a Scotch-French family. The descendent of Midwestern cabinetmakers, that he became the designer of the uniforms of the Navy WAVES is perhaps less surprising than that he became a fashion designer at all.

Later in life Mainbocher credited his interest in fashion to watching his mother’s dressmaker when she came to his childhood home for an appointment. Despite these experiences, however, his early years were marked by a passion for art and music rather than design. He attended the University of Chicago until the death of his father, when he quit school for unknown reasons and went to work at the

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55 The family was fanatically Francophilic; they hung French flags from their Chicago home, and celebrated French cultural holidays such as Bastille Day.


Complaint Department at the Chicago-based department store giant Sears-Roebuck. After returning to school at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, he moved to New York to study at the Arts Student League. His mother and sister joined him on the East Coast and the three Bochers undertook a series of trips through Europe, traveling between New York, Paris, and Munich in 1911. Mainbocher served in the army during World War I, working on an ambulance in Paris. When the war ended he remained in the city to pursue a career as an opera singer.

Mainbocher transitioned to a career as an illustrator for the Paris branch of Harper’s Bazaar when his voice failed early in his singing career. After moving to French Vogue, he worked his way up to fashion editor of the magazine in 1922 and then editor-in-chief before leaving in 1929 to open his design house. During his stint as editor of French Vogue he was credited with coining the phrases “off-white” and “spectator-sports-clothes,” the predecessor to the fashion industry’s mainstay term “sportswear.”

Mainbocher’s editorial background explained his ability to get his press releases incorporated, almost unchanged, into supposedly journalistic accounts of his fashion lines. In 1961 Vogue called him “one of the most articulate designers in the

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60 Milbank, Couture: The Great Designers, 166
world.”61 Fashion writer Eugenia Sheppard once wrote, “Mainbocher, of course, is the very epitome of the fashion intellectual.”62

Mainbocher established his atelier at Number 12 Avenue de George in Paris, right at the epicenter of an exploding fashion world that included such luminaries as Coco Chanel, Elsa Schiaparelli, and Molyneux. He combined his first and last names into “Mainbocher” in homage to his fashion heroes Louiseboulanger and Augustabernard.63

Mainbocher worked early on to establish a refined pedigree for his designs. He controlled every aspect of his public image – from the tone of his showroom to his restrictive purchasing requirements – to promote himself as the designer of refined, elegant clothes for ladies, not women. The New York Times described the experience of buying clothes from Mainbocher: “Getting clothes at Mainbocher is secure and serene, not for women who are climbing socially. It’s for those that are already there.”64

Mainbocher sold exclusivity and class alongside his gowns and suits. His methods of controlling his clientele and his image included banning all food from his salon. Unlike his competitors who often offered their visiting clients pastries and


champagne, Mainbocher employed a “marvelous butler” to provide only water.\textsuperscript{65} He differentiated serious customers from casual visitors by insisting that any visitor to the showroom sign a contract promising to purchase the least-expensive dress at a minimum before she would be allowed inside.\textsuperscript{66}

By policing his customers and banning tourists, Mainbocher established a record of providing the finest clothes only for those who could afford and, perhaps more importantly, deserved them. This concern, even obsession, with control, public image, and class would become central to his role as designer of uniforms for the WAVES, the “lady’s” branch of the gentleman’s military. The Navy identified this quality in his work and counted on Mainbocher’s reputation to help elevate that of the newly formed women’s service.

Mainbocher worked in Paris until 1938. In those years he designed clothes for a number of wealthy society women and high-ranking aristocrats, growing his reputation alongside his brand. He is best remembered for his work for Wallis Warfield Simpson, the American widow for whom Edward VI, king of England from January to December of 1936, abdicated his throne. Mainbocher was credited with quite literally “making” Wallis Simpson, and her elegant, severe style was a reflection of his influence. Mainbocher’s garments embodied a combination of American ease and European elegance, an mélange that appealed to the future Duchess of Windsor and matched her desired public image. Mainbocher was so central to her style that she

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{65} Gilbert Millstein, “Mainbocher stands for a Fitting,” \textit{New York Times Magazine}, March 25, 1956.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{66} Milbank, \textit{Couture: The Great Designers}, 168}
picked him to design her gown for her wedding to the Duke of Windsor. Designed on a sharp bias cut with long sleeves and a high neck, the dress was made in “Wallis Blue,” a shade created by Mainbocher for Simpson.67 The American press considered Simpson the nation’s personal Cinderella story, a Baltimore girl who made it big. As a national celebrity, her connections to Mainbocher were well known and helped to raise his profile in the United States.

With the onset of war came Mainbocher’s decision to close up shop and returned to the United States. He established a new atelier on Fifty-Seventh Street, alongside Tiffany & Co. and just a few feet from Fifth Avenue. Mainbocher’s comments in the press and his design and organization of his New York location show that he wished to create a deliberately two-pronged public image. On one hand, his newly established salon was nearly identical to his Parisian workroom, reminding clients that he brought the cachet of Paris couture to the U.S.68 On the other hand, he feared he might appear too foreign to a clientele who wished to purchase American designs. To combat this, he perpetually reminded reporters that he was American-born.

Despite the reminders of his American heritage, however, some fashion critics refused to see Mainbocher as anything other than old-world European. Amy Prote wrote for the Associated Press: “It’s good-bye to French names such as

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68 Milbank, Couture: the Great Designers, 168.
Mainbocher, Lanvin, Legong [sic, likely referring to Lucien Lelong] and hello to such American names as Clare Potter, Nettie Rosenstein, Dorothy Cox, Jo Copeland.”

Three years into his establishment on American soil, war reached the United States. Even before the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, however, the press was filled with forebodings of war. The fashion world reflected a newly patriotic spirit. An article titled “Mainbocher Designs Feature Red, White, and Blue Theme” declared, “There’s simply no limit to the fashion acceptance of red, white and blue and the variations thereof.”

With the coming of war came the formation of the women’s services and Mainbocher’s role in designing the WAVES uniform. His design history and philosophy will be explored further in chapter three, but it is important to note that Mainbocher’s designs for the WAVES fit not only with a national movement toward “patriotic fashion” but very specifically followed the aesthetic standards that he honed in the couture area of his craft. Wartime interest in appropriate fashion dovetailed perfectly with Mainbocher’s aesthetic. His vision of the “right dress for the right woman” carried over seamlessly from his couture work to his uniform designs. The WAVES commission provided him with the unprecedented chance to superimpose his ideas of looking “right” onto thousands of American women, an opportunity that he took up with a vengeance. With the WAVES commission Mainbocher became both

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69 May Porter, “Americans to Set Fashions, French Designers No Longer Leaders” Associated Press. FIT scrapbook 2:2-B.

70 “Mainbocher Designs Feature Red, White, and Blue Theme,” The Cincinnati Post, June 28, 1941. FIT scrapbook 2:127.
couturier to the wealthy and a democratic dressmaker, a combination that made him into a truly national household name.

Partially because of his success with the WAVES uniform, Mainbocher was also contracted to design uniforms for the Girl Scouts of America in 1946, the American Red Cross in 1948, and the women of the United States Marine Corps in 1951. During the war his WAVES designs were replicated for the Coast Guard SPARS, with key insignia and military symbols changed. In 1948 Mainbocher redesigned the WAVES dress uniform and that of the Navy Nurses Corps, a related unit. With his design of the Women Marines’ uniforms in 1951 came the end of an almost-ten-year career of uniform designing. He returned to couture work full-time and worked through the 1960s, maintaining salons in both New York and the newly revived Paris.

As the eyes of the fashion world moved from haute couture to ready-to-wear and a rebellious youth market grabbed center stage in the 1960s, Mainbocher saw his clientele drop away. In 1971 he retired, closing up shop and moving with his life partner Douglas Pollard to Europe, where they lived until the designer’s death in 1976. By this point Mainbocher had fallen out of fashion and into obscurity. By the end of the twentieth century, few members of the fashion industry and only a few more costume scholars were aware of his massive contributions to the world of twentieth-century fashion and design.
Chapter 3

“RIGHT, NOT CHIC”: THE UNIFORMS AND MAINBOCHER

A mainstay of the fashion press and society circuit from the moment he opened his atelier in 1929 until closing his design house in the 1960s, Mainbocher has been largely forgotten. While the public, press, and academic field still discuss the genius of Chanel, Schiaparelli, and Adrian, their contemporary Mainbocher is at best a footnote in the history of twentieth-century fashion. Yet his influence was widespread and continues to be felt, whether in the introduction of the strapless dress or the early adoption of a girdle that, ten years later, Christian Dior and the New Look would make mandatory for all women.

When Mainbocher has merited discussion, little has been said about his uniform designs. Whether because his couture work for the Duchess of Windsor and other socialites casts a long shadow or because the clothing he designed for the WAVES and other women’s groups now appear to modern eyes as boxy and militarized rather than fashionable, the years that Mainbocher devoted to outfitting thousands of American women have been treated as an aberration, a curiosity, and a non-issue in turn.

The uniforms, however, must be considered central to Mainbocher’s success in the United States in the 1940s. They Americanized him in a political climate that prized patriotism above all else and they provided him with the
opportunity to test his theories about the suitability of fashion on thousands of women. The uniforms offered him total control over his “clients” and served as a widely seen example of his developing aesthetic, standing as a testament to the Mainbocher look.

**A Developing Style: Mainbocher Before the War**

War broke out in Europe at the height of Mainbocher’s European career, forcing him to curtail his design business in Paris and return to the country of his birth. Mainbocher arrived in America unsure about his future. In 1939 he prepared for his return to the States, saying,

> “I’m going to do something in America… I don’t know what I’ll do, whether I’ll open my own shop to a private clientele, become affiliated with an already-established shop… I’ll do something… as soon as I get my bearings.”

The designer added that while he was technically American, “I’ve lived abroad so long that it’s going to take a little time to become acclimated.” ⁷¹

As Mainbocher negotiated his return to America, he insisted that Paris was still the capital of international style. In a newspaper article about Parisian fashion shows held in cellars during air raids, Mainbocher declared, “There’s no place in the world so perfectly coordinated for the creation of fashions as Paris.” ⁷² His loyalty to Paris and his European clients receded, however, upon settling in New York City. By 1940 the media was quoting Mainbocher’s love of American women and their innate


style. While he continued to argue that a post-war Paris would reemerge as the center of the fashion world, the designer’s changed approach to American press and markets illustrated his practical need to get in good with the nation.

It was in a climate of patriotic fashion reporting that Mainbocher began to design for an American audience. As noted in chapter two, many reporters considered Mainbocher one of the old guard of European designers, excluding him as they trumpeted the developments of a new crop of American designers creating clothes for the needs of modern American women. To assert his brand and his Americanness, Mainbocher designed for the “new American woman.” Referring to American women as “the eighteen-carat women of the world,” he cut garments to “move well” with their bodies, keeping dresses and skirts short to show off legs that Mainbocher described as, “the most beautiful anywhere.”73 He also designed in a newly patriotic color palette: A Women’s Wear article in 1940 remarked on Mainbocher’s enthusiastic “endorsement of red, white and blue fashions,” noting that one “especially interesting” chiffon frock was worn at a ball fundraiser for the Allied Forces.74 The connection between Mainbocher, patriotism, and wartime fashions were already being formed, one year before the United States would officially enter World War II.

Mainbocher’s promotion of patriotic colors and the style of the new American woman dovetailed with his interest in issues of suitability, femininity and control, ideas that would come to mark his WAVES uniforms as well as his civilian


74 “Red, White and Blue in Chiffon…” Women’s Wear, May 21, 1940. FIT scrapbook 1:78-B. 48
Mainbocher put his savvy media skills (honored as editor of French *Vogue*) to work in a series of interviews, praising American style and putting forward a style manifesto that he called his “Twelve Point Plan for Chic.” In an interview on January 4, 1940, Mainbocher articulated twelve ideas about women’s style that defined his approach to fashion for American women.\(^75\) The plan began with the claim: “You can be pretty, beautiful, lovely and be careless about your appearance, but you can never be chic unless you are well groomed.” This statement differentiated between natural beauty and the sort of cultivated style and appearance that Mainbocher felt was an essential part of a woman’s public identity.

Other points included number five: “Chic is as much about what you don’t wear as what you do wear, because an overdressed woman is like an overfilled glass, rather messy.” Number six was similar: “That’s why you must never wear clothes that you don’t understand, or you will find yourself being taken for a fashion ride.” The ideas that a strong public appearance came from keeping one’s body under control (“well-groomed”) and that suitability was central to style (wearing clothes you “understand”) showed that Mainbocher’s “Twelve Point Plan for Chic” was a preamble to his uniform designs. Point four foreshadowed the WAVES uniforms most clearly: “It is impossible to be chic unless all the accessories you wear make a perfect ensemble – that means the right dress, hat, shows, gloves, bag jewelry, coiffure, and scent.” These were the words of a man dedicated to ideas of uniformity,

\(^75\) “Mainbocher’s Rules for Chic,” *New York World-Telegram*, January 4, 1940. FIT scrapbook 1:11-A.
regularity, and completion. He was the ideal uniform designer, even if he did not yet know it.

As the shadow of war grew over American society, so too did Mainbocher’s interest in suitability and conformity in fashion. Describing his line for autumn, 1941, one reporter for the New York Times wrote that the designer had completely divorced himself from influences in the past: “The only motivating thought was that of the present day and of the needs of women faced with the demands of this turbulent era.” Writing about the same show, the New York Herald-Tribune quoted Mainbocher as he described his interest in aligning his fashions to the times:

“Troubled times do not kill chic, but they do bring out a new, more appropriate elegance; an elegance in which reserve seems more charming than extravagance, and understatement seems better-mannered than ‘splurge.’

Mainbocher finished with a statement that could apply equally to his future uniform designs: “These clothes… are intended to fit perfectly and appropriately in the life, relaxations, and duties of the smart woman.”

A Milwaukee Journal article published a week after Mainbocher’s autumn 1941 runway show pointed out “indicators of the future from the new Mainbocher collection”: “… his skirts even the most slimmest, were made for action, with some

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width contrived always either by back or front fullness or by side drapes.”

“Made for action” described the suitability of civilian garments while foreshadowing the true and necessary functionality of Mainbocher’s WAVES uniforms.

**Suitable Suits: Mainbocher in Wartime**

The United States entered World War II in December of 1941, an act that precipitated from Mainbocher an increased emphasis on suitability-focused rhetoric and designs. A February 1942 *Harper’s Bazaar* profile of Mrs. Rodman Wanamaker illustrated how Mainbocher turned uniformity into a business by dressing the richest of the nation’s women. Mrs. Wanamaker was living in Washington, D.C., supporting political and military causes while her husband served in the Navy. A woman whose social position and unpaid philanthropic work required a certain look, Wanamaker explained that Mainbocher’s designs were ideal for her lifestyle: “Mrs. Wanamaker wears – morning, noon, and night – a series of Mainbocher sweater sets, which she says are to be her uniform for the duration [of the war].”

By March of 1942, Mainbocher saw the suitability of garments as their most important feature. In an interview, Mainbocher explained that his new designs were inspired by discipline and forethought, with the intent of showing, “that there is a genuine place for fashion, even in a war-shaken world, if it is a fashion of actuality.”

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78 “Sweater Lines are Featured by Mainbocher,” *Milwaukee Journal*, September 19, 1941. FIT scrapbook 3:7-B.


In an interview in the *New York Times*, Mainbocher said, “Today’s woman must look right.” Fashion reporter Virginia Pope elaborated:

> When [Mainbocher] came to New York a couple of years ago, he brought with him the aura of French couture. Now he stands forth in his individual right with a collection created for Americans, born of wartime needs and designed to offer women who are devoting much of their time to war work the kind of clothes they will want to wear.

It was Pope who wrote: “It is “right”; this word applied to styles he uses instead of “chic,” which he has banned from his vocabulary.” “Right, not chic” was the term that would define Mainbocher’s WAVES designs as much as it did his civilian looks. As an idea, the concept unified his couture and naval work.

Pope highlighted specific aspects of Mainbocher’s Spring 1942 fashion show that illustrated the “right” look: “Suits… carried the functional note seen in crepes and sheers. Dickies took the place of blouses… and we could not detect a single bit of padding to hint at masculinity in this collection.” Simple, functional, restrained in fabric usage, yet highly feminine and deliberately anti-masculine: these were the features of Mainbocher’s “right” civilian looks. These design ideas would show up again in his uniform designs, connecting his civilian work to his Navy work on an aesthetic continuum.

America’s entry into World War II brought with it many austerity measures, including rationing. Some designers, Mainbocher chief among them, quickly adapted to the strict requirements of Limitation Order L-85 during the war.

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Mainbocher skillfully presented himself as the ultimate L-85 designer, arguing in a syndicated article that fabric rationing would help American women become better-dressed citizens.

Mainbocher designs were described in the article as expensively simple, and his approach was likened to that “of a master engineer blue-printing a beautiful but functional bridge span.” On the subject of fabric limitations, he concluded they would force designers to create short dresses and skirts with “round-the-clock importance,” explaining that women felt “right” in less elaborate clothing. Mainbocher believed that “absolute obedience is an integral part of victory… I am convinced that the WPB [War Production Board] rules will lead to better dressing.”

“Master engineer,” “right, not chic,” “absolute obedience”—these phrases illustrate the degree to which suitability, simplicity, and control were central parts of Mainbocher’s design aesthetic even prior to creating the WAVES uniforms. As his portfolio expanded to include the uniforms, his role as the man who controlled the appearance of thousands of women, making them suitable and appropriate, would further these aesthetic ideals. As a designer, Mainbocher was concerned that his clothes appear “right” for the women who wore them. He argued for suitability of

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clothing, saying that when it came to a dress, “its main function is usefulness.” Who better to design uniforms for the lady’s Navy?

**Uniformity Realized: Mainbocher Goes to War**

With the WAVES commission, thousands of women were suddenly wearing “Mainbocher originals.” Through them, Mainbocher’s design philosophy garnered mass exposure. His “foreign-sounding” nom de plume became a household word. All eyes were upon the Navy as Americans waited to see how brass would negotiate the pitfalls that befell the WAC before them, and Mainbocher was a central part of the battle-plan. The announcement of his involvement came right on the heels of the formal formation of the WAVES, and soon the press were as interested in what the WAVES would wear as in what they would do.

The *New York Times* announced Mainbocher’s involvement with the WAVES on August 15, 1942. Lieutenant Commander Mildred McAfee confirmed that, “the revered label would stand behind every uniform of the WAVES.” Within a week newspapers around the country were declaring that the Waves would be the best-dressed woman in uniform. The Navy unveiled the uniforms two weeks later, prompting one journalist to write that the Waves looked “trim, tailored, and

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streamlined… for when it comes to designing neat and well-fitting clothes that do something for a lady’s figure, Mainbocher knows his stuff.”\textsuperscript{85}

The sheer volume and frequency of WAVES-uniform-related newspaper articles illustrate the ways the WAVES turned Mainbocher into an American brand. The designer had sparked interest in fashion reporters when he returned to the United States, but the WAVES commission drew attention from news journalists and war correspondents as well.\textsuperscript{86} The articles and reports gave Mainbocher the opportunity to promote his design philosophy to a wider audience than ever before.

One reporter highlighted the famous Mainbocher control, explaining that the designer had made the uniform skirt pockets very small in order to prevent Waves from “filling them too full” and thus ruining the line of his design.\textsuperscript{87} In another article, Mainbocher explained his long-standing position on the functionality of dress in the context of the uniforms: “Suitability in clothes has long been a formula of mine… I thought of comfort, freedom, and, of course, the lines of a woman’s body.”\textsuperscript{88}


\textsuperscript{86} The sharp uptick in coverage can be seen in the Fashion Institute of Technology’s library, which maintains scrapbooks that include almost every article printed about the designer in his lifetime. Two volumes of the scrapbook cover the three-year period between his return to America and the WAVES commission, while the first six months following the WAVES commission merit an entire volume themselves.

\textsuperscript{87} Kernodle, FIT scrapbook 3:132-B.

Some articles covered all of Mainbocher’s motivations and design ideas, highlighting the myriad of ways in which he benefitted from working on the WAVES uniform. Published in the Newark News in September, one article simultaneously pointed out the social cachet of owning a Mainbocher suit, argued that civilian designers would be copying his distinctive work, and declared Mainbocher a patriot for designing the uniforms at no cost. The article closed with the following reminder:

Contrary to popular opinion, the designer of the WAVES uniform is not a Frenchman. He was born in Chicago, the son of Mr. and Mrs. George Bocher, and was christened Main after his mother’s maiden name.89

By hitting the high points of social influence, stylishness, patriotism and nationality, the Newark News unknowingly summed up the importance of the WAVES commission to Mainbocher’s career and life in the United States.

**Aesthetics of Suitability: Comparing Civilian and Uniform Designs**

Mainbocher not only discussed issues of control and suitability in his civilian and naval designs, he also built them into the very structure of his garments. Comparing his civilian designs and the WAVES uniforms reveals the way his aesthetic ideals influenced the final product in both arenas and highlights practical connections between his civilian designs and the uniforms.

As early as 1940, The New York Times reported that Mainbocher’s first fashion presentation in America involved a new silhouette. The article described

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“natural shoulders, for the designer does not like the straight, broad plank line,” paired with “a skirt with moderate fullness, since in the mind of Mainbocher the skimpy skirt impedes motion.” While the dress and jacket featured in the article present a slightly different silhouette than Mainbocher’s later designs for the WAVES, inset shoulder seams and a flared skirt connect the two ensembles. The stark lack of ornamentation on the earlier civilian design foreshadows the clean lines of the future uniforms.

Mainbocher’s inset shoulders reappear in the WAVES uniform, while the cut of the jackets and skirts in both designs emphasize a smoothly curving line from bust to hip. Where the inset shoulders might appear stylistic and attractive in the civilian suit, their presence in the uniform reveals a deeper purpose. In the WAVES uniform, Mainbocher’s decision to set the shoulders closer in on the jacket de-emphasized the Wave’s shoulders, making her body appear smaller and less broad. This undermined the traditional mission of uniforms, which was to emphasize the masculinity and physical of the servicemen wearing them. Innocuous in the civilian suit yet noticeable in the uniform, this design decision marked Mainbocher’s interest in clean, crisp lines that still emphasized femininity.

Mainbocher returned to the United States in 1939 with war on his mind. By the time America entered World War II at the close of 1941, he was designing clothes with a mind toward suitability, functionality, and conformity. He was not only interested in conforming garments to a woman’s lifestyle, but in conforming the

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clothes to women’s bodies and women’s bodies to his clothes. In early 1942 he stated a belief that a woman who did not take care of herself physically was “bad for the morale of every one.”91 In a moment of prescience, Mainbocher identified fashion as armor for women, preparing them for the coming storm of war. Clothing could, he claimed, “be of great help to her if they are “right”, both for herself and for these troubled times.”92

For Mainbocher, style and suitability were inextricably linked. Concerned throughout his career with control and appropriateness, he once argued that he spent as much time convincing women that a dress was wrong for them as he did trying to sell them one. His desire for control was absolute. Everything from the cut of a dress to the woman who wore it was cleared with him first. He was famous for screening potential clients before permitting them access to salon.93 This level of control and obsession with suitability marked not just Mainbocher’s salon or work style—it also came through in his designs. Mainbocher was determined to create clothing that fit a woman’s life even as they marked her as his own creation.

Ultimately, the WAVES uniforms formed the most complete manifestation of this design philosophy. Fabric rations let him exercise his ideas of restrained elegance while patriotic fervor allowed him to remake himself as the prodigal son, returned home in the nick of time. Most importantly, the wartime needs


92 ibid.

of the Navy allowed the designer to experiment with controlling every aspect of a woman’s appearance from head to toe. In the end, Mainbocher designed his ideal feminine armor in the form of the WAVES uniform, literally shaping the experiences of thousands of American women as they navigated the complicated seas of women’s naval service.
Chapter 4

“YOU IN NAVY BLUE”: THE UNIFORMS AND RECRUITMENT

The WAVES commission gave Mainbocher’s career a much needed boost, elevating his American profile and providing him with the opportunity to test and perfect his aesthetic of suitability and conformity upon the bodies of thousands of female models. While the benefit to Mainbocher was clear, what prompted naval bureaucrats to turn to one of the world’s most expensive designers for their first women’s uniforms? What was the ultimate benefit to the Navy?

The Navy and Mainbocher needed each other for the same reason: recognition. Mainbocher’s uniforms served as the perfect recruiting tool, attracting the “right” kind of American women to service in the WAVES. Navy leaders were concerned with creating a lady’s navy that complimented the Navy’s reputation as the most gentlemanly of the military branches. If they could ensure that their female recruits were lady-like, the Navy could declare their women’s reserve an unqualified success, creating women sailors who were patriotically dutiful yet still traditionally feminine.

The Navy crafted the WAVES’ circumspect reputation through two steps; first, by utilizing networks of women to construct the identity of the women’s service, then by launching a strategic recruitment campaign that built off that identity.

94 Burke, Camp All-American, 20.
Stressing the image of the “right” kind of female sailor, they painted the picture of a Wave who was attractive yet asexual, militarized yet not masculine. In both the women’s networks and recruitment efforts, Mainbocher and his uniforms played a central role.

**Ball Gowns and Bluestockings: Women’s Networks and the WAVES**

Networks of women were the unlikely force that mediated the relationship between the Navy and Mainbocher. As shown in the brief history of the WAVES in chapter two, the reserve was formed through a partnership between Navy officials and the female academics of the Women’s Advisory Council. Women such as Wesleyan College President and WAVES director Mildred McAfee and Barnard professor and WAVES officer Elizabeth Reynard played a pivotal role in the formation of the organization. Other networks of women helped to shape the WAVES as well, however, and they came not from the ivory tower of academia but from the glittering ballrooms and cocktail parties of Washington society.

Wives of high-ranking naval officers and government bureaucrats, the women in this network were politically savvy. They understood the unofficial dealings necessary to affect military change and more importantly, they understood the power of image. Many of these women advocated for the formation of the WAVES, aiming their lobbying efforts at not only their husbands but also such influential people as Eleanor Roosevelt. Already serving their husbands’ careers in the unofficial capacity of wife and hostess, they understood perhaps better than anyone the layered public

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95 Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 110.
appearance the WAVES needed to cultivate in order to straddle the divide between expected feminine behavior and military service.

Josephine Forrestal was one such Washington wife. Her husband, James V. Forrestal, was undersecretary of the Navy in 1942 during the formation of the WAVES. Forrestal became the reserve’s unofficial “civilian advisor,” and was responsible for introducing Mainbocher to the Navy.\(^96\) Before marrying Forrestal, Josephine Ogden documented the world of high style as fashion editor of American Vogue. She likely encountered Mainbocher when he served as editor-in-chief of French Vogue and became one of his clients when he left the world of journalism for that of fashion designer.\(^97\) Like Mrs. Rodman Wanamaker, the socialite-turned-Navy-wife who wore only Mainbocher clothes as a “uniform” in her position as a military hostess, Mrs. Forrestal served as a bridge between the Navy and the WAVES. As a patron, Josephine Forrestal approached Mainbocher about designing the uniforms. A September 1942 newspaper article described the exchange between Forrestal and Mainbocher, which ostensibly took place when she happened to stop by the designer’s New York salon: “Main, why don’t you design a uniform for the women’s Navy? After all, nothing is too good for our girls.”\(^98\)

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\(^98\) “WAVES Wild Over Uniform,” *Newark News*, 2 September 1942. FIT scrapbook 3:140-A.
While contemporary reports gave the exchange a spontaneous, off-the-cuff quality, Josephine Forrestal’s involvement was central to the creation of the WAVES’ public image. She approached Mainbocher early in the formation process of the WAVES, even before Mildred McAfee was tapped to head the Women’s Reserve. Forrestal was arguably the first female decision-maker for the WAVES, setting the tone for the branch’s public image.

Forrestal also negotiated the terms of the design commission, which resulted in Mainbocher’s designing the uniforms at no charge to the Navy. Joy Bright Hancock, an early Wave officer and the only woman to serve first as a Yeoman (F) in World War I and then as a Wave, credited Forrestal with making the WAVES “the best-dressed women in America.” When the completed uniforms were first presented to the public in an editorial spread in Vogue, Forrestal served as one of the models for the fashion spread and organized the event through her connections at the magazine. Her photograph in the fashion magazine confirmed her role as honorary Wave and her position as a link connecting the Women’s Reserve to networks of women as much as to the Navy.

99 Godson, Serving Proudly, 124.

100 Pearson, “The Washington Merry-Go-Round.”

101 Hancock, Lady in the Navy, 152.

Ladies and “Patriotutes”: Recruiting in the Face of Slander

Navy leaders purposefully connected the WAVES to networks of socialites and respected academic institutions in an attempt to distance the women’s service from the masculine culture of the armed forces. Formed in the wake of the WAC, the WAVES sought and achieved an opposite image to that of their army counterparts who suffered from one public relations disaster after another.

Most WAVE administrative decisions were made as a contrast to the WAC. Wacs trained on army bases, while Waves trained at respected women’s colleges. Wacs served in war zones, while Waves served domestically or in non-active theaters abroad. The WAC accepted a broad range of women, while WAVES enlistees needed two years of high school and only college graduates could be officers. These distinctions were not only significant, they were also widely publicized in recruitment materials, press releases, and newspaper articles. WAVES training at women’s college was an especially popular topic in the civilian press.104


104 The differences in training grounds between the WAC and the WAVES were especially significant. Many civilians who opposed the WAC worried that women training on military grounds would fall prey to their male counterparts’ baser urges, while senators and congressmen who opposed the formation of the WAC at the outset saw the placement of WAC centers on army bases as yet another example of the Armed Forces’ “masculinizing” of American women. The WAVES highly publicized their relationship with women’s colleges in response. Many Waves identified the connection with women’s colleges as a strong motivating factor for enlisting, seeing the WAVES as their chance to have a college experience.
Ultimately, the WAVES defined themselves as the women’s service with higher standards, a better quality of life, and the greater prestige.\textsuperscript{105}

From the outset the Navy was determined to highlight the ways in which they cultivated a more feminine, ladylike culture for their sailors. These efforts became increasingly necessary after the slander campaign in 1943 that viciously attacked all four branches of the women’s services and focused especially on the WAC. As explored in chapter two, the campaign was started by syndicated columnist John O’Donnell and kept alive by conservative religious groups and military men opposed to women’s service. The campaign spread rumors that the armed services turned women alternately into “patriotutes,” (the curious portmanteau coined by a United States Public Health Service official to refer to sexually-available young women who had intercourse with soldiers to maintain morale), lesbians, and career soldiers.\textsuperscript{106} To combat the rumors and maintain and even increase enlistment rates, the various women’s services launched recruitment campaigns aimed at discounting the slander campaign and reasserting the image of women’s military work as honorable wartime service.

The recruitment campaigns were partnerships between the Joint Army-Navy Personnel Board and the Office of War Information (OWI).\textsuperscript{107} With

\textsuperscript{105} Meyer, Creating GI Jane, 66.


O’Donnell’s attacks on the women’s services leading to a drop in enlistment across the branches, an Army-Navy Personnel Board directive justified the recruitment drive. The report noted that “women were reluctant to join the newly formed women’s services,” and argued that a sustained and multimedia propaganda effort might change their minds.\textsuperscript{108}

The role of men—as fathers, brothers, husbands or sweethearts—was central to this effort. By 1944, a Gallup survey found that the majority of civilian women polled believed that men, both military and civilian, did not approve of women in the services, while 72 percent of them reported that they were most concerned about the disapproval of Army men. “Army men’s attitudes had given them an unfavorable impression of the women’s corps and had been a major factor in their decisions not to enlist,” the poll concluded. While the poll focused on Army men’s opinions, women likely feared that Navy men felt the same.\textsuperscript{109} Spurred by the anxiety and insecurity many military men felt at the thought of women in uniform, the slander campaign created and perpetuated these attitudes.

Unable to validate the rumors of the slander campaign with a direct response but desperate to combat their negativity, recruitment offices of the four women’s corps and the OWI developed a visual vocabulary and made deliberate copy decisions to subconsciously appeal to the American public.

\textsuperscript{108} Maureen Honey, \textit{Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender and Propaganda during World War II} (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 35.

\textsuperscript{109} Meyer, 41.
While all four women’s services utilized recruitment drives, WAVES recruitment efforts made a special effort to tailor their material to a very strategic message. Recruitment material used specific language to illustrate the feminine, even girlish culture of the WAVES, hoping to attract women who might have been put off by the slander campaign and specifically the WAC’s maligned reputation. The WAVES uniforms were central to these efforts, and the Navy often leveraged them to achieve their goal.

**Recruiting Ladies for the Women’s Service: Printed Material**

Mainbocher’s uniforms represented the public face of the WAVES, and as such they were the standard bearer for the Women’s Reserve’s reputation for lady-like behavior. WAVES recruitment material used the uniforms to show that while patriotism and duty were the primary reasons to enlist, a woman should feel confident that her femininity would only be enhanced by service in the WAVES.

Recruitment efforts included printed posters, advertisements, and pamphlets. The printed material overwhelmingly focused on the idea of the feminine sailor. If a prospective enlistee could verbalize the message she received from recruitment material, it might have gone something like this: “Join the WAVES – you’ll be a patriot, and a lady too!”

One recruiting booklet, entitled *How to Serve Your Country in the WAVES or SPARS* [figure 20], describes the pride women feel in being WAVES:

> It is a proud moment when you first step out in brand new Navy blues! The trim uniform was especially designed by the famous stylist
Mainbocher to flatter every figure and make you look – and feel – your best!\footnote{How to Serve Your Country in the WAVES or SPARS, United States Navy Recruiting Bureau, Washington, D.C., 1943, 10.}

*You in Navy Blue*, a longer recruitment book, uses many of the same lines about “trim uniforms” and figure flattery [figure 22]. The text also addresses another issue that the Navy believed was vital to young American women: socializing. Immediately following a detailed description of the uniform components—a description that includes such terms as “attractive raincoat” and “flattering six-gored skirt”—the book segues into a discussion of the variety of off-duty activities available to navy women. “YOU’LL HAVE GOOD TIME: WITH GOOD COMPANIONS” the pamphlet promises. *You in Navy Blue* describes the activities available to the smartly dressed Wave:

SATURDAY NIGHT DANCE: At many stations the Saturday night dance has become traditional. Navy music, Navy men, and good friends all around you contribute to evenings that you will remember always.\footnote{You in Navy Blue, United States Navy Recruiting Bureau, Washington, D.C., 1943, 11.}

Even in the section on housing, the authors of *You in Navy Blue* seized another opportunity to mention the potential for romance in Navy service: “Certainly WAVES can have dates – with officers, enlisted men, or civilians!”\footnote{Ibid.} Descriptions of Waves’ enviable social life, coupled with the common knowledge that WAVES trained at women’s colleges and wore “designer” clothes, reinforced the desired reputation for the Women’s Reserve.
Recruiting Ladies for the Women’s Service: Poster Art

Just as written recruitment material sold American women on the idea of the lady’s Navy, pictorial recruitment efforts showed them exactly how they would look in service to their country. Recruitment material was meant to entice women to enlist while simultaneously reassuring them, and their families, that they would not sacrifice their traditional femininity in service to their country.

While posters were only one of the media used in recruitment efforts, the OWI considered them an especially powerful tool and one that took advantage of a new spirit of wartime community. One OWI official said, “We want to see posters on fences, on the walls of buildings, on village greens… shouting at people from unexpected places with all the urgency which this war demands.”  

To separate their identity from the WAC and sidestep the slander campaign, the WAVES literally illustrated the differences between their reserve and other women’s services while also challenging three main fears. Standard histories of the women’s services provide numerous examples of the concerns that the adverse publicity campaign generated. These fears were diverse and sometimes oppositional, yet often a single poster addressed all three at once. For the purposes of this study of the WAVES uniforms, the concerns can be summarized as such: over-sexualization, defeminization, and the permanence of women’s branches.

A close examination of six WAVES wartime recruitment posters printed between 1943 to 1944 illustrates the ways in which the Navy responded to these fears,

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113 Bird and Rubenstein, *Design for Victory*, 11.

emphasizing the Waves’ gender and using Mainbocher’s uniforms, in conjunction with other gendered imagery, to paint a picture of the lady-like sailor. These posters have become iconic images and are still widely published and reproduced, but the subtleties of their multivalent meanings have in many cases been abandoned in favor of patriotic nostalgia. To their original intended audience, however, their visual vocabulary would have read loud and clear. While many scholars have tackled the complicated layers of meaning contained within these images, this analysis will focus on the imagery particularly relevant to the uniforms and their connections to ideas of femininity, sexuality, and militarism.

The first poster, called “On the Same Side,” features a Wave and a male sailor standing at attention [figure 23]. Another male sailor stands behind the Wave, suggesting that they are in a crowd of sailors. Above their heads read the words, “On the Same Team”, and below them is the phrase, “Enlist in the WAVES/Apply to Your Nearest Navy Recruiting Station or Office of Naval Officer Procurement.”

While the text and a cursory glance at the image of the poster suggest that the message is one of unity and solidarity, the poster is also an exercise in contrasts. The gentle curve of the Wave’s cheek as compared to the sailor’s lantern jaw, her red lips as opposed to his vaguely drawn mouth, and her curly, lively hair as compared to his closely cropped hairline—all these comparisons serve to highlight the differences between Wave and sailor. Their uniforms are central to this juxtaposition. The Wave in her blue uniform stands in stark relief against the traditional white of the male sailor. Her jacket emphasizes her sloping shoulder while the line of his tunic extends off the frame of the image, implying shoulders so broad no poster can contain them.
Also evident are the distinctive curved collar points of the Wave’s jacket, the mark of Mainbocher upon her body. Even the sailors’ headgear highlights their differences. The sloping brim of the enlisted Wave’s cap (the very one maligned in chapter two as girlish and infantilizing by the Waves who had to wear it) pulls a viewers’ eyes down to her face and body with it’s sloping brim, while the male sailor’s traditional Dixie Cup cap points upwards, standing tall and straight.

The play of light and dark, of curves and angles, and of size (she is short, he is tall, her tie and collar are diminutive compared to his) all serve to point out the ways in which the Wave is distinctly not a sailor. She is not wearing a traditional sailor’s tunic, not wearing a traditional sailor’s cap, not tall, not male. The two may be on the same team, but they are not the same kind of sailors. A prospective Wave and her family could rest assured: by joining the WAVES she would not be sacrificing her femininity or turning herself into a man.

A second poster shows a Wave in action. “Share the Deeds of Victory” features a control tower operator speaking into a radio as planes fly overhead [figure 24]. This poster shows more of her uniform, and the longer view allows the viewer to see how slim and straight in it she appears. This is another image with multiple meanings. It shows a Wave at work, reinforcing the idea that Waves are patriotic and dutiful, yet it still emphasizes her femininity through her coiffed hair, red lips, and slim, Mainbocher-encased body. Moreover, her work is inherently non-physical. Although she stands, the Wave’s primary job is to look and talk on a receiver that resembles a telephone, connecting her duties to social activities that were considered natural for women. Again, the Wave can serve, but she is still a woman. A third
meaning can be read into her body as well; though feminine and attractive, Mainbocher’s suit thoroughly contains and controls the Wave’s body, restraining her curves and moderating her body’s interaction with the outside world. The messages of this poster are manifold — the Wave is feminine yet patriotic and attractive yet de-sexualized.

In her book *Making War, Making Women*, Melissa McEuen argues that a poster of a Wac working as a topographical draftsman reinforces the connections between her gender and her job. The bright red of her lipstick, McEuen posits, is connected to the bright red of the lines on the map she is drawing, making a claim that coloring one’s lips and coloring a military map are essentially the same task. If this is true, what are we to make of the Wave featured in a third poster [figure 25]? The Wave works as parachute rigger, her fingers and arms twisted into the cords and fabric that make up the parachute, while above her hang the words, “Have you got what it takes to fill an important job like this?”

Hard at work, the Wave still looks crisp and put-together in her uniform, contained and controlled by her Mainbocher suit. Her task requires precise handwork and an attention to detail, but her materials – fabric and thread – are familiar and domestic, even womanly. Like the Wac, whose abilities to apply lipstick and draw topographic lines come from the same feminine skill set, this Wave is illustrating that she did not sacrifice her femininity to enter the Navy. On the contrary, it is her feminine skills with fabric that allow her to be good at her job.

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The question asked by the poster reinforces the gendered implications of her work and includes a layered off-color joke that calls attention both to the Wave’s sexuality and to her temporary role. When the poster asks, “have you got what it takes to fill an important job like this?” it is referencing that the unspoken yet primary requirement for front-line military duty in this period was the possession of male reproductive organs. Thus the Wave inherently lacks “what it takes” to be in the military. However, the job being performed in the poster is not a front-line job — it is not even vital except in situations of military emergency. The poster argues, then, that not only are there feminine applications to rigging parachutes but that it is the sort of temporary, crisis-created position that is perfectly suited to women rather than men. For this job, for this moment, the Wave has what it takes – but only in limited capacities, and only for a short period of time.

A fourth poster makes direct connections between the Waves’ bodies and the differences between them and their male counterparts. A Wave looks out to the side of the frame while behind her, a ship on rough waves is attacked by fighter planes in a direct reference to the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Above the scene, a banner reads: “THERE’S A MAN-SIZE JOB FOR YOU IN YOUR NAVY” [figure 26]. Another exercise in layered messaging, the poster connects women’s service to the current military crisis and makes it clear that the WAVES are an emergency unit, not a permanent addition to the Navy. Waves, and the women who might become them, are told that they will take on the duty of men, connecting their service to that of patriotic sailors. At the same time, however, the phrase “man-size job” immediately points out the drastically un-masculine appearance of the Wave. Her face, lit by the
bombs falling on the ship behind her, is delicately all-American; her brows are perfectly manicured and her lips are a tasteful red. Her jaw is gently rounded, matching that of the Wave in the first poster, and her shoulders, while straight, are slight and unimposing. She is, quite literally, not man-sized, and her uniform—with its figure-flattering cut, narrow shoulders, and feminized rounded collar—emphasizes that contrast.

A fifth poster provides the most focused look at the uniforms. “Don’t Miss Your Great Opportunity” features a full-length image of two Waves striding before a naval harbor, with the vibrant New York City skyline behind them [figure 27]. Wearing white service dress uniforms the Waves are tall and slim, and the closely fitting jacket and gored skirt of the uniforms show off the curves of their chest and waists while leaving plenty of leg bare. The language of this poster, both textual and visual, is less about ideas of patriotic duty and wartime sacrifices. Rather, it sells the Waves as an opportunity to see the world and, of course, look fabulous in a designer suit. Many Waves found themselves convinced to enlist by this poster in particular. As she noted in her memoirs, when Wave Josette Dermody arrived in New York City on liberty, she found herself remembering this poster: “New York, here I am at last, worldly and sophisticated as I’ve always known myself to be – just like the recruiting poster with the two leggy Waves.”

116 The implied opportunity to travel was an ironic recruitment incentive as the Waves were not allowed to serve beyond the western hemisphere and could not leave American shores until 1945.

117 Josette Dermody Wingo, Mother Was a Gunner’s Mate (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 45.
Yet, while the women wearing the uniforms have provided ample recruitment incentive with their pretty faces and feminine forms, they are still highly contained by their uniforms, their clothing restraining the curves of their body even as it forms to them. The Waves in the poster are shapely and beautiful yet not sexual, and their well-cut uniforms maintain the delicate balance between attractive and sexualized.

The poster’s focus on the bodies, and especially legs, of the Waves makes for a telling comparison with another widely consumed piece of popular visual culture in the period: the pin-up photograph. Hollywood actress Betty Grable was famous for her shapely legs and for the promotional photographs taken of them. In one particularly popular photograph, she leans against a wall wearing a man’s shirt and little else. This Army used this image to teach soldiers basic map-reading skills during the war.118

The difference between these two images—a woman in a men’s clothing showing off her legs and projecting a casual sexual availability versus two women in women’s clothing projecting chaste femininity—illustrates the complexity of the messages contained within these posters. In the case of the recruitment poster, the trim lines of the uniform clearly cover and demarcate the limits of the Waves bodies. They are under control and to be almost forgotten, allaying the fears of fathers, brothers, and sweethearts that the WAVES was the service for women who wanted a man’s attention.

118 “Charted Grable,” *LIFE*, March 27, 1944.
The sixth and final poster takes the focus away from the Wave and her body and redirects it to her family. As mentioned in the Gallup poll earlier, women considering enlisting worried about what the men in their families might think of their service. Fathers, brothers, boyfriends and husbands had a great deal of influence on many Waves’ decision to join, and the Navy considered this influence when they printed the poster called “Proud—I’ll Say” [figure 28]. The Rockwellesque poster features a domestic scene in which a father sits at his roll-top desk, projecting paternal warmth from his ends of bowtie to his twinkling glasses and rolled shirtsleeves. As he looks out at the viewer, he holds a framed photograph of his daughter in one hand. She, of course, has been captured in her full WAVES uniform. The text below the image reads, “Proud – I’ll say,” declares this father’s attitude toward his daughter’s enlistment. Good girls become WAVES, the poster argues, because their fathers let them. In the case of this poster, the uniforms play a less immediately significant role. Mainbocher’s designs for the WAVES, however, were a central component of the image of the lady sailor, and without them the poster would be far less effective.

A photograph taken by a Wave while in service illustrates the prevalence of these posters, as well as the way in which they mirrored the uniform’s ability to

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119 Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) was an American painter and illustrator whose illustrations of every-day life in the United States have become iconic. Working for the Saturday Evening Post and a number of other publications and companies, Rockwell created some of the most famous images of World War II, including Rosie the Riveter and the Four Freedoms series. His images of day-to-day experiences and ordinary Americans are often viewed as idealistic and overly sweet, yet have continued to define the visual culture of America during World War II and the mid-century.
make Waves into ladies. Ensign Marlene Nelson stands in uniform in front of the “Proud, I’ll Say” poster on display at a post office in her hometown of Delevan, Wisconsin [figure 29]. Whether the photograph was taken to commemorate her decision to enlist or out of hometown pride, the picture is the perfect image of cause-and-effect. The uniform the Wave is wearing influenced the advertising campaign, which resulted in the poster next to her, which in turn helped her decision to join up and don the uniform that started it all.

The Navy’s decision to form a women’s service was a carefully planned, deliberate one. As was shown in chapter two, leaders organized the groundwork for the WAVES even before Congress approved the service. That such care was taken in the formation of the WAVES strongly suggests that every important decision regarding the Women’s Reserve was equally considered and strategic. For the Navy, creating a women’s corps meant finding a space for women within their organization while simultaneously upsetting neither the status quo nor traditional members and supporters of the Navy. To do this, the Navy had to position Waves as the “right” kind of women. It had to characterize the WAVES as an emergency service, rather than a permanent addition to naval organization. Connecting the WAVES to networks of women, both academic and social, was one tactic the Navy used to cement the concept of the WAVES as the place for genteel, educated women serving only during a national emergency. The tactic was implemented both formally, by hiring women leaders from respected academic institutions, and informally, by encouraging participation by Navy spouses. This was a first step in the process, and it was a tactic that brought Mainbocher into the Navy’s orbit.
The second tactic was a public relations campaign, waged in print and in the media and using graphics designed for specific purposes. Leveraging the uniforms in recruitment pamphlets and posters, the Navy combatted fears that the WAVES would make women sacrifice their femininity and become masculinized by their military service. The recruitment material highlighted the attractiveness of the uniforms and their social cachet, playing up the femininity of the Waves in conjunction with their uniforms. In this way, they encouraged women to become sailors while promising to keep them women, a duality that would come to define the experiences of the hundreds of thousands of women who served in the Navy during World War II.
Chapter 5

WOMEN INTO SAILORS AND SAILORS INTO WOMEN: THE UNIFORMS AND THE WAVES

“We had the formal swearing-in as a group. My heart was beating hard and my hands were cold and damp. We raised our right hands for the big commitment to live and/or die for our country. I recall the solemn, serious atmosphere in that room. There we were, young women swearing their complete loyalty to the Navy and our country.”

When Helen Gilbert remembered being sworn into the Navy, she recalled her physical reaction – her beating heart and her damp hands – and the serious tone of the proceedings. She recognized that she and her fellow women were undertaking a mission far larger than themselves. Years later she would write, “We were but a small cog in the wheel of the war effort, but we had the personal satisfaction of knowing that we played a role and did our part.”

For thousands of American women, joining a women’s service was their way of “doing their part.” Many chose the military because it seemed to be the most direct way to connect to the war effort, while others enlisted to honor their own fathers’ and brothers’ service. Yet all recognized that they were part of something larger than themselves—a patriotic mission, a military service with an honored

120 Helen Gilbert, Okay Girls—Man Your Bunks! (Toledo: Pedestrian Press, 2006), 44.
121 Ibid., 96.
historical tradition and a group identity that stretched back generations. Many of them might not have initially understood, however, just how complicated their own place would be in that tradition. Unbeknownst to them, they would soon be engaging in complex social negotiations simply by putting on their uniforms.

Mainbocher and the Navy had specific goals for the uniform. Mainbocher wanted to create a dress aesthetic that matched a specific lifestyle while also working to re-brand himself as an American designer. The Navy, meanwhile, wanted a uniform that would attract the right kind of women to the service and declare its women as ladies first, sailors second. But what did these motivating factors and the uniform they produced mean for the women who wore them? If the uniforms worked for Mainbocher to assert his aesthetic vision and worked for the Navy to create the desired public image, how did they work for the WAVES?

Mainbocher’s uniforms pulled a double shift with the WAVES, operating for and on the women who wore them. The uniforms were agents of political and social work, serving to make Waves feel part of a larger military system while also highlighting the inherent difference of their gender to male members of the Navy, a suspicious public, and sometimes even to the women themselves. The duality of the uniforms – their ability to turn women in sailors and sailors into women – was dependent upon who was interacting with them and in what situation that interaction took place.
Turning Women into Sailors

Before they were sailors, Waves were women. Primarily young white women, Waves were new to ideas of military organization and to the kind of structure created by a strict hierarchical culture. Newly enrolled in the WAVES officer training school at Northampton, Helen Clifford immediately realized the degree to which she was out of her depth:

Panic! What was the difference between “column” and “flank?” Quick-witted upstarts leaped forward without waiting for the pause before “march,” while confused laggards straggled behind, then ran to catch up. The sergeant restored order and explained what column and flank meant, not managing to hide his annoyance with his new female seamen.122

Enlisted Wave Vi Meyers was equally out of her depth. She recalled arrived at boot camp at Hunter College in 1944 in the midst of a winter snowstorm with silk stockings and heels as her only footwear.123 Rosemary Fleming Tharp surprised herself with her naivety: “Going into the Navy was kind of frightening. I was twenty-two but pretty young and innocent.”124

Regardless of gender, all recruits go through a transitional process when they enter the military. The purpose of initial military experiences such as boot camp is to break civilians down and build them back up into soldiers and sailors—obedient

122 Gunter, Navy WAVE Memories, 23.

123 Olga Gruhzit-Hoyt, They Also Served: American Women in World War II (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995), 121.

124 Rosemary Fleming Tharp, unpublished memoir manuscript, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.
and responsive to military hierarchies and decision-making processes that would seem foreign to their former selves.\textsuperscript{125}

For women, especially young white women, however, the transition from civilian to sailor was more drastic than most. While Waves came from all walks of life, many, especially the officers, were middle class and college-educated. Even Waves who had held jobs prior to joining had been employed primarily in administrative or factory capacities. The women of the WAVES were not accustomed to obeying orders, to finding themselves subservient to others, or to abiding by a system of uniformity and conformity as the Navy demanded. Unlike men who had been socialized as boys to be open to the possibility of military service, the military world was an entirely foreign idea to most Waves prior to the war. Thus, while Waves would never go through many of the experiences that turned male civilians into soldiers and sailors — having one’s head shaved, learning to fire a weapon, intentional humiliation at the hands of a drill sergeant — their transition was felt just as drastically and was equally marked by ceremony and symbol. With so many of the military’s rites of passage denied to them, Waves found meaning in the donning of their uniforms and in the physical transformation from civilian to sailor that they saw reflected in the mirror.

**Personal Experience of Wearing the Uniform**

Gilbert noted the feeling of pride she felt when she was fit for her uniform, remarking how, “very proud and elegant they made us feel.” She credited

\textsuperscript{125} Burke, *Camp All-American*, 12.
the uniforms with changing her behavior around civilians: “[t]he total look affected our posture and even the way we walked.”126 Wave Sue Eskey recalled that her uniform changed her emotional responses, explaining that she was taught: “Ladies in uniform are dignified and do not swoon.”127

Many women joined the WAVES over the protests of their family members, who felt—possibly because of the slander campaign of 1943— that the Navy was no place for a well-bred young woman. For Thelma Harriet Blumberg, her parents’ disapproval weighed heavily:

> They thought I was so special. Why should I leave for such an unpredictable future? The only one that was on my side was my grandfather… he said, “you should be proud of her by wanting to help out at this terrible time in our world.” 128

When she shipped out, Blumberg’s emotional state was a mixture of excitement at what she was about to do and fear that her parents were right. “So I had a strange feeling inside. I was scared, and I was excited at the same time.” For a Wave like Blumberg, the act of putting on her uniform was an affirmation of her decision and a visual confirmation that she belonged to an organized group with a purpose beyond her individual efforts. While Blumberg’s parents saw her as special


and believed her individuality would be wasted in the WAVES, she felt that she could best serve her country as a de-individualized sailor.

Some Waves dealt with an added layer of disapproval from parents who not only frowned on their daughters’ service, but were opposed to the Navy in its entirety. Enlisted Wave Jessie Richardson, one of the first African American Waves to serve in the Navy, was, in her words, “completely disowned” by her father:

[H]e thought that was the dumbest thing I could have done to join the Navy because the Navy was a hotbed of prejudice, and why you want to go in there and be discriminated against. And plus the fact that he didn’t want any of us to go to war… No, he didn’t even think about me going to the service.

Richardson enlisted in her hometown of Chicago against her father’s orders. When she told him what she’d done, he responded, “Don’t even talk to me. I don’t have a daughter.”

Wave Lillian Rothberg was a member of the first class of Waves at Hunter College, the first training site for enlisted women. When Rothberg arrived in the Bronx for training, the uniforms were not yet in production. Instead, the Waves were finally fit for their uniforms a few days before they completed their three weeks of training. As the first class of enlisted Waves, their every move drew attention. “The day before [her day off] was when we were outfitted in our uniforms, and it had been announced in the New York newspapers that the WAVES were going to be out in

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129 Jessie Ada Richardson, interviewed by Kate Scott, June 22, 2005, Oral History Project, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.
Rothberg’s family took the train from Boston to New York to see her on her day off, and she recalled going out in uniform with her family:

Well, that was quite an experience, because here I was, the first time really wearing a uniform, the first time in three weeks being away… the first time I’m on the street with it people would come up and want to feel the material of it, you know, and it was quite an experience for our lunch at Lindy’s.130

Rothberg’s feelings about her uniform – that wearing it made her stand out and that even after three weeks in boot camp, it was the uniform that marked her as changed – articulate the power of the uniform.

For Wave Winifred Eng the act of trying on her uniform was intimately connected with her new position as a Yeoman in the Navy, a feeling reinforced by the advice she got from the older Waves and drill instructors at boot camp. She recalled what she was told to do when she put on her uniform for the first time and went to look at her appearance in the mirror: “[T]hey told us to practice our salute.”131 The most militaristic of gestures, the salute was an affirmation of the uniform. The act of wearing it for the first time marked a transition for every Wave, showing her how she transformed from civilian to sailor.

If the immediate act of acquiring the uniform marked a transition from woman to sailor, the design of the uniform reinforced a Wave’s identity as a sailor when she donned it every morning for the course of her service. The color of the

130 Lillian Ruth (Rothberg) Erno, interview by Kate Scott, March 25, 2004, Oral History Project, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.

131 Winifred (Eng) Lee, interview by Kate Scott, July 11, 2005, Oral History Project, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.
WAVES uniform was the initial indicator of military service, helping Waves feel like sailors the moment they saw it. While technically not quite as dark as the navy blue of men’s uniforms, the color choice reinforced the connection between traditional male sailors and the newly formed WAVES.

The WAVES’ stripes and badge system denoted rank and role in the Navy and matched those of their male counterparts. Officers added stripes to the bottom of their jacket sleeves as they ascended the ranks and receiving special staff insignia to stitch above their stripes if they were officers in a designated corps, such as the civil engineer corps. A gold star stitched above an officer’s stripes indicated her status as a line officer that was not a member of a specific corps. These insignia matched male

132 Like the WAVES, male sailors in the US Navy had different uniforms for different occasions. These uniforms came in different colors as well. Men had “dress blues” and “dress whites,” the more commonly recognized white tunic and sailor trousers. Both were worn when on liberty or for more formal occasions. They also wore “undress blues,” which were identical to the dress blues but lacked contrasting piping and stars on the back sail (the extended back flap on the collar). Undress blues were worn for everyday use.

133 The idea that a Wave could be considered a line officer merits further exploration. A “line officer” or “officer of the line” is an officer trained for command – specifically, trained to be the commanding officer of a warship, ground combat unit, combat aviation unit, or combat support unit. Given that Waves were banned from serving in active war zones and even from serving aboard ships at sea, the idea that a Wave might be a line officer, and thus have a specifically combat-focused role, is confusing. Because Waves could not serve overseas or command a ship or combat unit, it is likely that the term “line officer” was used to refer to any Wave in command of a large unit. For instance, Lieutenant Commander Mildred McAfee, first director of the WAVES, was also called the first female line officer in the United States Navy. It was not until 1972 that a female line officer would be permitted to serve aboard a ship, allowing for the possibility that one day a woman might be the commanding officer of a warship or combat unit.
insignia for the same corps. Like enlisted male sailors, enlisted Waves wore rating badges on their upper left sleeve that denoted their rank as well as specialty badges that showed skill or success in a specific field or job, such as radioman or gunner’s mate [figure 30].

**One of Many: Uniforms as Symbol of Group Cohesion**

If Waves experienced a personal transformation in their uniform, their transition also marked entry into the community of Waves. Uniform color, insignia, badges and the multitude of interchangeable parts required for different situations (i.e. long sleeved dark shirt for more formal situations, summer work uniform for daily work in hot environments, etc.) reinforced the feeling of military uniformity. A sense of unit cohesion was reinforced by publications such as *Conning Tower*, a newsletter published for the USS Hunter training school and featuring articles written by Waves. An article in the September 1944 issue of *Conning Tower* dealt with the exciting preparations of the “Forty Boots of 85,” the women of Company 85 in the 39th

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135 *Conning Tower*, the name of the newsletter, provides another example of the ways in which the Navy attempted to “sailor-ize” the WAVES. A conning tower is a raised platform on a submarine or ship from which an officer can give directions to the sailor at the helm. The tower is traditionally the highest spot on the ship in order to give the greatest visibility to the officer at the con. Introducing Waves to nautical language was an essential part of making them into sailors, as will be evident later in this chapter.
Regiment who were training at Hunter College\textsuperscript{136}. In this installment of the article series titled “Dress Right… Dress! Conning Tower Covers 40 Boots,” the newsletter examined the experiences of the “Forty Boots of 85” as they received their uniforms and prepared for their first Regimental Review.

The Regimental Review was a communal test that inspected the Waves’ abilities to meet a Navy standard in barracks maintenance, physical appearance, and drilling [figure 31]. Reporting on the test’s importance, Conning Tower reinforced the distinctions between civilian and sailor when it reported that as the boots cleaned their barracks and tried on their uniforms, they put away the civilian clothes that they had worn with their Navy shoes and hats prior to receiving their completed uniforms. The women had been practicing drilling in their civilian clothes and were now relieved to stow the “poor, limp, tired things… all their once-clean lines destroyed by the incongruity of the combination of G.I. shoes and Navy headgear.” They could be pleased to know that on the day of their Regimental Review, “their hats and shoes would complete the picture, not destroy it.”\textsuperscript{137}

As an article written by a Wave, “Dress Right… Dress” represents the significance that Waves placed on the image of themselves as a cohesive whole. For the forty boots of 85, the addition of their uniforms solved the dissonance created by attempting to combine civilian clothing with Navy accessories while doing basic Navy

\textsuperscript{136} As mentioned in chapter two, “Boots” was the term used for newly enlisted Waves entering boot camp. Primarily a colloquial term, it was a word borrowed from the general Navy and was used popularly by the Waves themselves.

\textsuperscript{137} “Dress Right… Dress!” Conning Tower 2, no. 39, September 1944, 4.
activities. According to “Dress Right… Dress,” the Regimental Review provided
Company 85 with the ultimate expression of their new status as WAVES: “Shoulders
erect, heads high, moving in perfect rhythm, they marked down the field as one girl –
one unit in a mass formation – the sublimation of the individual in the perfection of
the whole!”138 Marching in their uniforms, the Waves of Company 85 completed
their transformation from individual civilians into a single entity made up of identical
sailors embodying the “perfection of the whole.”

WAVES Officer Joy Bright Hancock also saw uniformity as a central
component of the WAVES group identity. A 1943 survey of WAVES found a wide
range of differences among Waves, including physical appearance, cultural and
geographic background, and ultimate goals. Hancock noted these distinctions in her
memoir yet also remarked, “But in Navy blue, they all stood tall and became truly
composite, and their similarity was marked as one saw them in review.”139

The Uniform as Part of a Navy Culture

Other aspects of boot camp, Navy training, and service worked in tandem
with the uniforms to instill in Waves an appropriate sense of naval knowledge and
obedience. Waves were immersed in the world of the Navy in officer and enlisted
training schools. Service-specific language joined with service-specific uniforms to
transform women into members of the Navy. They were instructed to use naval
terminology at all times, calling floors, “decks” and toilets, “heads.” They “swabbed”

138 “Dress Right… Dress!” Conning Tower.

139 Hancock, Lady in the Navy, 152.
when they cleaned, and any Wave who failed training school was “bilged” from the Navy. As has been shown, even their training schools were given with naval names, such as USS Northampton. Wave Lois Logan later recalled that, “[i]t wasn’t long before all of us spoke [a] new language… we absorbed Navy history, tradition, and etiquette.” For newly minted Ensign Logan, the complete immersion in training was an important rite of passage: “It was a whole new world that transformed us from coeds in sloppy Joe sweaters and saddle oxfords to trim, alert Navy officers in eight weeks.”

The act of joining the military service marked Waves as different from civilians, but the transformation from woman to Wave required more than simply signing enlistment forms and reporting for duty. From the moment of acquiring her uniform to the act of wearing it alongside her sisters-in-arms, a civilian woman became a Wave by literally dressing the part. She entered boot camp in her dress and heels and exited in a Mainbocher suit. She walked in as an individual and marched out weeks later in formation, head held high under her sailor hat. For an organization that was determined to take only the “right” kind of American women, Mainbocher’s suits were central to turning them into the “right” kind of sailor – patriotic, knowledgeable of naval systems and hierarchies, and most of all, uniform in appearance and behavior. Yet even as it made women feel like sailors, the implicit femininity of the uniforms highlighted their wearer’s gender, contributing to the continued perception of WAVES as women first, sailors second.

140 Lois (Logan) Horn, unpublished memoir manuscript, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc., 27.
**Turning Sailors into Women**

Mainbocher’s uniforms and the WAVES intensive naval training at boot camp not only helped to create a sense of cohesion and belonging on the part of the Waves, they also reinforced their femininity and created visual and cultural distinctions between Waves and the Navy. The use of Navy terminology is an example of this dual purpose. Waves were trained to use ship terminology to refer to the built environment, yet they knew from the outset that they would never be permitted to serve at sea. Waves trained at women’s colleges that were rechristened with ships’ names rather than being integrated into pre-existing naval training grounds. In these immediate, obvious ways, the Navy reinforced the WAVES’ “otherness,” marking the women’s service as connected yet separate from its general body. Mainbocher’s uniform provided a more subtle yet powerful interpretation of this distinction, marking a Wave as “Navy-yet-not” every time she wore it.

From the outset, the designation of Waves as the “world’s best dressed sailor girls” created a gendered identity within the Navy. Mainbocher’s designs for the women’s uniform highlighted the Waves’ gender for two reasons: to serve as a recruitment incentive and to reassure male members of the Navy and a concerned American public that the Women’s Reserve would alter neither the traditionally male culture and structure of the Navy nor the stereotype of feminized American womanhood.

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As noted in chapter two, Mainbocher created three versions of his uniform: the blue service dress uniform, the white service dress uniform, and the seersucker summer work uniform. The uniforms’ overall appearance matched those of women’s civilian suits in the period, with single-breasted slim jackets and gored skirts that were featured in popular fashion magazines (often designed by Mainbocher) before they appeared on the bodies of female sailors.\footnote{142} While certain decisions (color scheme, rating badges, design of headgear) reinforced the militaristic nature of the WAVES, the majority of the uniform design emphasized the femininity of the wearers.

**Masculine and Feminine: the WAVES Uniforms and Uniform Theory**

Military uniform theory holds that uniforms are designed to emphasize the authority of the wearers. Jennifer Craik writes, “military uniforms convey symbols of authority, status and power by constructing clean lines and a handsome silhouette.”\footnote{143} Authority, status, and power are three concepts that have been understood by the Western world for centuries as distinctly masculine characteristics. It is through highlighting soldiers' or sailors' masculinity that their uniforms convey those characteristics.

Epaulets and shoulder boards emphasize the span of a serviceman’s shoulders, while sharp collars and broad, crisp lapels serve a similar purpose, acting as

\footnote{142} “Sweater Lines are Featured by Mainbocher,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Milwaukee, WI. September 19, 1941. FIT scrapbook 3:7-B.

\footnote{143} Craik, *Uniforms Exposed*, 38.
arrows that draw the eyes outward. In formal uniforms, heavy inner facings on jackets make chests look larger, while hidden shoulder and pants seams make for cleaner, straighter lines. Straight cuts on jackets and trousers make their male wearers appear straight and tall, with broad shoulders that taper into a slim body. The cut of male uniforms lend a phallic erectness to their wearers, who become literal embodiments of the armed forces’ belief in the power of masculinity.

Mainbocher’s WAVES uniforms turn the standard military costume tropes on their head, deemphasizing the wearer’s physical presence and privileging the curve of a woman’s waist over the trim line of hips usually seen in male uniforms. The single-breasted jacket, which appears in some form in all three uniforms, is cut to emphasize the curve of a woman’s waist. The blue and white service dress uniform jackets feature vertical darts on the front and back of the jacket that enhance the curve, drawing attention to the shape of the wearer’s body and specifically to the distinctions between bust, waist, and hip. The seersucker jacket has three central darts on the back, which, like the darts on the service dress jackets, serve to emphasize the curve of a Wave’s waist. Also focused on the waist are the shirts worn under the jackets, which feature vertical tucks at the waistline that create a more dramatic shape. The standard short and long-sleeved button-up shirts and the alternate yoked-neck and V-for-Victory shirts have a different number of tucks, creating a blousy, busty look that emphasizes the shape of a Wave’s torso.

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144 Fussel, *Uniforms*, 11.

Along with chests, shoulders play an essential role in this process of feminizing female sailors. The WAVES uniform jackets generally de-emphasize a woman’s shoulders. Even the shoulder pads in the seersucker jacket serve to highlight the contrast between shoulders, full bust, and narrow waist. The seams where the arms meet the shoulder line are set in rather than projecting outward as they do on men’s uniforms. Shoulders are a site of authority in male uniforms, which use them as “theaters of honorific male display” through the previously mentioned shoulder boards and epaulets, accentuating the masculinity and “presumed bellicosity” of the wearer. The women’s uniform jacket shoulder construction undermines the authority of the uniform rather than reinforcing it.

The skirt’s flat front and relatively slim profile keeps the uniform looking streamlined, but the gored construction uses seams that draw the eyes to the Wave’s waist, once again highlighting the non-masculine curve of her body. The slant pockets in the skirt also draw attention to a Wave’s torso, emphasizing the inward curve from the wider point of her hip to the narrower point of her waist.

**Mainbocher’s Signature Collar as a Feminine Attribute**

Mainbocher’s rounded collars drew attention and acclaim from the public, fashion press, and Waves themselves. He worked them into each version of the uniform, including the jackets in the blue and white service dress uniform and the dress of the grey seersucker summer work uniform. The curved collars were consistently brought up in conjunction with the WAVES uniform’s fashion-forward

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146 Fussel, 11.
Mainbocher openly admitted that the round collars were the equivalent of his signature upon the bodies of the Waves, “plainly indicating that it was a Wave’s uniform.”

The collars were more than stylish, however. As explained briefly in chapter two, their curved points overlap with the peaked revers of the jacket lapel, interrupting the upward diagonal jut of the lapel point. The collars’ roundness recalls popular Peter Pan collars, a shape that is common on children’s clothing and casual women’s day dresses. The round collars overlap and distract from the sharp lapel points, interrupting the classic design of a lapel. Collars and lapels in military uniforms traditionally draw the viewer’s eyes up and outward to the broad chest, hopefully decorated with the medals of the heroic and hyper-masculine soldier or sailor. These collars, however, turn that tradition on its head by de-emphasizing the wearer’s chest and recalling women’s and juvenile fashions rather than heroic masculinity.

While Mainbocher was concerned with differentiating Waves from members of the other women’s services, his “trademark” curved collar marked Waves as women, not sailors in the general Navy. An article in LIFE Magazine pointed out that the collars were as distinctive for WAVES as was the “traditional sailor collar of seamen,” and while that comparison suggests that the collars were an attempt to create a “sailor-like” look, the fact remains that the WAVES collar was markedly different.

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from male sailors’ collars. If the uniforms were supposed to remind people only of male sailors, the collars would match those found on sailors’ tunics. Instead, their distinctiveness reminded people of traditional sailor collars and then deviated drastically from them, creating a different and highly feminine look that undermined the association with traditional seamen’s uniforms.

Mainbocher was very conscious of the effort to make the uniforms appear feminine. As he explained to a reporter, his job was to emphasize the Wave’s gender, not hide it. “These women, all-American women, are going to do a fine, intelligent job, but they do not have to look like men.” His goal, he explained, was to create a look that was workmanlike yet womanly. He accomplished this goal, though media attention focused more on the latter than the former. The Washington Post reporting that “it is difficult to see how a uniform could have been made more attractive to the eye and remain recognizably a uniform.”

**Wearing Many Hats: Specialized Headgear as a Feminine Attribute**

Other features of the uniform design highlighted distinctions between Wave and sailor. Headgear was one such element. While men wore traditional navy

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148 “WAVES UNIFORMS,” *LIFE Magazine*, September 21, 1942, 50. When the magazine mentions “traditional sailor collar of seamen,” it is likely referring to the well-known sailor’s tunic, which had a collar that folded back from the neckline into a flap against the neck and shoulders of the sailor in a form called a “sail.”


blue berets, called flat hats, the envelope-style hats called garrison caps (also called “overseas caps,”) and the white Dixie Cup hat, Waves had only one hat option before 1944. Officers wore the curved side brim officer’s cap and enlisted Waves wore the flat-brimmed hat. As explained in chapter two, garrison caps were introduced as a replacement for the enlisted cap in late 1944. Officers were also permitted to wear garrison caps. The garrison cap marked the first time that Waves and male sailors wore similarly designed headgear.

That the garrison cap was introduced for Waves only toward the end of the war might have been a coincidence. The Navy, however, was slowing down recruitment of Waves in preparation for the next year’s demobilization, and there was a sense that time was running out for the Women’s Reserve. It is possible that the sense of a pending termination reinforced the temporary quality of the WAVES, allowing Navy brass to feel comfortable with Waves wearing the more masculine garrison cap.

Both WAVES officials and the civilian press trumpeted the curved-brim officer’s cap as a reinterpretation of the bicorn and tricorn hats worn by eighteenth-century British naval hero John Paul Jones. But why did Mainbocher and the Navy reach back a century for inspiration when there was perfectly functional headgear available in the men’s uniforms? And why would members of the press call a hat with such an impressive pedigree a “feminine chapeau” if there were not gendered qualities

151 Godson, Serving Proudly, 157.
to the difference in hats? The design of a whole new hat—one that was navy-approved yet not traditionally naval—is indicative of the ambiguous space that the WAVES occupied in the American naval landscape. As explored in chapter two, the brimmed cap worn by enlisted Waves was also a gendered object, with many enlisted Waves complaining that its unprofessional floppiness made it both girlish and impractical.

**Serious in Purpose, Womanly in Dress**

The question of the femininity of the uniforms affected Waves and their leaders in different ways. As the first director of the WAVES, Mildred McAfee was charged with overseeing the development of the uniforms. She generally adhered to a series of talking points with the press, describing the uniform as “becoming and functional,” keeping reporters abreast of delays (sourcing the proper hosiery color was one of the more exciting setbacks in getting the uniforms ready) and answering

\[\text{References}\]


155 “No Makeup Rules for Members of Waves,” *Arkansas [Little Rock] Gazette*, August 15, 1942. FIT scrapbook 3:124-A. “Proper” hosiery color was a “neutral beige” as described in the 1943 uniform regulations. They could be made of plain rayon, silk nylon, cotton or lisle thread. The color requirement was significant enough to merit the delay, and a sample of the color was held at the Navy’s Bureau of Supplies and Accounts in Washington, D.C., for reference. The color choice of “neutral beige” further proves the idea that the ideal Wave was Caucasian – there was no consideration for possibility of skin color differences between Waves of different
questions about uniform distribution and pricing. Yet her occasional verbal slip-up illustrated her own frustrations with the increasingly frivolous nature of coverage of the WAVES and the decision of the Navy to promote the uniforms as the primary focus of interest rather than the women’s patriotic service. McAfee gave the press a dressing-down in an interview in August of 1942, charging the reporters with being more curious about the uniforms than the women wearing them.

It is only fair to say that these women are not coming into the Navy because of any desire to dress up or for any personal glory, but from a genuine seriousness of purpose and a desire to make their special training useful to the country.

This frustration with the perception of WAVES as women interested more in the stylishness of their uniforms than the patriotism of their duty carried into the national coverage of the question of undergarments. When the WAC announced that they would be issuing undergarments to their recruits, they found themselves at the center of a public relations firestorm. McAfee and company chose to steer clear of the controversy by allowing Waves to provide their own undergarments. The public remained fascinated with the question of intimates and unmentionables, however, and McAfee faced countless questions about underwear prior to the release of the Mainbocher-designed uniforms. After repeating again and again the party-line


156 “Mainbocher Designs WAVES’ Uniforms,” Tallahassee Democrat, July 19, 1943. FIT scrapbook 3:123-B.

regarding underwear, McAfee reportedly gave a “pointed reply” to one reporter, declaring flatly that, “all parts of the WAVES’ uniform that are not visible are a matter of the wearer’s private choice.”  

While the decision to allow Waves to choose their own undergarments was couched in terms of ease and convenience, it brought attention to Waves’ gender and highlighted their differences from the more “masculinized” WAC as well as their male counterparts in the regular Navy. It was yet another point in favor of the WAVES, a way to illustrate how the Navy would never masculinize young American women or turn them into permanent sailors. WAVES recruiter Mrs. John Tapers of Tallahassee, Florida, explained to one reporter how the Navy preserved the feminine qualities of its women recruits: “While Navy regulations are very explicit about what must be worn top-side… they permit both officers and personnel to retain their individuality in making the choice of underwear, nightgowns, negligees, and bedroom slippers.” The public’s preoccupation with the Waves’ undergarments, the Navy’s willingness to exploit their titillation, and even McAfee’s clearly exasperated acceptance of the party line) stand as examples of the construction of the WAVES as a group separate from the Navy, defined by its members’ gender.

158 Ibid.

159 “Mainbocher Designs WAVES’ Uniforms,” Tallahassee Democrat, 19 July 1943. FIT scrapbook 3:123-B.
“Feminine and Flattering”: Waves’ Appreciation for Their Uniforms

Although overemphasized, the press’ focus on the uniforms was understandable. Many Waves enjoyed looking stylish and attractive in their uniforms. In a letter to her family, Margaret Milligan wrote how it felt receive her uniform, hat, and accessories while at officer training school at Smith College. “Our bags are by Korst and our suits by Mainbocher. No wonder the Waves have the best uniforms.” In general Milligan was quite taken with her uniform, describing the blue service dress uniform as “beautiful” in one letter and boasting that her havelock, the rainproof headdress worn with the WAVES’ raincoat, “resembled something Hedy Lamarr might wear.”

Yeoman Second Class Mary Ellen Ancelin found the uniforms very flattering and appreciated that they emphasized her looks more than other women’s corps’ uniforms. She had considered joining the USMCWR to honor her brother, who was serving as a Marine, but she knew she would look better in Mainbocher’s uniforms than the forest green Marine uniform. Her one regret was that she would have liked to wear the Women Marine caps, which had appealing red trim. Wave Lillian Rothberg, who had felt such pride in wearing her uniform out to lunch in New York City with her family, was also aware of its designer pedigree and flattering

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160 Margaret Milligan to family, August 25, 1943. August 15, 1943. Margaret (Milligan) Mulcahy Collection, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc. Hedy Lamarr was a popular film actress in the period and was well-known for her glamorous roles.

design. She recalled that it was “gorgeous,” adding that “[t]he gored skirt flowed very nicely, the jackets were comfortable and sharp.”

Some Waves, already taken with their appearance in uniform, attempted to improve upon Mainbocher’s designs. Enlisted Wave Helen Gilbert recalled taking care of her uniform: “We figured out ways to make our uniforms even more attractive. We ironed pleats in the gores of our skirts and put a little starch in our summer seersucker dresses.” Gilbert appreciated the Navy’s decision to allow Waves to purchase their own undergarments, recognizing the Navy’s leniency as an attempt to preserve their femininity: “Because we had to wear uniforms at all times, we wore exotic underwear. We were gorgeous undressed… this was our way of making ourselves feel more feminine.”

Navigating a Masculine Navy in a Feminine Uniform

For all that Waves appreciated feeling feminine and attractive in their uniforms, many also recognized that the distinctions between male and female uniforms betrayed the paradox of women’s naval service. Despite the efforts of the uniforms, naval recruitment material, and boot camp to make women feel that they were sailors, many Waves understood that while they could work with the Navy and even technically be in the Navy, their gender and perceived femininity always marked them as “other.” While few made overt connections between the design of their uniforms and their treatment as women rather than sailors, the fact that they marked

162 Erno, interview.

163 Gilbert, Okay, Girls, 47.
their treatment as different is proof that their male counterparts interpreted Mainbocher’s uniforms as part of a larger mission to portray Waves as women first, sailors second.

Helen Clifford appreciated the beauty of Mainbocher’s uniforms, but she also recognized inconsistencies in the uniform design and what they meant for her treatment in the Navy. She recalled that as a recruit, she had been promised uniforms that echoed those of her male counterparts:

We were issued two uniforms designed by the famous Parisian couturier, Mainbocher, to correspond to male officers’ uniforms; but instead of black and gold stripes, WAVES were outfitted in navy-blue serge. When commissioned, our stripes would be lighter blue. We only minded the color difference because women officers were supposed to be on an equal footing with men.164

In June of 1944, Clifford returned to the issue of uniform differences in a letter to her father, writing:

WAVE officers are to wear stars above stripes on their sleeves like men officers-of-the-line. Originally our uniforms didn’t have them because of “limited military authority.” Now they’ve decided that women officers do as much work as many men who sit at desks. The nice part is that higher naval officers promoted the change, saying women deserve the stars.

For Clifford, the initial refusal of the Navy to let women wear stars above their officer stripes illustrated their lack of faith in their abilities. She saw the move to add the star as a vote in favor of women’s involvement, a long-needed endorsement of their equal abilities [figure 32].165

164 Gunter, Navy WAVE Memories, 34. .

165 Ibid., 126.
Gilbert, the enlisted Wave who altered her uniform to make it more flattering, was also aware of gender politics in the Navy. When Waves first began working on Navy bases, she recalled, men reacted differently to the sight of women in uniform. Some adjusted, slowly but surely, to the presence of women on base. “At first there was a lot of cat-calling and whistling, but that tapered off… we ceased being unusual, and became a normal part of the military community.”

Others, however, refused to accept the idea that women might have a legitimate role to play in the Navy. Their disapproval and resentment colored Gilbert’s experiences as a radioman working within a team of radio operators on a base.

This was scary time for us. We were working side by side with seasoned Navy men and were well aware of the negative feelings about us. We’d heard all about our joining the Navy to “service” the men…. We were more or less ignored. The attitudes of some of the men bordered on hostility toward us. The military is a man’s world and we were invading it!

Waves like Gilbert chafed not only at the insults and mistreatment that they experienced at the hands of their male counterparts but also at the Navy’s institutional unwillingness to treat them as equal members of its body. Naval administration’s rejection of the WAVES as full members of the Navy is reflected in the design of the uniforms, which highlighted the rank inequality rather than the “sailor-ness” of the women wearing them. For Gilbert and other Waves, this unequal treatment played itself out in the rules detailing what Waves were and were not

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166 Gilbert, *Okay, Girls*, 60.

167 Ibid., 61.
allowed to do. Some of the strictures were bizarrely specific. Gilbert recalled one that banned Waves from boarding single engine planes: “They didn’t think a female with a parachute would have the courage to jump in an emergency. How about that for discrimination?” She also identified the ban on foreign service as another maddening distinction between male and female sailors, saying, “To be a woman and not allowed to be closer to the action was extremely frustrating.”

While not articulated by Gilbert, the bans on foreign and sea service were subtly reinforced by the uniform design itself. Suitable for state-side work, no Wave would be able to easily negotiate the confusing terrain and tight quarters of a ship in a skirt and heels. Images of Waves visiting ships as part of their boot camp training or on liberty illustrate the difficulty of maneuvering aboard a ship in the very feminine uniforms assigned to them [figure 33].

Many Waves felt frustrated by their treatment by the naval administration, but some suffered serious harassment and mistreatment at the hands of Navy men who saw them not as fellow uniformed sailors but as women available for the taking. Mary Jane Stutsman, an enlisted Wave working alongside Navy corpsmen at Bainbridge Naval Hospital in Maryland, was taking part in a local Bainbridge town festival when she and her fellow Wave were joined by two sailors in uniform. Suddenly the men grabbed them and pushed them against some tree trunks. Stutsman recalled that they “attempted to push up our skirts and grab us all over.”

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168 Ibid., 89.

169 Ibid., 84.

170 Mary Jane Stutsman as told to Olga Gruhzit-Hoyt, They Also Served, 116.
was acceptable for them to attack their female colleagues because in their eyes, the women were not truly colleagues. Their gender and their uniforms marked them as separate, outside the Navy order and therefore fair game.

Unfortunately, this was not the end of Stutsman’s mistreatment. A fellow sailor asked her out on a date and attacked her while they were walking to dinner. She remembered, “Suddenly I found myself on the ground with him on top of me trying to remove my skirt and pants.” When Stutsman fought him off and tore open the bandage protecting his hand, which he had injured earlier, she got his blood on her clothes. She escaped and returned to her barracks, where the WAVES officer in charge questioned her about the blood. Stutsman felt shocked and incapable of explaining, and the Navy chose not to pursue the incident. Her attacker, furious at her for preventing her own rape, spread rumors on base that she was a slut. Stutsman was hounded for dates by sailors who saw her as an “easy lay,” while her attempted rapist suffered no consequences for his actions.¹⁷¹

While Stutsman’s experiences were not the norm, Waves had encounters that spanned a spectrum of inappropriate verbal and physical situations. Enlisted Wave Doris Adams also found herself manhandled by men in uniform. While stationed in Southern California, Adams recalled walking down a street in San Diego with some friends on her way back to the barracks when a man accosted her. “All of a sudden this big Army boy came right up behind me and picked me up, just like a little girl and took me down the street with his friends, clapping.” Adams kicked her legs

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 117.
and tried to hold on so she would not fall. The soldier carried her a few blocks and then dropped her on her feet, far from her friends, and walked away without a word. His motivation seemed clear to Adams: “I’m sure that we girls were walking along, holding ourselves quite big, and ready to salute any officer we saw, and these boys couldn’t stand it, probably.”

Even those Waves who did not experience physical harassment first hand encountered disrespect and mistreatment from their fellow sailors and members of the public. Waves who worked as Link instructors, for instance, had the often difficult job of training male cadets. Link aircraft simulators trained aviators in the use of the aircraft’s instruments. Waves found themselves dealing with military aviators who resented taking directions and orders from women, even when those directions could one day save their lives.

For Helen Clifford, meanwhile, negative encounters often connected her uniform to larger issues about the role of women in military service. While traveling home for leave during the war, she heard a woman declare that all women in the military were “camp followers.” The woman gave Clifford, who was still in uniform,

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“a knowing look that implied they were prostitutes.” She also encountered men in uniform who suggested that women entered the WAVES to “snag husbands.”

Clifford worked in the Photoscience Laboratory at the Naval Air Station in Anacostia, writing and editing educational, propaganda, and recruitment films for the Navy. At one point she worked with a Hollywood actor-turned-sailor who wanted to make a WAVES recruitment film. Clifford assumed it would feature extensive footage of Waves in uniform going about their daily duties. Instead, the actor included a few scenes of Waves at work but ended the film with an extended scene that disturbed Clifford: “a beautiful enlisted Wave, no longer in uniform but in a diaphanous bridal gown from Saks, as she exchanged marriage vows with the officer under whom she had been assigned.”

Some Waves had experiences that highlighted the differences in their gender and treatment in less harmful yet equally telling ways. Betty Doolittle, an enlisted Wave working on Operation Overlord once found herself waiting for an elevator beside an admiral. Rank demanded that an admiral precede a yeoman, and so Doolittle stood back. The elevator came and went without either of them getting on. Doolittle recalled that this happened three times before the admiral turned to her. “He

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174 Gunter, Navy WAVE Memories, 120.

175 Ibid., 121.

176 Operation Overlord was the code name for the Battle of Normandy. The operation planned the attack and the subsequent invasion of Nazi-occupied Western Europe. As the yeoman assigned to a high-ranking officer, Captain Challenger, Doolittle was charged with maintaining the top-secret status of the mission, shredding all documents and ensuring that all the other Waves in the office complied with secrecy codes.
finally said, ‘Young lady, will you get on the elevator, and I said, ‘After you, sir,’ and he said, ‘Let me tell you something, I was a gentleman before I was an admiral, please get on the elevator.’”  

Lieutenant Margaret Combs had a similar experience while working under Admiral McMillan. In a 1943 letter to her family she wrote that the admiral, who would presumably exit the room before her, appeared at her desk waiting to escort her to a meeting. When she did not stand immediately he asked if her she was ready, forcing her to disregard Navy protocol that demanded she walk behind him. Terrified of doing something wrong to violate further Navy codes and equally scared she would offend him by breaking unknown rules regarding how one walks alongside an admiral, she wrote that her knees were knocking with fear. “I just silently said, “Now, knees, you’ve held me up before. You can’t afford to let the Navy down.”” The admiral flouted Navy convention by opening doors for her, making her feel “like a debutante making her first appearance in public.” Combs appreciated the encounter, which made her realize something about the admiral: “he was just a good person who wanted to treat me as if I were a lady and not a uniform.”

While not directly caused by their uniforms, the sort of casual sexism and physical harassment experienced by Waves was the outcome of an institutional culture and organizational system to which the uniforms were central. While the Waves at

177 Betty Doolittle, as told to Gruhzit-Hoyt, They Also Served, 107.

the receiving end of the admirals’ polite behavior might have been appreciative of it, the sort of “chivalrous” behavior exhibited by both naval leaders in those anecdotes speaks to the same sort of casual sexism—a refusal to see the Wave for the woman.

Doolittle and Combs may have encountered a kind of sexism that stemmed from “gentlemanly” behavior, but the power differences between them and their male commanding officers were significant and important. Military hierarchies are in place to make those of inferior rank obedient to those of superior rank, but they are equally necessary for mediating interactions between ranks and protecting people of lower rank from those who command them. The male admirals’ refusal to see Doolittle and Combs as genderless subordinates undermined that hierarchy. The end result of those interactions might have been harmless chivalry, but the implications of an abuse of power and misconduct remained.

Interactions between male superior officers and female Wave subordinates were mined for humorous effect in a Collier’s cartoon published September 2, 1944 [figure 34]. In it an older male officer approaches a young, attractive Wave waiting at a bus station on a windy day. She is holding her skirt down with both hands, but when the officer gets closer she lifts up a hand to salute, causing her skirt to fly up. The officer passes, then loops around to make her salute a second time, again getting a flash of her legs as the wind whips up her skirt. The cartoon is off-color and amusing, but it unintentionally highlights the potential for male officers to abuse their power over Waves who, by dint of their gender, age, and unfamiliarity with the military, would be unable to demand the kind of equal treatment they were promised by the Navy when they enlisted. The cartoon also makes a visual connection between the
Wave’s gender, uniform, and treatment—after all, if the Wave were not wearing a skirt, the wind would not be able to lift up her skirt and give the officer the voyeuristic glimpse for which he aimed.

That Stutsman’s two attempted rapists and Adam’s manhandler felt it acceptable to put their hands on a fellow member of the military, and that the gentlemanly admirals could not fail to see their subordinates as ladies rather than sailors suggests the failure of the uniform to instill in others a sense of the authority of its wearer. This, as was explored earlier in this chapter, is one of the primary purposes of all uniforms—to make the wearer part of an organization larger than herself and as such, imbue her with the authority of that organization. Yet in fact Mainbocher’s designs had not failed. They simply had a different mission than most uniforms. Rather than vesting their wearer with military authority, they swathed her in the appearance of femininity. The experiences of countless Waves in uniform were a testament to their success.

Men in uniform felt it acceptable to speak sexually or insultingly to female colleagues, proving that they had not accepted the women as true colleagues or “brothers in arms.” The uniforms, supposedly the last word in military cohesion and conformity, formed a physical barrier, setting the Waves apart from the Navy. The clothing provided visual confirmation that Waves, while sailors, were still very much women. Even the officers who believed they were behaving appropriately by treating their female insubordinates with chivalry and civility were actually undermining the WAVES’ authority and presence in the Navy. By treating Waves as “ladies, not just
uniforms,” these men undid the uniforms’ work of turning women into sailors by fulfilling the uniforms’ second mission—to turn sailors back into women.
Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

When the USS Oak Hill docked in Virginia Beach on December 21, 2011, Petty Officer Second Class Marissa Gaeta was the first enlisted sailor to disembark. Chosen by lottery, she was picked to participate in the time-honored Navy tradition of the first homecoming kiss. In her dress blues, she stepped out onto the pier where she embraced her girlfriend of two years, fellow sailor Citlalic Snell.\textsuperscript{179}

The moment was historic, marking the Navy’s first official lesbian kiss since the policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was repealed in September of 2011. It also illustrated the degree to which the world had changed since the first Wave entered boot camp in 1942. Not only did these two women serve as permanent members of the United States Navy in positions equal to their male counterparts, they were finally permitted to carry out their relationship in public without fear of punishment or reprisal. Seventy years after women were banned from shipboard service and lesbians were drummed out of the Navy, Gaeta and Snell’s kiss marked the impressive progress made by women and marginalized groups in the armed forces.

But if Gaeta and Snell’s shared moment was a reflection of everything that had changed since World War II, it was also proof of the cliché that the more things

\textsuperscript{179} Corinne Reilly, “Two Women’s Kiss at Homecoming a First for Navy, Too” \textit{The Virginian-Pilot}, December 21, 2011.
change, the more they stay the same. For even as Gaeta bent Snell backwards in an unconscious imitation of the famous V-J Day photograph of a sailor kissing a nurse in Times Square, the most visible portion of her uniform illustrated that some things have changed very little. Gaeta’s uniform hat was almost identical to the famous roll-brimmed hat designed by Mainbocher and worn by WAVES officers throughout the war.

Gaeta’s combination cap has survived almost seventy years in the US Navy, and while it rests atop the head of a sailor who serves in ways foreign to the women of the WAVES, it harkens back to those first few years of women’s naval service and to Mainbocher’s complicated, complex designs. All uniforms “work”—working, after all, is central to their existence. Mainbocher’s WAVES designs, however, did an unprecedented amount of work. They re-patriated an American designer who had become foreign in the eyes of an increasingly patriotic American public. They acted as a recruitment tool for a women’s service trying to attract the “right” kind of women. Finally, they made women feel like members of the military even while they highlighted all the ways in which that membership was qualified and temporary. For garments made of wool and cotton, they were remarkably active agents in their own existence.

This thesis is in no way the final word on women’s Navy uniforms. Further research can profitably continue on the ways in which the Waves, male sailors, the press, and the American public understood the uniform and the work it was doing. Moreover, research into the changes of women’s uniform options since World War II will have fascinating results. Another potential research avenue relates to designers of
women’s military uniforms. From thinking about quartermasters attempting to cope with women’s clothing requirements to the shade of red lipstick developed by Elizabeth Arden for the USMCWR, there is a mountain of research just waiting to be uncovered on the complicated relationship between uniform design and gender in the second half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{180} Finally, while this thesis contextualizes the uniforms within Mainbocher’s oeuvre, much work remains to be done on the designer himself.

Mainbocher’s uniform remained the Navy’s female uniform through the 1940s, with some small changes instituted in 1951.\textsuperscript{181} Since then uniform options have expanded for women to include summer white trousers and shirts, service khaki uniforms, as well as the Navy Working Uniform (NWU), a supposedly unisex uniform composed of a loose tunic, trousers, and matching cap, and made of fabric that has been screen-printed with a grey and blue pixelated camouflage. The NWU is the required uniform for daily work while at sea or in industrial environments.\textsuperscript{182}

Despite the expanded uniform options, however, the standard women’s dress uniform remains remarkably similar to Mainbocher’s: a single breasted blue-black jacket and six-gored skirt. The primary changes are the color shift from navy blue to blue-black and the option to wear the uniform with trousers rather than a skirt in professional environments. A third change is perhaps the most radical: the curved

\textsuperscript{180} McEuen, \textit{Making War, Making Women}, 36.

\textsuperscript{181} Godson, \textit{Serving Proudly}, 198.

collar so indicative of Mainbocher’s hand upon the body of the Wave has been exchanged for a more traditional sharp collar point that sits above the peaked revers rather than overlapping with the lapel point.

As the Navy has changed to give women expanded service opportunities, so have the uniforms. Yet change has come slowly, and the uniforms have evolved in fits and starts. The hat on Gaeta’s head is proof that no matter how equal the Navy declares its female sailors, their public appearance marks them as different from their male counterparts.

This is not an argument for identical uniforms for men and women. Many female sailors feel that their uniforms have a history and tradition of their own, one that they are proud of and are unwilling to give up for the sake of a uniform appearance across genders. Others feel that their uniforms have already become too genderless. Navy internet forums are filled with discussions of uniform design, with many female sailors stating that they wish their uniform looked better on their bodies.

Rather than arguing for a genderless uniform worn by both sexes, this conclusion seeks to show how even seventy years after Mainbocher first designed the WAVES uniform, questions of how to dress female sailors persist. They do so because the Navy, and the American armed forces in general, have yet to come to terms with a military filled with women participating at every level and in every role.

Women have been active members of the United States military since its foundation, first through subterfuge and then legally. They have been acting as recognized agents in the armed forces in some capacity since World War I and have been considered equal members since 1948. Despite their historic and continued
presence, however, the military continues to grapple with their place in the service. Even as late as the Vietnam War Navy women were called “Waves,” singling them out as different and separate from their male counterparts. The perpetual debate over what a female soldier or sailor should wear is proof positive that the questions that have plagued women’s service for decades live on unanswered.

Like the WAVES during the Second World War, modern female soldiers and sailors are banned from front-line combat. Despite this, however, many see combat in active war zones every day, leading many to advocate for lifting the ban on women’s combat. Their unofficial combat duty has highlighted a serious problem facing women in the military; their “unisex” uniforms are cut to men’s bodies and do not fit correctly for frontline battle. Body armor hinders their ability to fire their weapons, knee and elbow pads hit inches below the body parts they are supposed to protect, and flight suits make urinating almost impossible. In March of 2011, the Army announced that they were testing new combat uniforms that had been designed for women’s bodies. While many women protested changes that they felt would separate them from their male colleagues, others argued that the ability to do their jobs well while in uniform was more important than the appearance of uniformity.183

The Army is not alone in addressing uniforming issues; on August 25, 2010, the military newspaper Stars and Stripes published an online blog entry reporting rumors that the Navy was considering changing the women’s uniform options after sailors raised them as a hotly contested topic at a women’s leadership

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symposium earlier that year. And to whom was the Navy hoping to turn to for advice on how to better fit clothing to a woman’s body? None other than American fashion powerhouse Ralph Lauren.¹⁸⁴

Mainbocher designed uniforms that gave civilian women agency as sailors while simultaneously reinforcing their femininity. Seventy years later, the Navy is still grappling with this false dichotomy, this unnecessary division between maintaining a military appearance and looking “feminine.” Perhaps Ralph Lauren will resolve the issue once and for all, but even if he does, Mainbocher’s uniforms will live on as a testament to the uneasy time when a uniform had to do the complicated work of turning women into sailors and sailors back into women.

Figure 1: WAVES officer service dress blue uniform

Composed of jacket, skirt, shirt and tie. Officer’s rank indicated by star and stripes on sleeves and gold buttons. Louise Nash Dorsett Papers. Courtesy, the Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. WV00017.8.001.
Figure 2: WAVES officer service dress white uniform

Composed of jacket, skirt, shirt and tie. Officer’s rank indicated by star and stripes on sleeves and gold buttons. Judith Bullock Nisbet Papers. Courtesy, the Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. WV0056.8.001.
Figure 3: WAVES officer summer work uniform

Jacket and shirtdress, which would have been worn with a tie. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command artifact, 2005-74-32; 2005-74-33. Gift of Martha Geoghegan.
Figure 4: Darts detail on uniform jacket

A close up of the extended darts at the front of the uniform jacket. WAVE Chief Petty Officer uniform jacket, ca. 1945. Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Division of Armed Forces History. Gift of Gladys Marscheck, 265029, 5905-N(1).
Figure 5: Rounded collars with pointed reves

Rounded collar points on service dress blue uniform jacket. Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Division of Armed Forces History. Gift of Mary Virginia Harris, 207641, 58018-N.
Figure 6: “V for Victory” shirt

The non-traditional yoke on the shirt was called the “V for Victory” design. The flat front of the blouse required women to access the shirt from a series of snaps at the side. This shirt design was obsolete by 1944. Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Division of Armed Forces History. Gift of Mary Virginia Harris, 207641, 58025-N.
Figure 7: WAVES officer combination hat with white cover and badge device

Figure 8: WAVES enlisted personnel hat

Figure 9: WAVES garrison cap

Grey seersucker garrison hat to be worn with seersucker summer working uniform. The garrison cap, which was introduced in late 1944 as an alternative to the enlisted personnel hat, came in black and navy blue as well. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command artifact, 2005-74-21. Gift of Martha Geoghegan.
The handbag is made of leather, though WAVES handbags could also be made of fabric or synthetic materials. The comb and mirror were also required by the uniform regulations. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command artifact, 2005-76-62. Gift of Martha Geoghegan.
Figure 11: WAVES black leather oxfords

The black leather oxfords worn by a Wave officer were, interestingly, likely in violation of the women’s uniform regulations. They feature a patterned detail on the toe (not visible in the photograph), while regulations required that shoes be made of plain, undecorated material. They do, however, match requirements in terms of heel height and lace eyelets. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command artifact, 2005-74-60. Gift of Martha Geoghegan.
Figure 12: “Ready for Trudging to Class in the Snow.” Waves wearing winter raincoat and gloves

In this image a group of Waves dress for a cold winter in Massachusetts, wearing their raincoats (likely with winter liner included) and gloves. They wear no havelocks as it is not raining. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1943. Ethel (Greenfield) Booth Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection. Courtesy, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.
Figure 13: Navy Waves in gym “tennis dresses.”

These Waves pose for a candid photo in their tennis dresses. Carrying their textbooks, they are enlisted Waves in boot camp at USS Hunter on the campus of Hunter College, in the Bronx. New York, New York. Date unknown, during World War II. June (Hays) McCallum Collection. Courtesy, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.
Figure 14: SNJ Aircraft mechanic Waves in work uniform dungarees and coveralls

This group image of Waves working as aircraft mechanics illustrates the diversity of more casual work uniforms available to women who worked more physically demanding and dirty jobs in the WAVES. Location and exact date unknown, taken during World War II. Darlene (Davison) Ferguson Collection, Gift of Carol Parrish, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection. Courtesy, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.
Yeomen (F) wore uniforms made up a long skirt, blouse (called a shirtwaist) and a single-breasted Norfolk style coat with gilt buttons. They wore their rating badges on their left sleeves. They also wore flat-brimmed sailor hats that resembled boaters and were made of navy blue felt or straw. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command photograph, NH 53165.
Mildred McAfee takes the oath of office as an “officer and a gentleman,” becoming a Lieutenant Commander in the Naval Reserve and the Director of the Navy’s Women’s Reserve. Taken August 3, 1942. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command photograph, NH 95017.
Figure 17: WAVES recruit company at boot camp for enlisted Waves

These Waves have been photographed with their recruit company while dressed in their full uniform. Sisters Lorraine Isabelle Clemons trained together in this company, and Lorraine is the fifth Wave from right in the third row while Isabelle is standing to her left. Learning to work, attend class, and drill in uniform was an important part of boot camp. Photographed during World War II. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command photograph, NH 95016. Donated by Lorraine Canter, 1984.
Figure 18: WAVES Photographer’s Mate Third Class Mildred Hoffecker, July 1944

Photographer’s Mate (3c) Mildred Hoffecker working at Floyd Bennet Field at the Naval Air Station in New York, New York in July of 1944. Photographer’s Mate was only one of many positions open to Waves. Mildred (Hoffecker) Bingley Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection. Courtesy, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.
Harriet Ida Pickens and Frances Wills were the first two African American women accepted to train at USS Northampton after the WAVES permitted black women to serve at the end of 1944. They were commissioned at the rank of Lieutenant (junior grade) and Ensign respectively, and were members of the final graduating class at the training school at Northampton, MA. U.S. National Archives photograph, 80-G-297441.
The recruitment booklet *How to Serve Your Country in the WAVES or SPARS* mentioned Mainbocher’s uniform many times, using it as a recruitment incentive. The owner of this particular booklet drew on the cover and inside pages with red pencil and marker at some point, making this a particularly personalized copy. Julia Agnes Hunt Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection. Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.
Figure 21: “$200 Worth of Clothes Free!” from *How to Serve Your Country in the WAVES or SPARS*

This page from the recruiting booklet *How to Serve Your Country in the WAVES or SPARS* describes the uniform and the various uniform components that a Wave receives as part of doing her duty, citing the “stylist Mainbocher” as the designer of the uniform. The image at the bottom of the page is of a Wave wearing her rainproof havelock, the wimple-like headgear that was considered the height of style. . Julia Agnes Hunt Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection. Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.
This recruitment booklet describes Mainbocher’s uniforms in depth. It also pitches joining the WAVES as an opportunity to socialize with young people, especially young servicemen. Positioning the WAVES as the women’s service for young women who wanted to do their duty yet continue to live traditionally feminine lives was a central part of the Navy’s recruitment campaign. Julia Agnes Hunt Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection. Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.
Figure 23: “On the Same Team”

Figure 24: “Share the Deeds of Victory”

Figure 25: “Have You Got What it Takes to Fill an Important Job Like This?”

Illustrated by John Falter. Office for Emergency Management, Office of War Information. Domestic Operations Branch, Bureau of Special Services, 1944. United States History and Heritage Command photograph, 81-156-L.
Figure 26: “There’s a Man-Size Job for You in Your Navy”

Figure 27: “Don’t Miss Your Great Opportunity”

Figure 28: “Proud—I'll Say”

Figure 29: Ensign Marlene A. Nelson in Delevan, WI, 1943

Figure 30: WAVES Petty Officers and their rating badges, 1943

This photograph was taken after the Waves had completed their specialized training and received their rating badges, worn on their sleeves. From left to right, the Waves served at the following rates: Specialist (Teacher), Specialist (Photographer), Aviation Metalsmith, Aviation Machinist’s Mate, Aerographer’s Mate and Yeoman. U.S. National Archives photograph, 80-G-102975.
Figure 31: WAVES Locker in Barracks at the Naval Air Technical Training Center, Memphis, TN, 1944

While this image is of a locker in barracks at a technical training center rather than at boot camp, it illustrates the rigid standards maintained in military living quarters. The regimental review tested Waves’ ability to perform tasks such as cleaning their barracks, dressing properly, and drilling. US Navy photo, Lorraine (Jaycno) Dieterle Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection. Courtesy, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.
The single stripe and star on this officer’s seersucker summer work jacket marked her as an ensign, the lowest rank of commission officer, and as an “officer of the line” rather than as a staff officer belonging to a specific corps. The introduction of the star for Waves came in 1944 in an attempt to make women’s uniforms reflect their rank in the same way that men’s did. The stripe on the seersucker uniform is another example of distinctions between men and women’s uniforms—men’s uniforms featured gold braid, while women’s blue uniforms used light blue braid and white and seersucker uniforms featured dark blue braid. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command artifact, 2005-74-33. Gift of Martha Geoghegan.
Figure 33: Enlisted Wave exiting a gun mount on the USS Missouri during a shipboard visit

This image illustrates how unsuitable Mainbocher’s uniforms would have been for shipboard service. Dresses and heels are not practical clothing for manning a warship, and the design of Mainbocher’s uniforms was proof of the Navy’s refusal to permit women the same service opportunities as men. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command photograph, K-4570.
Figure 34: Cartoon, *Collier’s*, September 2, 1944.

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APPENDIX

A: GLOSSARY

**Boots:** Navy slang for a Navy or Marine recruit, specifically one who is still in boot camp or early training. One of the terms that carried across the gender divide, “boot” was a commonly used term in WAVES boot camp and training schools.

**BUPERS:** Bureau of Naval Personnel, the organization that functions as the “human resources” department of the Navy, overseeing recruitment and management of personnel.

**Conning Tower:** the raised platform on a ship or submarine from which a commanding officer can “con” the vessel, giving orders to the ship personnel and specifically to the helmsman. It is traditionally as high on the ship as is possible to provide the best visibility. *Conning Tower* was also the name given to the newsletter published at USS Hunter, the enlisted WAVES training school based at Hunter College.

**Gob:** Slang for “sailor,” “gob” was a common term for Navy seamen. “Gobette” was one of the nicknames suggested for the Waves, along with “sailorette.”

**Rank:** WAVES officers, like Navy officers, achieved rank as they moved up the hierarchy of the Navy. Depending on their performance in training school they graduated at the rank of ensign or lieutenant (junior grade, usually shorted to “jg”). They had the potential to be promoted from ensign to lieutenant (jg), then lieutenant commander, commander, and eventually captain. As the WAVES officially ceased to exist after 1948, the only three Waves who ever
achieved the status of captain were the three women who lead the women’s service as director. Mildred McAfee, the first director of the WAVES, served at the level of lieutenant commander for years before being promoted.

**Rate:** Enlisted personnel did not achieve rank. Rather, they were awarded rates based on performance in training school and placement within the Navy system. They could be promoted from rate to rate. The lowest being apprentice seamen and the highest being chief petty officer.

**OWI:** Office of War Information, the government agency formed to coordinate all wartime public communications, including recruitment efforts and propaganda campaigns.

**SPARS:** Semper Paratus—Always Ready, the women’s reserve for the US Coast Guard, named for the Coast Guard’s motto. The SPARS were formed in 1942 after the WAVES and, as a branch of the Navy, had uniforms almost identical to the WAVES. As the WAVES came first, however, Mainbocher designed the uniforms for the WAVES and later altered it slightly for the SPARS.

**USMCWR:** United States Marine Corps Women’s Reserve, the women’s reserve for the Marine Corps. The last branch of the military to accept women, the Marine Corps was famously opposed first to women’s service and then to the trivializing of said service, refusing to adopt a what might be perceived as an infantilizing nickname for their women’s corps. The USMCWR was retired in 1948 when women were permitted to join the general corps.

**WAVES:** Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, the women’s reserve of the US Navy. Established in 1942 to “free a man to fight.” Waves served in
a variety of bureaucratic, assembly, technical and intelligence positions until 1948, when they were integrated into the larger Navy body.

**WAAC/WAC:** Women’s Army Corps, formed as the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps in 1941 as the first women’s reserve in the United States Military. The name changed in 1943 in response to bureaucratic issues with maintaining an auxiliary force that received some yet not all the benefits of military service.
Hi Shoshana - sorry for the late reply. I was out of the office on Friday.

You should be able to publish the photos with no problem. I just double checked with the photo curator, Rob Hanesew and he said you could use the following format in your footnotes, etc... for citation purposes:

"U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command Photograph (or artifact) – then the photo (or accession) number"

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I am sure whatever you do will be fine as long as you tell where the photo, or object is, that you are mentioning.

We are looking forward to this Saturday as well! I am really excited. My in-laws are visiting and will be keeping the baby so that is actually a huge relief not to have to worry about her. When you have time later this week just let me know how we should meet up with you and what time is best for you. We are really flexible now without Caroline to keep track of.

Again, sorry for the late reply. Hope it did not keep you from getting most of it wrapped up over the weekend!

Allison
Hanshew, Robert, NAVHISTHERITAGECOM <robert.hanshew@navy.mil>

To: Shoshana Rosnikoff

Shoshana:

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Regards:

Robert Hanshew
NHHC Photograph Curator
Naval History & Heritage Command
805 Kidder Breeze (CUP)
Washington DC 20374-5000
(202) 433-2765
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Keep up with my daily posts on the NHHC Facebook page:
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Hi Shoshana!

I do remember your research visit. I'm glad the thesis writing has been going well. Yes, you are allowed to use your photos in the thesis. I only ask two things: please don't use the images in any commercial publication, and please don't use (or somehow obscure) images that indicate where in the museum these items are located. I'm sure you didn't take any photos of the storage room doors/room numbers, but I just like to remind people as a security precaution. There are no forms or permissions for use in a scholarly non-commercial publication.

Hope you are well! Let me know if you have any more questions.

Cheers,

Natalie
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Subject: Photographs: World War II WAVES and Uniforms

Photographs From the Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWIIWAVES_772-003.jpg
US Navy WAVE officer, University of Indiana, Bloomington, Indiana, Summer 1943.
Irene (Coyer) Hagerman Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWIIWAVES_884-001.jpg
Hilma (Alford) Howard Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWIIWAVES_884-002.jpg
Chaplain’s Assistant Yeoman Second Class Hilma “Kitty” [Alford] Howard, US Navy WAVES, wearing the white service uniform, Naval Operating Base, Norfolk, Virginia, photo taken sometime between 1943 and 1945.
Hilma (Alford) Howard Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWIIWAVES_1160-001.jpg
Yeoman Third Class Virginia (Wolfe) Main, US Navy WAVES, wearing blue service uniform, location unknown, May 1943.
Virginia (Wolfe) Main Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWIIWAVES_1389-001.jpg
Group photo of SNJ aircraft mechanic Navy WAVES, location and exact date unknown, World War II.
Darlene (Davison) Ferguson Collection, Gift of Carol Parish, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWIIWAVES_1389-001.jpg
Group photo of SNJ aircraft mechanic Navy WAVES, location and exact date unknown, World War II.
Darlene (Davison) Ferguson Collection, Gift of Carol Parish, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWIIWAVES_2006-003.jpg
WAVE Photographer’s Mate Third Class Mildred (Hoffecker) Bingley, Naval Air Station New York, Floyd Bennett Field, New York, New York, July 1944.
Mildred (Hoffecker) Bingley Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWIIWAVES_2161-003.jpg
US Navy WAVE locker, WAVES Barracks, Naval Air Technical Training Center, Memphis, Tennessee, August 1944.
US Navy photo, Lorraine (Jaycyn) Dieterle Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection
WWII WAVES_2188-004.jpg
US Navy WAVES ironing their uniforms, Naval Air Station Key West, Florida, exact date unknown, World War II.
Virginia (Dremel) Riva Collection, Gift of Patfi A. Riva. Women's Memorial Foundation Collection

WWII WAVES_2188-004.jpg
US Navy WAVE disbursing clerk, Naval Air Station Key West, Florida, exact date unknown, World War II.
Virginia (Dremel) Riva Collection, Gift of Patfi A. Riva. Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWII WAVES_2188-008.jpg
US Navy WAVE, wearing summer service uniform, standing outside WAVES Quarters “L”
Virginia (Dremel) Riva Collection, Gift of Patfi A. Riva. Women's Memorial Foundation Collection

WWII WAVES_2369-001.jpg
Ensign Marlene A. Nelson poses for a photo next to a US Navy WAVES recruiting poster at the Delavan, Wisconsin, post office, 1943.
Marlene A. Nelson Collection. Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWII WAVES_2369-001.jpg
Mildred (Walenga) Amodeo Collection. Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWII WAVES_2790-005.jpg
US Navy WAVES, wearing the "tennis dress" and carrying their textbooks, pose for a candid photo during boot camp. Hunter College, the Bronx, New York, New York, World War II.
June (Hayes) McCallum Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWII WAVES_2994-001.jpg
Louisa (Norberry) Hilenski and 4 other WAVES on the shooting range, Naval Construction Training Center, Davisville, Rhode Island, 1943.
Louisa (Norberry) Hilenski Collection, Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection

WWII WAVES_3495-001.jpg
"Ready for trudging to class in the snow." Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1943
Ethel (Greenfield) Booth Collection. Women’s Memorial Foundation Collection
Shoshana M. Resnikoff
Lois F. McNeil Fellow
Winterthur Program in American Material Culture
Academic Programs Department
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