

# Danger!


## WOMEN AT WORK

by

STEVE KING

**The boss hired them with his fingers crossed.  
Now 900,000 women in America's war industries are bad news for the enemy**



 I STOOD with the two men in the brittle California sunshine outside the enormous spillway doors of the Vultee Aircraft plant and watched a new plane rolling off the assembly line. She was good to look at—slick, smart, saucy.

The younger man, the one with the wings on the collar of his army uniform, said approvingly, "Pretty as a woman, isn't she?"

The older man, the one with the workingman's badge on the breast of his white coveralls, chuckled. "She ought to be," he said. "Women helped make her." It was true.

We climbed to a catwalk in the rafters and looked down on one of the most fascinating factories on earth. It was as gay as a flower garden. Women in bright blouses and slacks were everywhere, doing everything. Blondes and brunettes and redheads, wearing all the colors of the spectrum. Young ones and—well, middle-aged ones. Mostly pretty. And every one eagerly intent upon her job.

I'd heard about women in factories, as everybody has. But somehow I'd expected to find them untidy, unfeminine, smeared with grease. But not these babies! Give 'em a minute to wash their hands and powder their noses, and they'd be ready to step out to a tea party—a California tea party, that is, where the gals wear slacks as a matter of course.

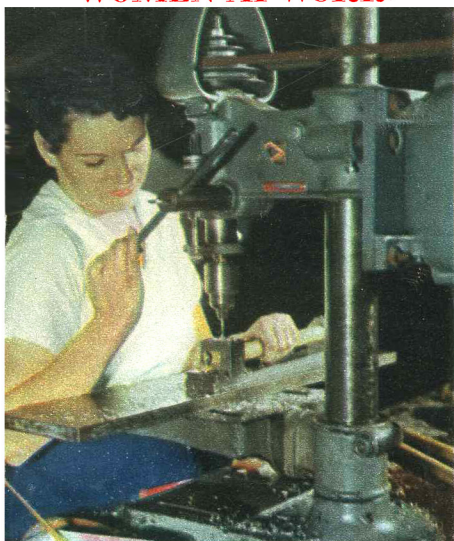
In spite of their smart appearance, they're doing a swell job of work. Vultee's officials are practically purring. They pioneered women in war industry, provided a practical laboratory for this significant war-time measure.

Today factories all over the country are putting women on assembly lines. With more than 900,000 of them now working in war industries, Vultee officials still boast that they employ more women in more kinds of jobs than any other war plant.

Nineteen months ago, when the first woman appeared at the hiring window, they thought she was batty. Everyone knew that women had no place in machine shops. They were awkward with tools; they were temperamental and couldn't be depended upon; wouldn't work at tasks which jeopardized



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*Alma Schwartz, former meat packer, has mastered the drill press. Supports two small children. Hopes to take flying lessons in spare time*



*Tops in experience is Blanche Patton, skilled aluminum welder. Learned welding in a 1918 war job, has handled a blow torch ever since*



*Virginia Alford, 21, quit work in a bakery to replace a man called up for service. Lives with mother and sister. Bowls and stars at softball*



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their fingernails or complexions; lacked the stamina for eight hours of unremitting labor. And they'd create a morals problem besides diverting male employees from their chores.

There was one thing the officials forgot to consider. That was the fact that a woman, when she gets hopping mad or when she senses a peril to the things she loves, can do darn' near anything. And frequently does.

But, even at that, women still might have been waiting out in the cold if it hadn't been for Uncle Sam. He began reaching into the shops and picking a man here and a man there for the Army. Others volunteered. By April, 1941, Vultee found itself facing a shortage of hands. Plus that, it had to step up production to handle the largest individual order ever placed by the War Department for military airplanes.

So, with many misgivings and purely for experiment, the personnel office hired 50 of the women who had been standing in line. They were given easy jobs, like filing and burring. Within a week 37 of them had graduated to more responsible tasks, and it was no longer an experiment. To everybody's surprise, possibly including the ladies themselves, they began piling out work as efficiently as the men they had succeeded.

**A**ND now what has happened, after little more than a year?

In midsummer, 19 per cent of all Vultee's shop employees were women. The percentage is rising. Nobody will be surprised if a full one half are women before long.

The number of men leaving for military service has trebled. That means 3 times as many new jobs opening up. Eighty per cent of those jobs are being dished out to women. That means that for every 5 men who leave, only 1 new man is hired; the other 4 replacements are women.



You'd think, just offhand, that no further proof of their competence would be required. heating takes about as much time as the welding. Blanche rigged up a gadget like an oven that delivers each piece to her torch ready to weld. Forty units used to be a good day's work; the afternoon I talked with Blanche she was on her second 100.

Or take Rebekah, who gave up a career as an interior decorator to make blind flying hoods. She has devised a method for making the hoods that saves each operator about two hours' work daily.

Some of the most valuable ideas have come from rank novices, women who never worked before outside their homes. To such a woman factory work is both a novelty and a personal challenge. She doesn't give a hoot how it has been done for years; if there's a better way she wants to find it.

**T**HE sixth original antisuffrage argument—that women are temperamental and therefore undependable—has to be divided into two parts, executives told me. The first part is true; they are, most definitely, temperamental. But that very fact, paradoxically enough, makes them ultradependable. They are so temperamental that they're ashamed to be undependable.

Foremen were the first to discover this strange fact. They noticed that most women, unlike many men, were never satisfied with a "good enough" performance. They'd fuss and fume, they'd talk to themselves, and

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*Ruth Baker used to sell lingerie, now assembles electric airplane starters. Experience operating her own amateur radio station got her this job*



*Esther Gumper, with spray, and Pauline Anderson paint a plane. Esther's husband is a painter. Pauline used to work in a dime store*



*Viola Mack runs a vertical mill. Married, she prefers factory work to housework. Also enjoys playing slide trombone in a girls' band*



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sometimes they'd cry. But when they turned out a piece of work it was perfect.

You'd think, ambitious and eager as they are, they'd all want to be foremen. The very opposite is true. I couldn't find a single woman foreman. Nor could I find a woman who'd say she'd prefer to be bossed by a woman or to be a boss herself. It was Marie, a former schoolma'am, who tried to explain this curious quirk:

"A woman needs a boss, but she has to respect him for superior knowledge and ability. Do you think any woman will admit that any other woman is smarter than she? Of course not! Women automatically resent orders from a woman."

And it isn't the pay check that attracts them, fat as these plane-plant pay checks are. I don't have to tell you why the Pearl Harbor widows are working, dry-eyed and grim and bitterly intent. There are other women with similar motives.

I remember a thin, shy girl on the final assembly line. She is married and has a small son. I asked why she was working. She found words difficult. "I guess it's because I want to feel safe," she said at length. I deliberately misunderstood. "You mean you want a safe job instead of something dangerous?"

That made her furious. "I don't mean that at all. I want to know that my home and my boy are safe—that everybody, the whole world, is safe!"

That's why they're working. And as long as American fighting men need planes to fly and guns to shoot, American women will be in the front line of production, pitching with everything they've got.

They'll continue to be strictly bad news for America's enemies.



*Josephine Waite went to the University of Omaha, has been a textile designer. Now wires fuse boxes for basic trainers. She's buying a house*

(continued)

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*Hessie Mae Moffit and Clara Stapleton, riveters, are both young mothers. Hessie, from Arkansas, used to pack vegetables. Clara is from Colorado*



*Marjorie Davis graduated from Pasadena Junior College to take a job in radio manufacturing. Now she does electrical subassembly*

**THE END**