

# 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



**WOMEN AT WORK**

*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*

## WOMEN AT WORK

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, but it remained for an earnest, solemn executive of the company to utter the final word. He stood in a gleaming boiled shirt one recent evening before a gathering of his fellow industrialists and spoke at length about women in war industry. It was his tag line that brought down the house:

"Women," he said, with a magnificent gesture, "are here to stay!"

But wait. It hasn't all been sweetness and light, peaches and cream. You can't just take a woman out of her kitchen, toss her into a factory, and tell her to go to work. Plenty of tears have soaked plenty of pillows since women went to work.

The first obstacle at Vultee, for example, was that many women *thought* they couldn't run big machines, hammer rivets, and operate hand drills.

I talked one afternoon to a girl named Sally, one of the hundreds working on the assembly line. All day long Sally clips metal clamps to tubing in fuselages. It looks easy, but isn't. I asked her about her first days at work.

"The foreman told me to start putting on these clamps. There's a trick to it; unless you start them right, they won't go on. The foreman showed me, but I was nervous and not very sure of myself and those darn' clamps just wouldn't snap into place. The harder I worked, the dumber I felt. All at once I started crying; I couldn't help it."

## WOMEN AT WORK

Sally's trouble was not mechanical; it was psychological, and therefore it was typical. What she needed was confidence. The foreman came back and patted her on the shoulder and told her it was his fault; he'd forgotten to show her the trick. That wasn't true, but it made Sally feel better. He gave her another lesson, this time more thorough. The clamps started snapping into place like magic, and they've been snapping ever since.

**T**HE second great obstacle was to induce men to accept women as co-workers. It was doubly difficult because Vultee insisted upon a single standard of wages in each craft, for men and women alike. Men were not crazy about that at first, and the women knew it.

The surprising result was a terrific surge of effort by all hands. Women, of course, worked hard to justify themselves. Men worked doubly hard to show up the women. One man, now a foreman, told me:

"When they put a woman on the next machine, it made me sore. I decided if a woman could do my job, it was too easy for me. So I turned on the steam. Know what happened? They gave me a promotion! Then I saw the light. The only way out was up."

Another unexpected result was that each foreman began to take a proprietary interest in the women who worked for him. I'm thinking now of a grizzled, case-hardened old-timer named Harry. When I first noticed him, he was explaining the operation of a machine to an eager, bright-eyed girl in trim pink slacks and blouse. Presently he gave her a paternal pat on the back and set her to work. As he walked away I cornered him and asked him how he felt about women in factories.

He gave me a level stare and didn't mince words. "I came home from that other war twenty years ago," he said, "to find a woman in my job. I said then and I say now that they're no damned good!"

I persisted, "Does that go for all of them?"

He took a backhanded swipe at a dab of grease on his nose. "Well, now," he hedged, "that's a pretty big order. Maybe not *all* of them. I've got a lot of women in my department, and they're not so bad. Of course, you understand, I broke 'em in right. That girl I was just talking to, for instance. I started her right, and now I'm giving her that machine. Give her a little time, she'll make a good hand. Good as most men, I reckon."

That's the way it goes. Many old-time foremen think women are no good—except the women in their particular departments.

**A**S FOR the women, don't think for a minute, just because they look so coolly efficient, that they're not using their noodles. They know that the old clinging-vine stuff works as well in a factory as on a parlor sofa. Listen to a cute little blonde named Irene:

"When a girl lets her foreman know she can handle the job without his help, she might as well go home and stay there. I manage to get into trouble once or twice a day, just so the foreman can help me out. That makes him feel manly and superior—and friendly. Men want their women to be efficient—but not *too* efficient."

Foremen have learned that women have to puzzle out new mechanical tasks for themselves. They learn best that way. Let's go back for a minute to Harry. I noticed he paid no attention to the girl he had started on the big machine.

"Mister," he explained, "never watch a woman when she's tackling a strange job. Tell her what you want done. Show her how

## WOMEN AT WORK

to do it. Then turn her loose. She'll deliver, or bust a girdle. If you stand around watching her, she'll go all to pieces."

The third great problem Vultee encountered was one they hadn't anticipated—clothes. No rules were formulated at first; a girl could wear what she liked.

Then the management decided all girls should go into uniforms. Mutiny reared its ugly head when they tried to standardize a coverall of serviceable blue denim. Blue-eyed girls adopted it—some of them—but those with brown eyes or auburn hair rebelled.

"I thought I'd go crazy," said A. R. Baish, employee service supervisor. "The gals were buzzing like a swarm of hornets. We soon realized that women just won't be standardized. They insist on the right to make themselves attractive, even at work."

So the company gave in. Some girls still wear coveralls, usually in light colors and soft fabrics, but most have adopted slacks and blouses. The reason they have to wear blouses traces back to a pulchritudinous lass named Betty. She had been a sweater girl before she went to work and didn't see why she shouldn't wear a sweater in her new job. She did, one day, and it wasn't ten minutes before the plant was demoralized—partly because men couldn't make their eyes behave, but mostly because the other girls were fairly steaming with indignation. Somebody sent a hurry-up call for Mrs. Irene Beaver, one of the three "women's counselors."

Mrs. Beaver told me, "I called Betty into a corner and tried to explain that the shop was no place for sweaters. 'I don't see why; men wear 'em,' she said. I pointed out that there were physiological differences, and she blazed, 'I can't help the way I'm made, and there's nothing about a sweater that interferes with my work.'

"So I took another tack. I complimented her on her figure and said regretfully, 'You're just too attractive, Betty. Suppose one of the boys looks at you instead of his work, and drops a punch press on his hand.'

"That did it. I borrowed a blouse from another girl and she put it on without a murmur. She was perfectly willing to co-operate on behalf of somebody else—a man, especially—where she rebelled at regulations that interfered with her personal vanity."

After that, slacks and blouses became regulation. They may be any hue or pattern, but not too tight. No jewelry, except wedding rings, may be worn, and high heels and open-toed shoes are also taboo.

The fourth big problem, the morals problem, proved to be no problem at all. The gals can take care of themselves adequately, thank you. A normal number of serious romances have flowered, and officials recently revoked a rule against employing husbands and wives (they can ride to work in the same automobile and save tires and gas), but very little funny stuff goes on. And that reminds me of Peggy.

Peggy looks like a girl off a magazine cover. Voluptuous, full-blown, she might be expected to provoke an epidemic of heart-trouble, and doubtless does. I asked her how she handled amorous advances.

"Oh," she said airily, "when a fellow whistles at me, I whistle right back at him. He doesn't know what to do next."

That's the attitude most girls have adopted—an easy, half-humorous camaraderie that begins and ends with the working day.

It was Peggy, by the way, who blasted another of those official fears—that women can't handle heavy machinery. She's a strong, capable girl. She went to vocational school for six weeks and learned to be a

## WOMEN AT WORK

riveter because, as she naïvely told me, "I wanted to do something important, and everybody said riveting was important." She didn't know a rivet from a trivet when she started, but at the end of her schooling she was ready for a job with Vultee. Her first day was nearly her last, because: "Do you know what they made me do?" she demanded indignantly. "Stick rivets into holes for somebody else to hammer!"

On her way to the dressing-room that afternoon she passed an enormous machine. She didn't know what it was nor what it did, but it was important-looking and made a ravishing din. Peggy told me, her eyes sparkling, "I began to pester the foreman to give me a chance at it. He acted like he hated me, but one night the regular operator didn't show up and he said I could try."

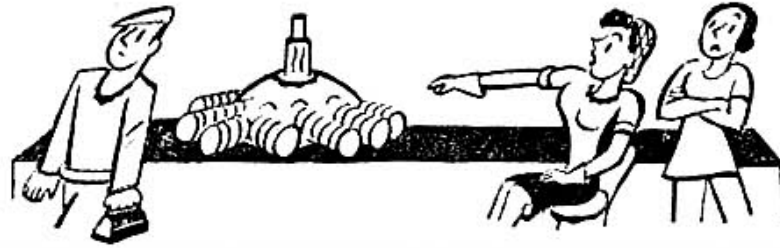
She still runs her big machine, to the consternation of experts who said a woman couldn't do it. Now, women run all sorts of big machines.

**O**THER problems vanished about as simply. For instance, at the outset, officials thought women would be restricted to repetitive tasks requiring no extraordinary brainwork. They've changed their opinion. About half the new ideas dropped in Vultee's suggestion box are from women.

Most of their ideas have to do with eliminating waste or speeding up production. They want to win the war quickly. There's Blanche, for example, a merry, comfortably built, middle-aged matron. She's a welder. She works with aluminum. Each piece she welds has to be preheated. For years men have been content to go along preheating the pieces with their torches, although the 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 sometimes they'd cry. But when they turned out a piece of work it was perfect.



## WOMEN AT WORK

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)

**WOMEN AT WORK**

*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*



**WOMEN AT WORK**

*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**