

# Review

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**Akers, Regina T. *The Navy's First Enlisted Women: Patriotic Pioneers*. Naval History and Heritage Command, Department of the Navy, 2019. <https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo120840>.**

That women served in every military conflict in the history of the United States is common knowledge—but that women performed duties other than nursing during the First World War may come as a surprise to some. Regina Akers, a historian with the Naval History and Heritage Command, describes the service of the more than eleven thousand women that enlisted in the Naval Coastal Defense Reserve during the Great War in *The Navy's First Enlisted Women: Patriotic Pioneers*. She also details the meaning of their contributions to the war effort both at home and overseas. By working as clerks, typists, stenographers, translators, cryptologists, messengers, and even designers of camouflage for ships, these women volunteers freed up men for sea duty and combat.

Akers begins her publication by outlining the history of women in war since the American Revolution, the existing societal norms, and the events leading up to WWI. She then highlights the leadership of Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, which was generally reformist and forward-thinking. Daniels did not challenge racial discrimination in the Navy; nevertheless, he welcomed the white women that enlisted into the Navy Reserve because the Navy had a pressing need for clerical workers.

Once the legality for women to enlist as reservists was established, a host of logistical and administrative issues had to be addressed, including designing uniforms, locating housing, establishing physical fitness standards, determining eligibility for certain military ranks and benefits, and even what to call the women. They were casually referred to as “yeomenettes” and “yeowomen,” but the official designation for them was “yeomen (F.,” and the (F.) indicated the yeoman’s gender was female.

Although admired for their efficiency and commitment, the yeomen (F.) encountered skepticism and even open hostility. Akers notes that most often the senior enlisted men resented the women reservists that were awarded the rank of chief petty officer without first serving sea duty. Among all

women wanting to serve in the U.S. Navy, minority women fared worst. Only fourteen African American women enlisted as yeomen (F.) because most were denied entry under a pretext such as flat feet (p. 43). Yet over time most men adjusted to the presence of women in the Navy. The women’s service was so valued that some women worked for the Navy as civilian employees after the war ended in 1918. But in the years following the war, the service of the yeomen (F.) was not universally appreciated. The women had to fight for recognition and benefits awarded to their male counterparts. For example, some Congressmen sought to exclude women in the Adjusted Compensation Bill, and it took aggressive lobbying by the American Legion to ensure that women were included in the act that passed. Some of the yeomen (F.) officers were initially given a less-than-honorable discharged simply because it was believed they would never reenlist. Following an official investigation, Secretary Daniels ordered honorable discharges be awarded to those who earned that designation.

Akers’ work provides a useful overview of the yeomen (F.) experience during WWI. Her narrative style is accessible and she avoids needless jargon. Readers will appreciate the thirty black-and-white photographs and illustrations, footnotes that include archival sources, and her suggestions for further research. A brief description for civilian readers regarding the difference between service in the U.S. Navy and the Navy Reserve would have been helpful. Her telling subtitle indicates her narrative’s emphasis is on women’s patriotic service. But a fuller account of the yeomen (F.) service might include accounts of women who were dishonorably discharged for cause or had regrets, reservations, or simply ambivalence about their military service. With that said, the historical record shows that the overwhelming majority of the yeomen (F.) indicated that they cherished and were proud of their time in the military. For them it was a transformative experience and it was one that laid the groundwork for expanded roles for women in the U.S. Navy.—*Kristine Stilwell (kristine.stilwell@ung.edu), Reference Services Librarian and Assistant Professor of Library Science at University of North Georgia*