

Veteran June Whitehurst

One Of Marines' First Women Helped Pave Way For Military Acceptance

BY MICHAEL STONE

It's 1942, or maybe early 1943, and in the basement of the Department of the Treasury in Washington D.C., June Whitehurst can't help but stare at an unfashionable older woman walking toward her.

The hair, the cotton hose, the dress, the flat shoes — all of it's "just terribly old-fashioned," Whitehurst observes. "I wouldn't have been caught dead in flat shoes. Even though I walked to work, I wore heels all the time.

"The only excuse I gave her was: It is wartime."

As the two get closer to one another, Whitehurst recognizes the face.

"It's Eleanor Roosevelt," Whitehurst realizes, surprised that the first lady is guard-less but figuring she had traveled through the underground connection between the treasury and the White House.

"And I'm still staring at her. I just can't help it. She looks so terrible. ... So she says hello to me, and I say hello back."

As a young woman at the epicenter of U.S. military and politics during World War II — and especially working at the treasury, which recruited celebrities to help sell war bonds — Whitehurst had several such famous encounters.

Actor Jimmy Stewart was signing autographs across the street when she first hopped off the bus, literally, that had carried her from her hometown of St. Joseph, Missouri.

"When [my friend I had traveled with] saw him, she about

went crazy," Whitehurst, 92, recalled from her High Springs home in the woods, a "Marine parking only" sign hanging from a tree. "And I said, 'Go ahead and go over there where he is and get his autograph, and I'll take care of our luggage 'cause I really could care less.'"

One day at the treasury, the comedic duo Abbott and Costello — of "Who's on First?" fame — was in a pack of celebrities that also included actresses Elizabeth Taylor and Greer Garson.

"The Marine Corps has opened its doors to women," she recalled the radio announcing. "And I can remember saying out loud, 'That's for me!'"

Costello "was, of course, acting a fool like he does on the stage," Whitehurst said. "And so he walks right into one of the big columns in the hallway there and then pretends to fall."

And at the Stage Door Canteen, where soldiers would be entertained before heading off to war, Whitehurst racked up more star sightings — including singer Al Jolson and bandleader Xavier Cugat — by working there at night as a hostess.



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But in a way, not from the stage or big screen but through patriotic trailblazing, Whitehurst established herself as a celebrity, at least to the historian's eye. She is one of the initial women in the Marines — and one of the very first to go on active duty — during World War II.

Altogether, after enlistment was opened to women, between 23,000 and 24,000 joined the Marines, responding to the slogan “free a Marine to fight.”

“If people say, ‘Well, what did women in World War II do? Why were they there?’ They were there to free Marines to fight,” said Marine veteran Nancy Wilt, a Colorado resident, the Women Marines Association’s historian and, through the organization, Whitehurst’s friend.

Wilt noted that the women’s 200-plus assigned positions were stateside office and training ones — things like clerical

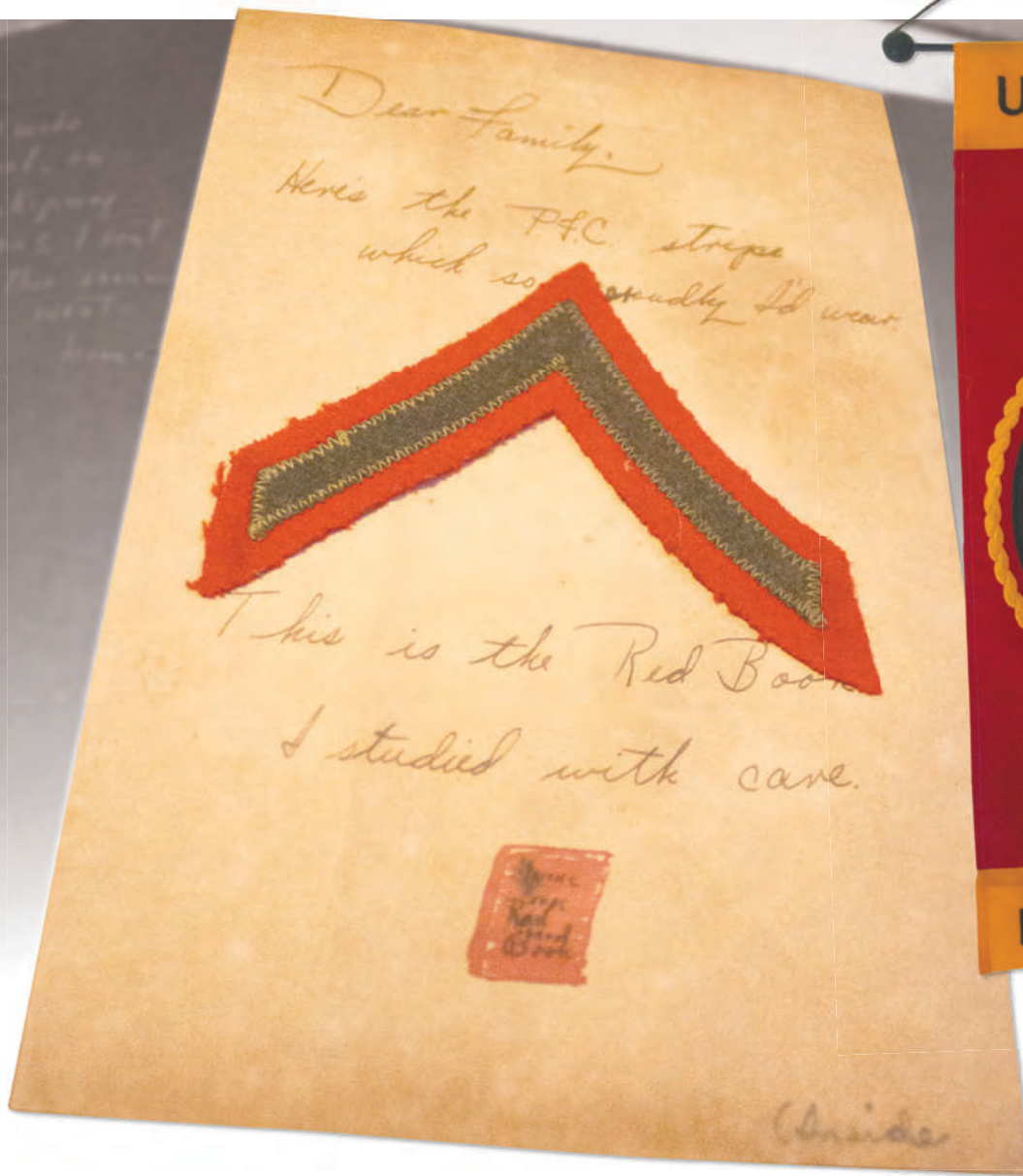
work, mapmaking, parachute rigging and Whitehurst’s eventual job: “link trainer;” the term for those who practiced flying planes with aviators in grounded simulators.

When Whitehurst arrived at Atlantic Field on the North Carolina coast, where she trained Marine pilots during the war, the link trainer Marine she was replacing showed her and a few other women around.

“He wasn’t happy with us, by the expression on his face, and his voice wasn’t cordial, shall we say,” Whitehurst remembered. “They were not happy that they were being taken out of their really good cushy jobs, safe jobs to be sent overseas.”

More broadly, “men didn’t want women in — the average American male,” Wilt said.

But infiltrate the U.S. military women did. An estimated 350,000 served during the war: in the Army’s Women’s Army



(Left) Whitehurst mailed her private first class insignia home to her parents when she was promoted to corporal. She would eventually be promoted to sergeant. (Top) A Marine banner hangs in Whitehurst's High Springs home.

Corps (WACs), started in May 1942; the Navy's Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), which followed in July; the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), launched under a different name in September; the Coast Guard Women's Reserve (SPARs), formalized in November; and the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, initiated on Feb. 13, 1943.

"The World War II women got us far farther in business and the new way of raising families," Wilt said. "It proved a lot of things: It proved that women could work and have families, [and] it opened up fields like crazy."

Graduating high school in 1940 at age 17, Whitehurst didn't start out with such sizable goals for the women's movement when she joined the war effort. She just wanted a job.

After Pearl Harbor pushed the U.S. into combat, she set her eyes on what was known as a "government girl" job in Wash-

ington D.C. at her father's insistence.

"Every woman should know how to make a living," her father, the owner of a Missouri business college and a veteran who had his arm nearly shot off at the French-German border during World War I, told her.

Whitehurst took the civil-service test in Kansas City on a snowy Saturday. She must've done well because three days after, she was told to be in Washington by Monday, to become an 18-year-old employee for the Department of the Treasury.

Her memories of wartime Washington include plenty of soldiers on guard duty; blackouts; the closure of certain places, such as the 555-foot-tall Washington Monument, possibly to prevent spying; and undependable public transportation, which prompted her to walk to the treasury from the nearby bedroom she was renting.



A local Missouri newspaper delivers the news that Whitehurst is one of the very first women to go on duty for the Marines. In part, it says: “She thought she would have time to spend a short vacation here with her parents before being called to duty. But she entered active duty six days (after joining) and received the rating of private first class her first day on duty.”

“I would wait half an hour or 40 minutes for a streetcar to go to work,” she said, “and then on the way there, it might catch on fire. ... So I thought, ‘To heck with this.’”

At the treasury, Whitehurst did mostly secretarial work, like records, filing and dictation. She held a high level of security clearance, leading to her being given the task of typing an inventory list of military items being sent to aid Russia under the Lend-Lease Act.

She enjoyed her work, there and at the Stage Door Canteen, where she’d talk and dance with soldiers about to ship out. “But I just seemed to be missing something.”

Whitehurst considered joining a military program for wom-

en, mainly the SPARs. But her real calling made itself known one morning in March 1943, a week before her 20th birthday, when the measles had her confined to home.

“The Marine Corps has opened its doors to women,” she recalled the radio announcing. “And I can remember saying out loud, ‘That’s for me!’”

Whitehurst had to wait a few days to meet the age requirement of 20, and right after enlisting during her birthday week, she bought a beautiful pink camellia she had spotted in a shop window.

That night, camellia in hair, she sat at a table with five Marines at the Stage Door and told them that she, too, was to be a

Marine.

The plan had been to start boot camp two months after enlisting, giving her time to wrap things up at the treasury and go see her family in St. Joseph. But one of the five Marines, a corporal who “knew just the right people,” asked, “Would you like to go on duty immediately?”

“And I said, ‘Sure!’”

The corporal suggested she go meet with a certain captain the next day, a Friday, and she was then told to be at women Marines headquarters at the Pentagon the following Monday at 9 a.m.

She and two other women started that day as privates, beginning their work directly under Maj. Ruth Cheney Streeter, the first director of the women Marines.

“[Streeter] had the bearing. She had the look of authority and the actions of authority,” Whitehurst said. “I was very impressed with her.”

Wilt noted the uniqueness of Whitehurst’s situation: She and the two other women went straight into Pentagon positions thanks to existing security clearances, and she went on active duty before the women Marines had even started their first boot camp.

“She was one of the firsts of the firsts,” Wilt said.

Whitehurst identifies herself as being one of the initial 80 women Marines in the war, and though Wilt has never come across the number 80 in her research, she said she believes Whitehurst’s number, especially in terms of active-duty status, is likely much lower.

Only seven women, including Streeter, started prior to the public announcement to serve in administrative roles for the women Marines, Wilt said.

So perhaps Whitehurst is in the top 40 or 50, she added, but “really, in my mind’s eye by what she has said, I truly feel she was sooner than that.

“She was at the right locale [Washington D.C.], she enlisted at the right time,



ABOVE: Photos show Whitehurst and a friend at a link trainer facility at Atlantic Field in North Carolina, and below them is a newspaper clipping about “Little Daisy June,” a Red Skelton character that Whitehurst said is named after her because her mom mailed the name into him.

BELOW: Whitehurst’s mom sent her a picture of a beautiful dress to tease her about the military’s drab uniforms.



“The World War II women got us far farther in business and the new way of raising families.”



Whitehurst poses in front of the Department of the Treasury, where she worked during part of the war. She's wearing a Marine armband to identify herself because uniforms for the newly formed Marine Corps Women's Reserve hadn't been delivered yet.

they were just starting, and I think they pulled her right away [without boot camp] with these other two women.”

They were pioneers in that they were among the first in the chain of women who have served in the Marines continuously since 1943, aided by a small number who remained after post-war discharges and, eventually, the Women's Armed Services Integration Act in 1948.

But they weren't the earliest overall. That title belongs to the 300-plus women who joined the Marines toward the end of World War I to do what the next Marine women did: take over stateside roles to free others.

While World War II women helped dispel workforce and

family gender roles, those in the first war earned women the right to vote, Wilt said.

“Because of the superior performance of women in all areas of the war effort in World War I, they had letters telling them how wonderful they were from the president and everybody,” she said. “And when [the issue of women's suffrage] came up, they said, ‘OK, this is what you say we did. Now why can't we vote?’”

For Whitehurst, there were some dots of sexism during her military career.

Two men who also worked at headquarters had set aside a stack of applications of women they felt weren't attractive

enough to be Marines. “There was nothing I could do [right then] because they were both sergeants,” Whitehurst remembered.

So she waited until the men left for the day to redistribute that stack into others to guarantee that the women would be sent off to boot camp.

Whitehurst also recalled a day when Streeter came into the office angry because she had just eaten a meal with a group of people who wanted women in the Marines to have an acronym, like the SPARs, WACs and WAVES.

“And I said immediately, ‘Well, I joined the Marine Corps!’” Whitehurst recalled, explaining that she thought an acronym would have diminished her position.

But overall, she said, military men treated their new colleagues with dignity. “The men were wonderful. They were very courteous, and they seemed happy to have us there. And they were very respectable.”

Whitehurst spent roughly a month and a half at headquarters, doing office work and participating in some of the initial decisions about the women Marines, like choosing a summer uniform from three finalists.

“I didn’t like any of them — the least of the three evils is what I’d consider [the one I chose],” she said. “Maj. Streeter often called the three of us women in there and asked us things about what would happen, what we should do.”

Then, in May 1943, the three left for boot camp at New York City’s Hunter College. Whitehurst said it never reached an intense level — sometimes marching, sometimes going to lectures, sometimes disassembling and reassembling an M1 Garand rifle but never firing it.

After finishing boot camp in July, she headed to Atlanta’s Harris Field to learn how to be link trainer — a job she’d then carry out for a year and a half at Atlantic Field, training new pilots and practicing with experienced ones.

At Atlantic Field, she met Marine Dale Whitehurst, an aerial gunner and Battle of Guadalcanal veteran, and the two married exactly eight weeks later, in January 1945.

Regulations prevented women from staying in while pregnant, so Whitehurst had to leave in April 1945, at the rank of sergeant. This gave her the chance to be with her husband while he was stationed in San Diego for the surrender of both Germany in May and Japan in August.



Whitehurst and her husband, Dale, pose with their first of seven children, Barney, who was born in late 1945. The Whitehursts married in January of that year, eight weeks after meeting at Atlantic Field. Dale passed away in 2000.

Following the war, the two returned to his hometown of Miami, where he worked as a telephone linesman and then as an aircraft-metal maker for Pan-Am airlines. Meanwhile, she cared for their seven children and eventually became a secretary at Southwest Miami High School.

The first and third children, sons, went on to join the Marines, while the second was a lead anti-Vietnam War protestor at Florida State University.

The Whitehursts retired to Arkansas in 1979 and then to North Central Florida in the early 1990s to be closer to their children still in Miami. Dale passed away in 2000.

Reflecting on the evolution of women’s role in the military, Whitehurst does have some reservations.

“I’m not jealous that they can be on the front lines, shall we say,” the grandmother to 12 and great-grandmother to 15

said. “I’m not jealous of that at all. And basically, I think the men who object to it are right because I don’t really think it’s a place for a woman.

“I can see some women doing a real good job of it, as far as that’s concerned, but just the thought — I just don’t think it should be.”

But wearing a large Marine pin on a purple blouse, Whitehurst said she’s proud of her service and glad she could fulfill her role to help win the war.

“I was very satisfied with my job in the Marine Corps,” she said. “I’ve led an exciting life — or I did some exciting things during my life, [I’ll] put it that way.” ■