

Riveting attire

‘Flying Fortress Fashions’ worn by women who built B-17s were both functional and popular

by Mike Lombardi



PHOTO: Mary Lucig examines stock from shop bins. The curved edge of her apron was not only a design element inspired by the shape of an airplane wing; it also helped prevent the apron from being caught in machinery. The chevron on the sleeve indicates a year's service at Boeing. **BOEING ARCHIVES**

This year marks the 75th anniversary of one of the most important airplanes in Boeing history—the B-17 Flying Fortress. The success of the Flying Fortress, and those who flew it in combat, made the airplane the symbol of American air power and made Boeing one of the most respected brands in the world.

But the story of the B-17 also includes the workers on the homefront who built more than 12,000 of the four-engine bombers for the war effort. One of the most famous icons of the war was “Rosie the Riveter,” a name proudly adopted by the millions of women who took up jobs at shipyards, armament factories and aircraft companies to help build the “arsenal of democracy.”

Women welcomed the chance to prove they could perform manufacturing jobs and the chance to contribute to the war effort, but there was some unease about leaving behind more traditional roles to enter the work force.

To ease the transition and make the workplace more inclusive, Boeing organized ride sharing and busing. The company assisted working moms in locating day care and provided work shifts that would allow mothers to be at home during the day. An extensive recreation program was put into place that helped all employees cope with the stress of work and war.

To design suitable and appealing work clothes for women factory and office workers, Boeing teamed with one of the country's leading custom fashion designers at the time, Muriel King, who returned to her hometown of Seattle to design a line of attire called “Flying Fortress Fashions.”

“I found these marvelous women resolute in their determination to do the job faster and better in every way than it has ever been done before.”

— Muriel King, fashion designer

King was known for her work in New York and in Hollywood, where she designed the personal wardrobe for movie actress Katharine Hepburn and also created costumes for movie stars Rita Hayworth, Margaret Sullivan and Ginger Rogers.

Even though King worked with Hollywood stars, when she was asked in 1943 who were the most interesting women of the day, King stated: “Unquestionably the women building our planes ... I found these marvelous women resolute in their determination to do the job faster and better in every way than it has ever been done before.”

Before starting her designs, King studied the work done at Boeing and consulted with female employees as well as safety officials (a number of accidents had been traced to apparel). Other concerns that needed to be addressed included functionality, durability and appeal. King said the task challenged her creative ability.

But King delivered a line of coordinated fashions that included coveralls, slacks, blouses, aprons and turbans for the factory and a “Flying Fortress” suit of

interchangeable slacks, skirt, jacket and blouse for the office. All were made of “Fortress” rayon fabric and cotton twills. The designs featured curved edges both for safety and to replicate the form of an airplane wing. The color selected was a gray-blue—Boeing women preferred blue and Muriel’s studies found that gray-blue hid dust and stains better than any other shade of blue.

A further enhancement to the Flying Fortress Fashions were emblems, intentionally similar to those worn on military uniforms. These included a Boeing insignia for the sleeve as well as four different insignia worn on the collar that represented the major divisions of the company.

To help with recruitment and to promote the new Boeing uniforms, Seattle department stores carried the Fortress Fashions line and set up window displays.

Purchasing the Fortress Fashions was voluntary. They became so popular an article in *Life Magazine* stated that they were being purchased as fast as the manufacturer could produce them,



and that they had become popular at other aircraft plants on the West Coast, including Douglas and Lockheed. ■

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PHOTOS: (Top) One of Boeing’s Rosie the Riveters wears a Flying Fortress uniform while working on the interior of a B-17 fuselage. **(Bottom)** Rosie the Riveters (from left) Violet Matson, Elaine Tosch, Katherine Cushing, Violet Waliinder, Elsie Clark and Vivian Speer show off the Flying Fortress Fashions on the wing of a B-17. Muriel King, right, teamed with Boeing to design the attire. **BOEING ARCHIVES**

