

Ruth C. Streeter - USMCWR

BLUF: Ruth Cheney Streeter was the first woman in the United States Marine Corps to achieve the rank of major. She was commissioned in 1943 and became the first director of the United States Marine Corps Women's Reserve. Over 23,000 women served in the Marine Corps as part of the Marine Corps Women's Reserve during World War II. Streeter was in charge of their training and fusion into the ranks of the Marine Corps. She was discharged from the Marine Corps on 7 December 1945 with the rank of lieutenant colonel. Streeter eventually was promoted in retirement to colonel and was awarded the Legion of Merit.

LEADERSHIP TRAITS DISPLAYED: Justice, Judgment, Initiative, Tact, Integrity, Decisiveness, Bearing, Courage, Unselfishness, Courage, Knowledge, Loyalty, and Enthusiasm.

SETTING THE STAGE: Ruth Cheney was born on 2 October 1895 to Charles and Mary Cheney. Her father was a successful banker in Brookline, Massachusetts, which allowed Ruth to grow up as a child of privilege. Because of her father's position in Brookline society, Ruth Cheney learned the social graces. She also learned tact and understanding for those who did not live in a privileged society. She attended Miss May's School in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, graduating in 1913. After acquiring two years of college credits at a local college, Cheney entered Bryn Mawr College in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, for two years between 1916 and 1918. Ruth met Thomas Streeter through family friends, with the couple marrying in Peterborough, New Hampshire, on 23 June 1917. Living in Morristown, New Jersey, Thomas became president of a petroleum company in 1925. Between 1918 and 1928, Ruth Streeter gave birth to four children, though she found time to pursue her greatest passions; social activism and airplanes.

One of the most important leadership traits that Ruth Streeter possessed was her enthusiasm to better others' lives in her community. She wanted to prove that women were influential leaders and should be taken seriously. Between 1917 and 1941, Streeter held many public health and welfare positions. She became the first woman to serve as President of the New Jersey Welfare Board in Morris County, NJ. As World War II loomed on the horizon, Streeter became more drawn to community defense organizations. In 1941 she became the chairperson for the Citizen's Committee on the Army and Navy for Fort Dix, NJ.

Ruth Streeter and Amelia Earhart were born two years apart. Their love of flight, however, bonded them together. There are no records that the two ever met, though Streeter admired Earhart greatly. In 1940 Streeter soloed successfully, earning a private pilot's license and flying with the Civil Air Patrol. At age 47, in 1942, Streeter received her commercial pilot's license. By 1943 she had three sons in the military, and she wanted to help with the war effort. Streeter applied for entry in the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program. Meeting with the program founder, Jacqueline Cochran, she hoped to gain a spot as a bomber ferry pilot. Her son Thomas stated that "She was pawing the air because she wanted to get in." Streeter, at 47, was considered too old to participate in the program. She made some very influential contacts in the government during the process, including First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. These contacts served her well as she pursued the opportunity of a lifetime.

In 1942, with the war industry gaining momentum, the Roosevelt Administration looked for more ways to get American women involved in the war effort. In July 1942, President Roosevelt signed into law, creating the United States Naval Women's Reserve program. Better known as "Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service" (WAVES), the program opened the door for more women to join the military. Most male government and military leaders opposed creating women reserve organizations, believing that they detracted from existing programs and drained needed

resources. Despite leadership's opposition to women reserve programs, the idea spread to other branches. In August 1942, Women's Advisory Council chairperson Virginia Crocheron Gildersleeve set her sights on the Marine Corps. The council interviewed 12 women for the leadership of a Marine Corps version of the WAVES. One of the women interviewed was Ruth Cheney Streeter.

THE STORY: With recommendations from business leaders like Chester Barnard, President of Bell Telephone, and WASP founder Jacqueline Cochran, the Women's Advisory Council recommended Ruth Streeter as Director of the United States Marine Corps Women's Reserve (USMCWR). Being sworn in by Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox on 29 January 1943, Streeter was commissioned as a major in the Marine Corps. This position was the first paying job that Streeter had ever held, earning \$200 per month with a \$15 per month housing allowance.

Major Streeter's primary responsibilities were recruiting, training, and coordinating women's activities in the Marine Corps. During World War II, the Marine Corps Women's Reserve had a peak strength of 19,000 women who possessed a multitude of skills. The most crucial role of women in the Marine Corps was to "Free a Marine to Fight." Women Marines served on every Marine Corps base in the U.S., including on the islands of Hawaii. Through the efforts of Streeter and her staff, she received permission in 1943 to recruit Native American women. Despite her strenuous efforts, she could never get permission from her superiors to recruit African-American and Japanese-American women.

From 1943 through 1945, Streeter traveled thousands of miles, visiting hundreds of cities and military bases. At the same time, she coordinated a staff at Headquarters Marine Corps to oversee the proper function of the USMCWR. Enlisted women Marines were initially trained at Hunter College, and the officers trained at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Seeing the need to create more cost-effective training, Streeter recommended that all women Marines train at the same location. Beginning in July 1943, all women Marine training was completed at Camp Lejeune. This change did not go over well with the male Marines at the facility. Eventually, their male counterparts referred to the women as "BAMs" (Broad Assed Marines). Streeter decided to improve the uniforms to combat this negative attitude, making them appear sharper in appearance. She also approved more rigorous physical training methods and higher standards of discipline. The negativity subsided significantly by 1944, as the female Marines proved they possessed the same fortitude and determination as their male Marines.

AFTERMATH: Despite the many challenges Streeter faced, she persevered, turning the USMCWR into an efficient and effective reserve program. Secretary of the Navy Forrestal praised Streeter for her "ability to organize and implement such a massive undertaking." Resigning her commission on 7 December 1945, Streeter was awarded the World War II Victory Medal, the American Campaign Medal, and the Legion of Merit. Streeter returned to the Marine Corps in 1946 and 1947 for temporary duty, being promoted to colonel in retirement.

QUESTIONS

1. What were the leadership traits displayed most by Ruth Streeter?
2. What was the U.S. Marine Corps Women's Reserve role, and why was it such an essential organization?
3. In what ways was Ruth Streeter the prototype for the modern Women's Liberation Movement?

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