

# Johnson, Ann: This Woman's War <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Ann Johnson: This Woman's War

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 11/11/2007. Copyrighted.  
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Ann Johnson has been a ferocious advocate for the state's elderly for more than 40 years. As the executive director of the Durham County Coordinating Council for Senior Citizens from 1966 to 1990, she was a national pioneer in developing senior citizen centers. During the Second World War, though, she was a different kind of pioneer. At her home in Chapel Hill, she told me about that extraordinary moment in American history.

**In Ann Johnson's words:**

I was in San Francisco at the World's Fair when World War II broke out. Shortly thereafter, my father, who was in the Navy Reserves, ordered us to come back to the eastern part of the United States because, we later found out, there were C

Her father had established a smelting plant called Schuykill Products in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. So we came back through Baton Rouge, and that is where I got a job going all over Louisiana teaching women how to weld so that they could g

In order to qualify for that job, I had to work in industry for six months. So I found a job with the Chicago Bridge and Iron Company in Baton Rouge. They're the ones that do these great, big high-octane gasoline tanks that you see way up in th

For six months, I pulled a cable with a welding package of rods and a little bench. Before the war, it was an all-male job. But there was a major, major recruitment of women into industry during World War II. The young men were all overseas.

They had to build me a little outhouse, because they didn't have any women before me. Plus, I had to become a union member! So I was the first woman member of the Boilermakers union in the whole United States!

When I began, there were not yet many women in industry there. But more and more and more women were getting into industry. This was happening all over the United States, that women were replacing men.

I learned to read blueprints first. Then I learned to rivet, and then I learned to weld. I also learned how to run a metal lathe.

That qualified me to work in the Vocational Education department for the state. At the shipyards in New Orleans, they were screaming and hollering for more trainees. They were building the Liberty Ships. That's where all our trainees went.

Because I had a degree, I was put in charge of three men who were very experienced welders. I was 21 years old! Of course they resented it. So it was a real learning experience about how to deal with relationships.

We went to all these small towns and crossroads teaching women how to weld. We had a flatbed truck, and they put three welding machines on each side of the flatbed. We would back that flatbed into a barn or, I think twice, we had to get a

Then we built cubicles on each side of the flatbed. We could teach six people at one time.

We had no problems recruiting women. Jobs were the carrot. These jobs in the shipyards were very well paying.

It was all women. They were mostly women that had never worked for pay, and mostly farm women. But they learned quickly. They were very well coordinated.

One of the more interesting places I went was Leesville, Louisiana, where you have Camp Polk. You also had the quarantine hospital there. That's where, when women were picked up and found to have a venereal disease, they could choos

These were usually girlfriends or wives who wanted to see their loved ones at Camp Polk as long as possible. So they followed them. And when they came to Camp Polk, their soldier had shipped out. They had no money, so they got into troi

We had a class for people from the quarantine hospital. Each day in the afternoon, the bus would bring the trainees for that class. They came with a matron, and she stayed and went back with them.

Well, one day, Dr. Kean, who was in charge of the hospital, said the matron is not well today. Should we call it off? Here I've got all these people leaning on me to send trainees to the shipyards. So I said, how about sending them and let's se

So he did. Everything was fine. The next morning, the matron is still not well. So they came again. But of all the days for the bus to break down, the bus broke down.

Now, Leesville at this time is wall to wall soldiers and bar after bar after bar. So the women on that bus collected money and, through the window, they gave it to a soldier on the street. He got them a fifth of liquor. They took it back to the hos

I was very lonely. Oh, my God, I never want to face something like that again. I did this for three years! In Leesville, for example, I had a room in the home of two elderly, unmarried school teachers, who, just as soon as the sun went down, pl

I didn't like it. I did not think about quitting though. I really felt as though what I was doing was very valuable for the war effort. And, unlike the way I felt during Vietnam and during this war which I do not support I really felt that that was a nece

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**Authors:**

[Cecelski, David S.](#) <sup>[8]</sup>

**Origin - location:**

[Durham County](#) <sup>[9]</sup>

[Durham](#) <sup>[10]</sup>

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