

YOU'VE HEARD OF "ROSIE, THE RIVETER" – NOW MEET A "REAL ROSIE!"

by Edith Emch

After a considerable amount of coaxing, Edith Emch joined me at lunch and she modestly shared her recollections when she, and many other women, contributed to the war effort 70 years ago. Her short anecdotal narratives of patriotism brought a glow of remembrances to her blushing face – a face that was a witness to, and a participant in, the Greatest Generation.

As told to Mary Ehrlich

The War Years

Raised on a farm near Elgin, Illinois, (youngest child in the Rosborough family), I found myself a high school graduate in June 1942 when WWII had been underway for six months. My two brothers had already enlisted. My eldest brother, Robert, became a sergeant in the U.S. Army Air Corps, stationed in London, England; my youngest brother, Glenn, served in the U.S. Army and was stationed in the South Pacific. With the men in the family having gone to war, my father and I worked together to keep the farm going. However, it was difficult for us because all qualified men had been drafted into military service. It soon became evident my father and I could not successfully keep up with running the farm all by ourselves. A decision was made to sell the farm and we moved into a house that had been built in town for my grandparents.

I started a short term of employment at the Elgin Watch Co. factory. I then, along with my sister Lois, responded to a recruitment effort by Douglas Aircraft Company. Douglas was building an aircraft assembly plant near Chicago, where they would build the C-54 troop carrier planes.

As a condition of employment, the potential new hires were given a physical exam. Subsequently, Douglas then provided technical training for the newly hired at the American Aircraft Institute (AAI) in Chicago. My sister Lois and I commuted from Elgin, Illinois, to the school on the "third rail" commuter train. However, we soon tired of this travel and we rented a room & board in Chicago. It was there that we learned the apartment building we lived in had reportedly been owned by Al Capone.

The technical training at the Institute included blueprint reading, layout, sheet metal fabrication, riveting, drilling, etc. The initial training of two to three months at the Institute was followed by on-site planning activities at the partially completed Douglas assembly plant in Chicago. During final completion of the factory building where we worked, large canvas curtains were temporarily hung at each end of the building to keep out the Chicago cold.

As I recall, administrative and supervisory management assigned to our plant were from Douglas-Santa Monica. The normal work schedule was eight hours per day, seven days a week.

However, it was mandatory for women workers to take one day off every two weeks. I do not recall the hourly pay. However, to further support the war effort, Douglas, with employee approval, deducted a sum of money from their pay check to purchase War Bonds. This purchase came in handy years later.

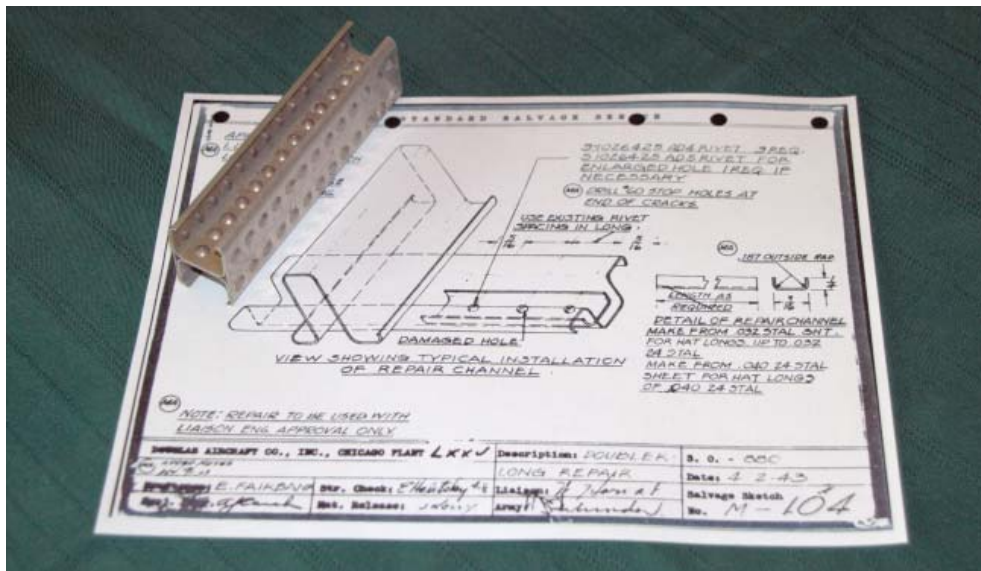
Douglas did not provide uniforms for employees. Instead, Douglas required workers to comply with clothing and attire requirements. This included women to wear slacks and, for safety, cover their hair.

At Douglas, aircraft assembly was accomplished at various work stations, in a team fashion: "Sandy" was the riveter and I was the "bucker." The buckler was on the opposite side of the aircraft skin, securing the rivet placement. My petite size and physical agility were key in performing the "bucker" task: climbing a ladder, crawling into the "fillet" of the aircraft wing and completing work to meet strict inspection standards. My hand/eye coordination (initially honed while working at the Elgin Watch Co.) also contributed to the "bucker" assignment. Quick individual response (as part of the team) was necessary when the urgent call "everyone off" was announced as the aircraft moved down the assembly line.

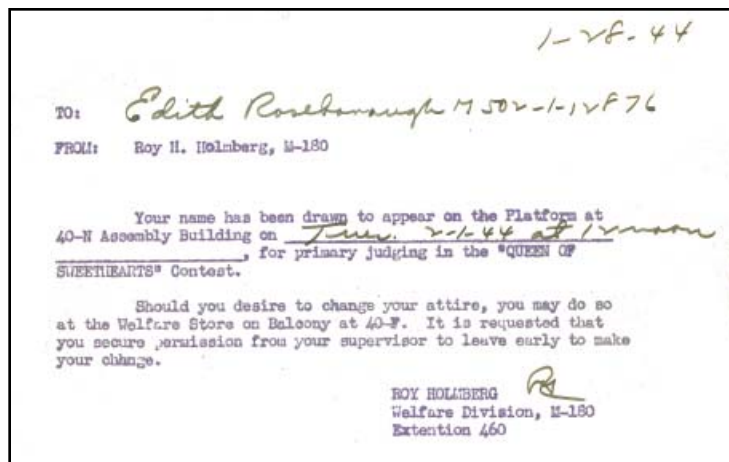
Another unique team task led to "Sandy" and I being named "Toilet Cadets" – installing toilets in the rear of the aircraft



The first production C-54 off the assembly line at Douglas Field takes to the air on its maiden flight. (Photo from the Des Plaines Public Library collection)



LEFT: The employees (most whom had never been around aircraft or manufacturing) were trained at the American Aviation Institute to read and interpret engineering drawings and basic manufacturing techniques such as this test specimen. This six-inch built-up part contains over 75 rivets. **RIGHT:** 1944 formal portrait of Edith Rosborough Emch. (All from the author's collection)



Edith's invitation to participate as a finalist in the "Queen of Sweethearts" Contest in 1944. (From the author's collection)

fuselage. My sister Lois (eight years my senior) became a foreman and she was assigned to the tail section of the aircraft.

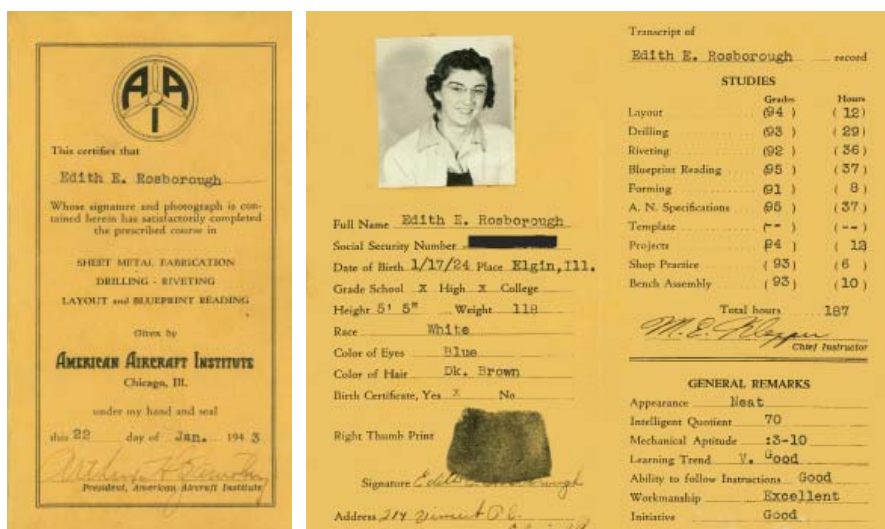
Douglas cultivated an environment to maintain high morale within a factory that operated three shifts a day, seven days a

week. The morale booster included the handing out of free cigarettes to all employees. However, because I do not smoke, I gave my cigarettes to my friends. Also, to assist workers, the company provided child care for employees. Social activities on site included a stage for live entertainment, dances, live orchestra, etc. One unique activity was a contest titled "Queen of the Sweethearts." (I was a contest finalist in 1944.)

I vividly recall how the entire plant workforce felt the thrill of watching the takeoff of the first completed C-54 aircraft at Douglas Field (this later became a part of Chicago O'Hare Airport). Interestingly, as soon as peace was declared, and as the military personnel began to be discharged, the "mission" for the C-54 troop carrier aircraft ceased. As the final C-54 came down the assembly line, and after I completed my routine tasks, I was "laid off."

It was a period of time in United States history where everyone worked together and contributed to the overall "good" of supporting the war effort! Attitude was positive! I cannot recall any complaints or employee turnover.

We had a job to do and we did it! ➔



Edith's certificate of completion at AAI showing her grades and studies completed. During her training at AAI, she completed 187 hours of instruction covering layout, drilling, riveting, blueprint reading, forming, A.N. specifications, projects, shop practices and bench assembly. She scored in the mid-90s in all subjects.