

Lyla Goes to War

It's not that I think we would have lost World War 11 if I hadn't done my bit—I'm just sayin'—

I was 14 when I signed up with the AWVS, the American Women's Voluntary Services. My friend, Suzy, and I, an inseparable team, were assigned to the Junior Division. Two afternoons a week, we collected tin foil and rolled it into balls—gigantic balls that would be recycled and used in parts for airplanes and other military equipment. Because our high school let out at 1 o'clock every day, in order to allow the army use of the building in the afternoon, we could work a full four hours, separating the foil from gum wrappers and cigarette packs, feeling terribly official in the snappy blue uniforms we were required (and happy) to wear when on the job or on parade.

Although the separation process was tedious, we were convinced it was of vital importance to the war effort. For all we knew, in some little corner somewhere on one of those B-17's roaring overhead, there was a Juicy Fruit wrapper that we, ourselves, had peeled. Talk about pride.

Working two days at the AWVS was very gratifying, but that still left us with three other days to give to our country. After much consideration, we decided to enter the labor market. So many men and women were in the armed services or working in factories, even high school students, who, in other times might not have stood a chance, were sought after by employers. Feeling it was our patriotic duty to help out wherever we could, we answered an ad in a local paper for the position of kindergartner.

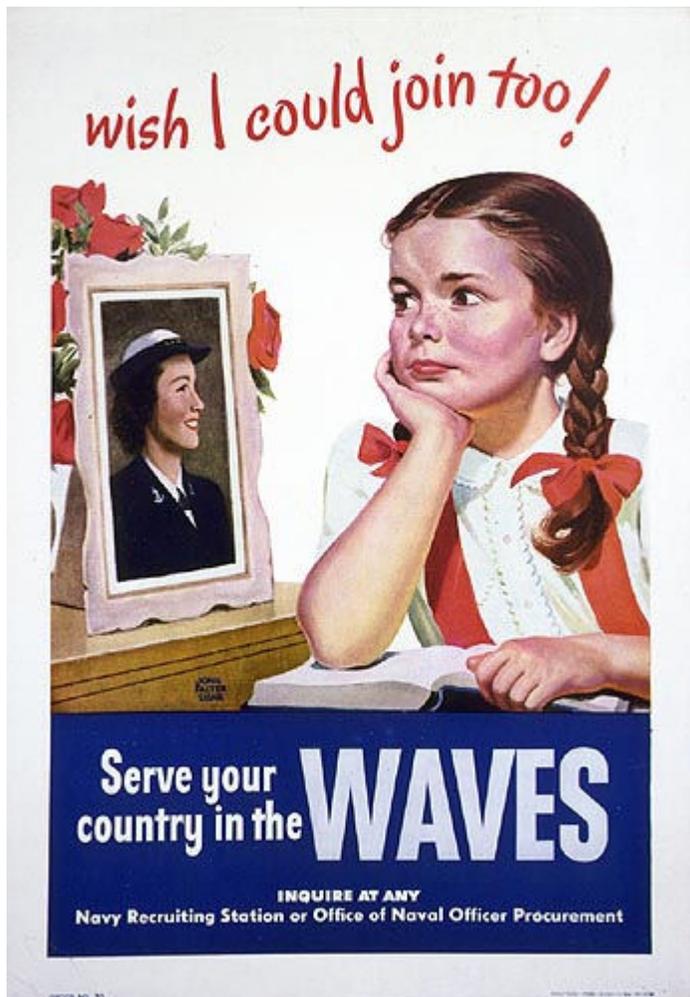
.A nursery school on the East Side, close to Hunter, needed two girls to take a class of 3 and 4 year olds to Central Park in the afternoon. We applied for the job--no references-- no experience—and were hired on the spot. The fact that the pay was only a couple of dollars a day probably dissuaded older girls from applying—to us,

that we were paid at all, just to take some tots to the park, was pretty exciting. We could hardly wait to begin.

As the youngest in the family, I had never been responsible for anyone younger than myself. The term “babysitting”, had not even come into being yet, so when we arrived at the school the next day and were presented with ten or twelve little children who needed help getting their coats on, I began stuffing arms into armholes without regard to cries of pain or “I want my Mommy.” I had been told to get six of them dressed; and by George, they were going to be dressed. I left no button unbuttoned. Meanwhile, Suzy using a softer approach—she had a younger sister—managed to get her six dressed and ready without any major incident, and when it came time for the tots to choose which one of us he or she would like to hold hands with, it was Suzy all the way. In fact, one little blonde, three year old, whose arm , unfortunately, had gotten stuck midway in her sleeve, looked up at me with steely blue eyes, and announced for all to hear: **”I don’t like you.”** Deeply hurt, but determined to carry on, I continued herding the others into a manageable line, and off we went. In any event, our employment lasted only a few weeks until one of the parents found out her child was being taken to the park with eleven others in the questionable custody of two fourteen year old girls.

Undaunted, I was determined to put all I had into winning the war, and one of the things I had was my sister who was old enough to join the WACs but to my great frustration had not shown any inclination to fight with anyone other than me. At fourteen or fifteen, I was still too young to volunteer; she, on the other hand, at

nineteen or twenty was the perfect candidate.



Because she preferred walking into The Stagedoor Canteen (she was going to be an actress and went to The American Academy of Dramatic Arts) to walking into a recruitment center, I did it for her. Somehow, I'm not sure how I managed it, I convinced a WAC in the Army recruitment office to come to our apartment and talk to my sister. Imagine my mother's surprise, when she answered the door and found a recruitment officer, in full uniform asking if she was the mother of June Blake, and if June was at home. Lucky for me, she was not, and after a long discussion, in which my mother tried to convince me that winning the war was not completely my responsibility, I let June off the hook, but only after she agreed to at least read the material the officer had left.

In 1944, the war was entering its third year and I was entering my sixteenth—I could finally do more toward the war effort than collect tin foil: I was old enough now, by our family's standards, to date, and how better to serve my country than to accept the invitation from Mrs. Kramer's son, home on furlough, to go roller skating at Gay Blades or Mrs. Cohn's son, just back from overseas, to go to the Paramount to see Frank Sinatra. This was the least I could do for our returning heroes.

And dating servicemen or former servicemen worked out well for me. In 1946, when Mrs. Ward, another friend of my mother's, asked if I would like to meet her son, Rusty, an Air Force Sergeant who was returning that month from Burma, I dutifully agreed, and five years later, ya da ya da ya da--we were married. End of story