

This Day in History... July 8, 1948

First Women Inducted into the US Air Force

Staff Sergeant Esther McGowin Blake raised her right hand in the very first minute women were allowed to join the US Air Force on July 8, 1948. Her enlistment did not make the Air Force equal overnight, but it marked a clear first step toward a permanent place for women in the nation's newest military branch.

Blake is often remembered as the "first woman in the Air Force." Her story, however, began before the Air Force existed as a separate service. During World War II, she was a widow and a civilian employee at the Miami Air Depot in Florida. Her two sons were already serving in combat. Her oldest son, Lieutenant Julius Blake, was a B-17 Flying Fortress pilot flying out of England. When she learned he had been shot down over Belgium and reported missing, she decided to serve as well.

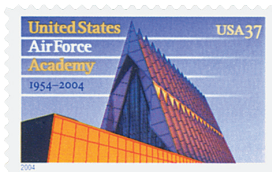
In March 1944, Blake enlisted in the Women's Army Corps. Her reason was practical and deeply personal. She hoped that by doing clerical work, she could free a male soldier for combat duty. In her mind, even office work could help bring the war to an end sooner. Her younger son, Lieutenant Tom Blake, flew B-25 Mitchell bombers in Italy and was also shot down later in the war. Thankfully, both sons survived and returned home with only minor wounds. Both were decorated for their service.



Issued to honor the role of women in the armed services, and shows women in uniform from the Marines, Army, Navy, and Air Corps.

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On July 8, 1948, the first day regular Air Force duty was authorized for women, Blake acted immediately. She enlisted in the first minute of the first hour of that first day. Eleven other women joined the Air Force that day as well. Blake's action was symbolic, but it was also the result of years of service. She was not a young recruit chasing adventure. She was an experienced servicewoman, a mother of two combat veterans, and a woman who had already worn the uniform during war.



The door opened wider in 1976, when 157 women entered the US Air Force Academy for the first time. Four years later, 97 of them graduated, including future astronaut Susan Helms and Janet C. Wolfenbarger, who later became the Air Force's first female four-star general.



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Blake served for a year in the Alaskan Division and was discharged in November 1945. She reenlisted in April 1947 and was later stationed at Fort McPherson, Georgia. By then, the US military was changing. President Harry Truman had signed the National Security Act in 1947, and on September 18 of that year, the US Air Force became a separate and co-equal branch of the armed forces. Until then, American air power had been part of the Army.

Women, however, still did not have a permanent place in the regular armed forces. During World War II, hundreds of thousands of women had served in organizations such as the WAC, WAVES, SPARS, Marine Corps Women's Reserve, and WASP. But most of those programs were wartime or reserve-based. Women could serve, but not on the same long-term footing as men.

That changed on June 12, 1948, when President Truman signed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act. The law allowed women to serve as permanent members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and the newly created Air Force. It also authorized the enlistment and appointment of women in the Regular Air Force. There

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Blake remained on active duty with the Air Force until 1954. After leaving the service, she worked as a civil servant at the Veterans Administration Regional Headquarters in Montgomery, Alabama. She died on October 17, 1979. In 1987, the Air Force Senior NCO Academy at Maxwell Air Force Base named one of its student dormitories in her honor.

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The WAF program lasted until 1976, when women were accepted into the Air Force on the same basic terms as men and the separate women's program ended. That same year, women entered the US Air Force Academy for the first time. Today, women make up roughly one-fifth of the active-duty Air Force and serve as pilots, maintainers, security forces members, engineers, medical professionals, commanders, and senior leaders. Blake's enlistment opened a door that many others would continue to push wider.



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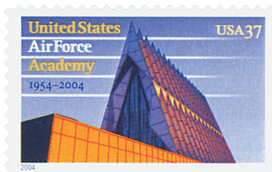
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