

# Remembering the Molly Marine statue and the women of the marine corps who served during World War II

By Barbara Kruse



Joanne Thornburg of Albany, Ohio, granddaughter of Barbara Kruse. Joanne is modeling Barbara's 1943 marine uniform

Let me first introduce my daughter Edith, her husband John (whose father was a Marine) and my youngest granddaughter, 12 year old Joanne. She is not wearing it (impersonation) but she is modeling my 70 year old uniform. Also, friend Jane who has been down here 7 or 8 times, working on some of the Katrina houses.

I especially want to thank Melanie and Patti for encouraging me to come back to New Orleans...it is GREAT to be back.

Now let me tell you how I first came to New Orleans. It was Dec 7th, 1941 when I was 18, in Manchester, NH. That Sunday afternoon my folks were out and I was listening to the radio and reading when the news came on that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. Where was Pearl Harbor and why was there such a commotion?

Shortly after, guys were dropping out of school to enlist in the services. For some reason, with the fellows that were joining the Marines, I was impressed. I WANTED TO BE A MARINE.

After I graduated from high school I started working for the New England Telephone Co. I enjoyed the engineering

aspects and the people I worked with, but I had been upset that 2 men who started working at the same time were paid more than I was. However, it was a job and I was paid well, but there was nothing about the job that held my interest.

Feb 13, 1943 the Marine Corps announced that they would be accepting women. One week later I was 20 on the 20th of Feb. and I couldn't wait to go to the recruiting office to enlist. I needed my parents' consent...and it never occurred to me that I wouldn't be accepted.

April 19, then Bunker Hill Day, now Patriot's day, I went to Boston for my physical and paper work....and no stores or restaurants were open. The young Navy doctor looked at this naive young girl from NH and asked "Are you sure you want to do this"? More than ever I was committed. Had no idea where I'd be going or what I'd be doing, but I wanted to be a Marine.

In early June I left for Hunter College...Camp LeJeune wasn't yet ready for us. We marched and marched; up to the 6th floor and down, marched to class and marched to meals. Our DI wasn't happy with his assignment, and I think his goal was to see how many of us he could break down and want to go back home. At the time, I think the men considered us a passing fad, and after the war was over, we'd be gone. (little did they know or understand the power of women.) I had been slated for link training school and that was crossed out and Recruiting and Enlistment was written in. Not until we were leaving did I know that I was on the way to New Orleans.

There was no question as to where I would be living. A lady had a big house out at 5836 Prytania St and her family was grown and gone, so she rented out bedrooms to women Marines. We'd take the St Charles streetcar into town. Only place I remember having breakfast was Morrison's. Of course there was Arnauds and Antoinettes but we couldn't afford those meals. But, on occasion we would go to one of them for dessert on a special occasion.

The office was in the federal building at 611 Gravier. It was plain that the men weren't happy having women in the Corps, but they had been brought up to respect women, so they were a delight to work with. We worked long hours- 17 year olds were volunteering and others were draftees from every walk of life, and it was urgent that these men



Barbara and Joanne at the Molly Marine statue in New Orleans

leave as soon as possible for boot camp in Calif. Sure there were times when we would complain, but patriotism was everywhere and we were contributing our service and talents.

Charlie Gresham was our public relations person. He had a friend, Enrique Alfarez who was a sculptor and he spoke to him about sculpting a statue of a woman Marine. The main model wasn't a Marine, (she was a professional model) but 4 of my friends modeled part time for the face, fingers, legs, etc.

Came Nov 10, 1943 and the men didn't show any pride, but at the Marine Corps ball that evening, I don't remember any celebrating, but the newspaper mentioned that the statue was unveiled and showed the picture their reporter had taken. Charlie took me over to the statue, probably the next morning, and that is when he took my picture, standing in front of, and looking up at Molly. On the front are the words FREE A MAN TO FIGHT. I have no idea when or who named the statue Molly. It bothers me now that when talking to personnel at the Visitors' Center, or looking through the Guide, no one seems to know about Molly or who she is, or that she's at Canal and Elk Place. One person mentioned that she often passed that corner, but she never knew of the statue.

One fellow in the office, Vincent Giangrosso (whom we called Grosso) would often get upset and swear a bloody streak. Then we found out he wasn't swearing, but talking Italian.

Both a fuzzy but vivid memory was going to the Higgins Plant. It was a special event with Marines attending and celebrating the Landing Craft. Must have been Sept 1943 for I have a copy of the Eureka, the news magazine. We were treated royally.

Very often I'm asked if I served overseas. Of course...I served in Algiers. There was an R and R base there that had several horses. Evidently the men didn't often ride them, so we were welcomed to go over Sunday afternoons to ride the horses down the levees. The first time, about 6 of us were all being interviewed to see how much experience we had. Not that I was that much of a horsewoman, but evidently I had more experience than the others. There was a lot of procrastinating going on and I was anxious to get started.

The horse was brought forward for me. He reared once and then settled down...the best riding horse I'd ever ridden. What bothered me was that Capt Brinkeroff spent so much time near me...why wasn't he more concerned about the other women who had less experience. Anyway, it was a pleasure riding with the group. Only when we returned to the stables did I learn my horse wouldn't let anyone mount him in the morning. We only went to Algiers 4 or 5 times, and I'm sure I asked for that horse. But my only clear memory is that first day.

I have so many memories and pictures of New Orleans...ferry to Donaldson to parade, bougainvillea, poinsettias etc. I was only there 9 months before being transferred to Okla. City...but that is another story.

When I joined the Marines, it was to Free A Man to Fight. I had no clue that joining the military would parlay into so many opportunities. I was proud to be a Woman Marine, and I'm still proud to be a Woman Marine, and yes, I am forever grateful.

Thank you...it's so nice to come back in New Orleans.



Barbara with a miniature replica of Molly