

AFEHRI File 19-10

**Research Materials/Source Documents
ENLISTED FIRSTS**

FILE TITLE: 1st Woman in Air Force: SSgt Esther McGowin Blake

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative *G. Akin* date 21 Oct 97

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Director

Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute







Mrs. Esther McGowin Blake has the distinction of being the "First Woman in the Air Force". She enlisted in the first minute of the first hour of the first day regular Air Force duty was authorized for women on July 8, 1948.

Service in the Nation's Air Forces, however, even then was nothing new for Mrs. Blake. Her active military career began in 1944 when she, a widow of the late J. O. Blake, joined her sons in uniform of the Army Air Forces. The occasion which caused her to close her desk as a civilian employee at Miami Air Depot and join the Women's Army Corps (WAC) was receipt of notification that her elder of two sons, Lt. Julius Blake, a B-17 pilot out of England, had been shot down over Belgium and was reported missing. Her younger son Lt. Tom Blake, who later shared a similar experience, was serving in B-25 Medium Bombers in Italy.

At the time Mrs. Blake was quoted in the Miami Herald as saying that her reason for joining the WAE's was the hope of helping free a soldier from clerical work to fight, thus speeding the end of the war. "If I can do this," she said "My efforts will be worth while."

During the months and years that followed, Mrs. Blake saw both of her sons return from combat with only minor wounds and much decorated.

She saw service not only in many bases throughout the United States but also in Alaska and the Yukon Territory near the Aleutians.

She separated from service briefly and returned to her civilian job in Miami in the mid-40's. She heeded a recall for women in service and returned to an Army assignment at Ft. McPhearson, Atlanta, Georgia. It was during this assignment that the Air Force became a separate branch of the service and women in Air Force were authorized.

She remained active with the Air Force until 1954 when she separated from the service due to a disability and went to work with the U. S. Civil Service at the Veterans Regional Headquarters here in Montgomery.

A few years back she fully retired and has lived in the City until a recent illness required nursing home care for rest and recuperation.

Her elder son Julius and his family live in Tampa, Florida, where is is the Assistant Treasurer and National Sales Manager for the Havea-Tampa Cigar Corporation.

Her son Tom and his family are Montgomerians. He is the Executive Vice President of the Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce.

17 Oct 77

ESTHER M. BLAKE

MRS. ESTHER MCGOWIN BLAKE HAS THE DISTINCTION OF BEING THE "FIRST WOMAN IN THE AIR FORCE". SHE ENLISTED IN THE FIRST MINUTE OF THE FIRST HOUR OF THE FIRST DAY REGULAR AIR FORCE DUTY WAS AUTHORIZED FOR WOMEN ON 8 JULY, 1948.

SERVICE IN THE NATION'S ARMED FORCES, HOWEVER, EVEN THEN WAS NOTHING NEW FOR MRS. BLAKE. HER ACTIVE MILITARY CAREER BEGAN IN 1944 WHEN SHE, A WIDOW OF THE LATE J. O. BLAKE, JOINED HER SONS IN UNIFORM OF THE ARMY AIR FORCES. THE OCCASION WHICH CAUSED HER TO CLOSE HER DESK AS A CIVILIAN EMPLOYEE AT MIAMI AIR DEPOT AND JOIN THE WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS (WAC) WAS RECEIPT OF NOTIFICATION THAT HER ELDER OF TWO SONS, LT. JULIUS BLAKE, A B-17 PILOT OUT OF ENGLAND, HAD BEEN SHOT DOWN OVER BELGIUM AND WAS REPORTED MISSING. HER YOUNGER SON, LT TOM BLAKE, WHO LATER WAS ALSO SHOT DOWN, WAS SERVING IN B-25 MEDIUM BOMBERS IN ITALY. AT THE TIME MRS. BLAKE WAS QUOTED IN THE MIAMI HERALD AS SAYING THAT HER REASON FOR JOINING THE WACs WAS THE HOPE OF HELPING FREE A SOLDIER FROM CLERICAL WORK TO FIGHT, THUS SPEEDING THE END OF THE WAR. "IF I CAN DO THIS," SHE SAID, "MY EFFORTS WILL BE WORTH WHILE."

DURING THE MONTHS AND YEARS THAT FOLLOWED, MRS. BLAKE SAW BOTH OF HER SONS RETURN HOME FROM COMBAT WITH ONLY MINOR WOUNDS AND MANY DECORATIONS.

SHE SAW SERVICE NOT ONLY IN MANY BASES THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES BUT ALSO IN ALASKA AND THE YUKON TERRITORY NEAR THE ALEUTIANS. SHE SEPARATED FROM SERVICE BRIEFLY AND RETURNED TO HER CIVILIAN JOB IN THE MID-40s; HOWEVER, SHE HEEDED A RECALL FOR WOMEN IN SERVICE AND RETURNED TO AN ARMY ASSIGNMENT AT FORT MCPHEARSON, ATLANTA, GEORGIA. IT WAS DURING THIS ASSIGNMENT THAT THE AIR FORCE BECAME A SEPARATE BRANCH OF THE SERVICE AND WOMEN IN THE AIR FORCE WERE AUTHORIZED. SHE REMAINED ACTIVE WITH THE AIR FORCE UNTIL 1954 WHEN SHE SEPARATED DUE TO DISABILITY AND WENT TO WORK WITH THE CIVIL SERVICE AT THE VETERANS REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS HERE IN MONTGOMERY.

MRS. ESTHER BLAKE, THE FIRST WOMAN IN THE AIR FORCE, PASSED AWAY 17 OCTOBER, 1979.

Son Missing In Action, So Mother Joins WACs

Miami, Mar. 23-1944.
The day she got the word that her son was missing in action, Pvt. Esther M. Blake closed her desk at the Air Service Command, Miami, where she had worked for nearly a year, and marched out to enlist in the Women's Army Corps.

The missing hero was Lt. Julius

O. Blake, first pilot on a Flying Fortress lost on the first all-American raid over Germany.

Pvt. Blake stated that she is merely "keeping up family traditions." She has seven nephews, two sons and one niece enlisted in the service. In addition to her son, Lt. Julius Blake, two of her nephews, Jack Blake, who crashed in Sicily, and Tom Blake, who was killed in a training accident in Miami, also are casualties of this war.

Lt. Thomas L. Blake, her youngest son, is serving as officer of bomber groups at an Italian base. He has earned the Air Medal and six Oak Leaf clusters during his career as bombardier-navigator.

NEPHEWS ARE FLYERS

Her five surviving nephews also are in the air force. First Lt. T. R. Carmack, while flying fuel on the Indo-China run over the Burma road, was shot down with his crew, all of whom were rescued 35 days later in the jungles. When Lt. Carmack recovered he was returned to his run, and again shot down with all his crew. He is now hospitalized in India.

A niece of Pvt. Blake is a battalion commander with the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, stationed at the University of Oklahoma at Norman.

Pvt. Blake now is completing her five weeks' basic instruction at

Fort Oglethorpe, Ga., after which she will be assigned to one of the many types of jobs at an Army port, camp or station in this country or abroad, where WACs are supplementing the work of the armed forces.

She is a graduate of Southern college, Camp Hill, Ala., and of the Florida Business university, Lakeland. For three years she acted as secretary to the manager of the Hotel Lakeland Terrace at Lakeland. She also held the post of secretary for the War Manpower Commission in Miami.

Asked why she gave up a good job to enlist in the Women's Army Corps, Pvt. Blake replied, "I want to do what my son was trying to do . . . what he wants to be doing now."

With son Missing, Woman Joins WACS

LAKELAND, March 29.—(Special.)

—Mrs. Esther M. Blake, former Lakeland who has one son missing in action, another son overseas, and who has had two nephews killed in action, has given up her job at the trained testing section of the Miami air depot and enlisted in the air WACS.

Her son, Second Lieut. Julius O. Blake, Flying Fortress pilot based in England, was reported missing following an operational mission on March 6. Her other son, Lieut. Thomas L. Blake, is serving with a bomber group in Italy. Both daughters-in-law are doing work connected with the army air forces.

Mrs. Blake Joins Sons In Uniform

*Air WAC Training
Awaits Volunteer*

JOINING her sons in uniform is Mrs. Esther M. Blake, 11 S. E. Seventh st., who this week was accepted here for Air WAC training.

Mother of Lts. Julius O. Blake and Thomas L. Blake, both overseas, Mrs. Blake decided to close her desk in trainee testing section of Miami Air Depot for the duration because "if I am freeing a man to fight, thus speeding the end of the war, I think my efforts will be worth it."

Mrs. Blake attended Southern college in Camp Hill, Ala., and has two brothers living in that state.

NINE IN SERVICE

Two nephews now are missing from communication forwarded to her from England, Mrs. Blake has reason to believe that her son, Julius, first pilot on a Flying Fortress with the Eighth Air Force, also is missing.

Two nephews have paid the supreme price and, from communication forwarded to her from England, Mrs. Blake has learned her son, Julius, first pilot on a Flying Fortress with the Eighth Air Force, failed to return from an operational mission March 6.

Meanwhile, his wife continues to do her share on the homefront, working for a bomber range at Avon Park.

Lt. Thomas L. Blake is serving as officer of bombing groups at an Italian base. He has earned the Air Medal and six Oak Leaf Clusters during his career as a bombardier navigator.

His wife also is engaged in war work, handling bills of lading on cargo bound from Miami Air Depot to Army outposts.



Official AAFIC Photo

MRS. ESTHER M. BLAKE CLOSES DESK FOR DURATION

SEPTEMBER 9, 1948

FIRST WAF



S-Sgt. Esther Blake

JOINED WAF IN INITIAL MINUTE

S-Sgt. Esther Blake of the S-4 section of the air base group at Greenville Air Force Base probably was the first WAC in the United States Army to be enlisted in the United States Air Force in the status of a WAF. She was enlisted in the first minute of the first hour of the first day regular Air Force Duty was authorized for women in July. 57-8-1944

Sergeant Blake was sworn in with a group of 11 other women at Fort McPherson, near Atlanta, but all the others remained in the ground forces.

She originally enlisted in March, 1944, in Miami in the Air Force, served one year in the Alaskan division and was discharged in November, 1945. She reenlisted in April, 1947, and was assigned to the ground force but seized the first opportunity to return to the Air Force.

She has two sons who served in the Air Force and now are members of the Air Force Reserve. First Lt.

Julius Blake was a pilot who was listed as missing for nine months in Germany and First Lt. Thomas Blake who flew 50 missions in North Africa and Italy.

STAFF SERGEANT
ESTHER MCGOWIN BLAKE

"THE FIRST WOMAN IN THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE"



DEDICATION OF
THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE SENIOR NCO ACADEMY
STUDENT DORMITORY
AS
BLAKE HALL
1 OCTOBER 1987

HONOREE



"FIRST WOMAN IN THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE"

MRS ESTHER MCGOWIN BLAKE

1897 - 1979

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HONOREE

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She remained active with the Air Force until 1954 when she separated from the service due to a disability and went to work with the U. S. Civil Service at the Veterans Regional Headquarters here in Montgomery.

Mrs Blake, the first woman in the United States Air Force passed away 17 October 1979.

Her elder son Julius is now deceased. His family lives in Tampa, Florida.

Her son Tom and his family are Montgomerians. He is the Executive Vice President of the Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce.

PROGRAM

DEDICATION CEREMONY

BLAKE HALL

1 OCTOBER 1987

The Air University Ceremonial Band	0945
Dedication Party Arrival	1000
Honors	Air University Ceremonial Band
National Anthem	Air University Ceremonial Band
Invocation	Chaplain, Major, Jerold L. Preston
Introduction of Guests	CMSgt Jeffrey L. Milligan Master of Ceremonies
Opening Remarks	Colonel Mark J. Dierlam Commander, 3800 Air Base Wing
Commander's Address	Lieutenant General Truman Spangrud Commander, Air University
Plaque Unveiling	Lieutenant General Truman Spangrud Mr Tom Blake
Dedication Acceptance Address	Mr Tom Blake Executive Vice President, Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce
Air Force Song	Air University Ceremonial Band

SOCIAL

Guests are invited to enjoy refreshments and Hor d'oeuvres at the Gunter Air Force Station NCO Club following the ceremonies.

MENU

Finger Sandwiches

Vegetable Tray

Mixed Nuts

Cheeseball and Crackers

Chips and Dip

Deviled Eggs

Franks -n- Basket

Mints

Melon Basket

Chicken Nuggets

Coffee

Punch

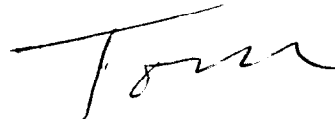
April 22, 1970

Mrs. Taylor Morrow
Montgomery Baptist Hospital
Montgomery, Alabama

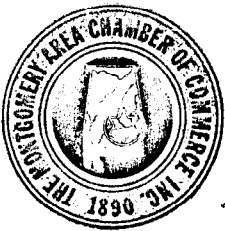
Just a Note. . . . Mrs. Morrow,

. . . to say I hope that the enclosed information and the picture you requested will be helpful. The picture was made during an interview a few years back by a Maxwell AFB WAF when they were preparing an article for the Air Force Times publication. The article definitely established her as being "The First Woman in Air Force".

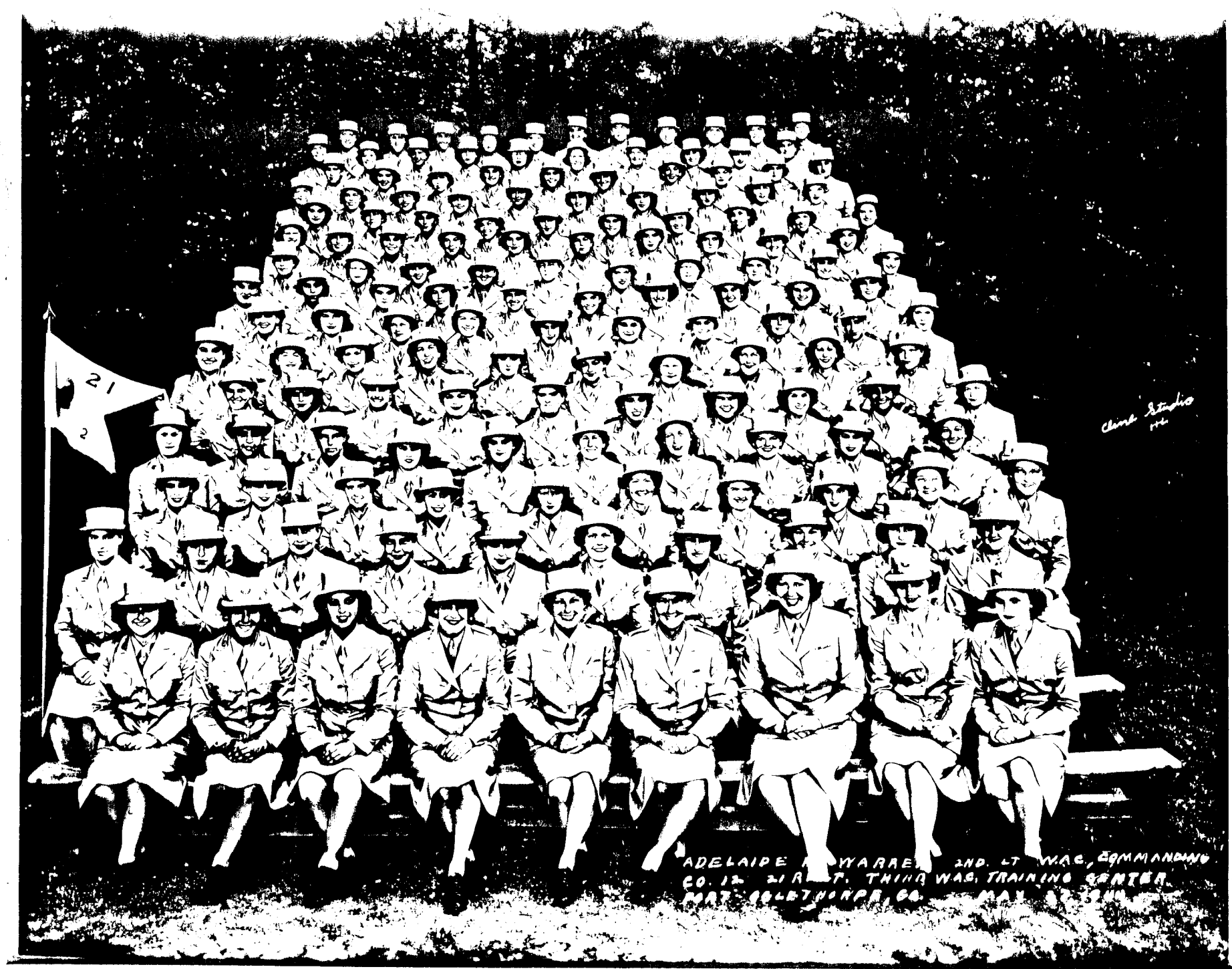
Sincerely,



THOMAS L. BLAKE
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
MONTGOMERY AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



*Please "crop" picture
any way you
want. I don't
mind it being
cut up. If you use it
whole, please return it upon completion. B*



ESTHER M. BLAKE
(ROW 11, SECOND FROM LEFT)