Lipstick and Steel-toed Boots

A REAL LIFE WINNIE THE WELDER RECALLS HER WWII ADVENTURES

A real life Winnie the Welder, Peggy Citarella gives her best Rosie the Riveter pose.

BY KRISTIN D'AGOSTINO

The melancholy cry of gulls; the crackle of sparks; the *click clack* of work boots on a ship's deck. These sounds play like a familiar song in the mind of 98-year-old Peggy Citarella when she recalls her days as a welder in the Charlestown Navy Yard in the 1940s.

Peggy Citarella welding during World War II.

On a recent visit to her home in Burlington, Vermont, Citarella beams from beneath perfectly coifed white curls as she shares photos from her welding days. A closer look reveals that seven decades haven't dimmed the radiant smile of the twenty-one-year-old girl in coveralls, her dark hair curled into a pageboy, a welding gun clutched in her gloved hand. The story is one she's told many times throughout the years.

One day, while working at a candy factory near her home in Somerville, Massachusetts, Citarella, then just twenty years old, restlessly scanned

A depiction of "Winnie the Welder."

the 'Help Wanted' ads for a better paying job. "I kept seeing the word *welder* in the men's section," she recalls. "I looked it up the dictionary, and it sounded interesting."

Hopping a bus for Boston, Citarella searched for a welding class at one of the area technical schools. She chuckles when she recalls these visits. "Nobody would let me enroll for a class," she says. "One time I heard a man say '*Tell her to go and buy a cookbook!*'"

Finally, one afternoon she found herself at a drugstore counter where she asked the clerk for directions to the Newton Trade School. Ironically, the school's welding instructor Tony Arno was having lunch a couple seats away. The clerk introduced them, and Arno offered her a ride to school. "When we got inside, he told me the cooking class was down the hall," she says. Upon learning that she wanted to study welding, Arno replied, "Welding is a man's job … dirty, repetitive, and dangerous. Nice, ordinary girls don't learn how to weld."

Citarella tartly replied that she *was* nice, but she certainly was *not* ordinary. A week later she'd won herself a spot among the men in Arno's small, but lively evening class.

Citarella soon discovered she had a knack for welding. She relished working with her hands and the feeling of joining two pieces of metal into one. Soon, Arno began complimenting her work and asking her to assist other students. Within five months, Citarella was asked to teach her own class. When she stepped in, enrollment soared.

"The scuttlebutt was there was a young girl teaching, so all the men wanted to see who she was," Citarella says with a smile. "The first class I gave a lecture and said I didn't want any funny stuff and wasn't available for dates."

Though Citarella enjoyed teaching night classes, she grew restless during the day. She decided to apply for a job at the Charlestown Navy Yard, which employed 50,000 workers at that time. When she arrived at the yard, the secretary told her they weren't hiring office help. So Citarella told her she was looking for a welding job.

"We don't have any women in the welding yard," the secretary replied.

After sharing that she had teaching experience, Citarella landed an interview with a supervisor who set her up with the challenge of welding different sized metal pieces together into a small box with a set of stairs inside. Citarella thought out the problem carefully and worked her way through. In the end, the supervisor remarked that she "had made a stairway fit for Buckingham Palace and a box fit for her majesty's jewels." Needless to say, she got the job and soon found herself the only female employee at the Navy Yard.

Two women welding in an Aircraft construction class in Daytona Beach, Florida, in 1942. *(Everett Historical)*

LABOR OF LOVE

A recruitment poster from 1944 depicts a beautiful woman in a suit clutching a handful of letters. "Longing won't bring him back sooner. Get a War Job!" it declares. Soon, Citarella became one of the scores of women who stepped into the shoes of men who were overseas. She balanced her night teaching job with a new day job helping to build battleships.

As Citarella recalls, there was a rivalry between the female riveters and welders of the era. "You always heard people talk about Rosie the Riveter, but never heard anyone talk about a welder," Citarella points out. "I made sure I'd tell people, I'm *not* Rosie the Riveter. I'm Winnie the Welder."

Despite her coveralls, work boots, and helmet, Citarella always took pride in her appearance. "My nails were always polished, my hair combed, my lipstick on," she says. "The men would joke they weren't used to seeing anyone with lipstick on under their helmet."

Overall, she says, the men treated her well, though she received her fair share of cat calls, mostly from admiring sailors. After a week on the job, she noticed management had installed a new ladies' bathroom just for her.

A classic shot of women welders who worked for Ingalls Shipbuilding Corp. in Pascagoula, Missouri in 1943.

New female-friendly rules forbade spitting, rude gestures, and foul language. Soon, Citarella saw other women workers take their places among the men in the yard.

The work was difficult, but she enjoyed it. Once, she worked for thirteen straight weeks without a day off. "I was young and strong," she says. "When you're doing what you love it's never a burden." Each day had a new challenge. One day she'd weld pipes or work on a ship's exit ramp, the next day patch a fracture in the metal walls. As a female welder, she was constantly being tried and tested. She rose to the challenge and worked her way up to being trusted to work on submarines, which required greater skill. "They gave me jobs they thought I'd refuse to do," she says. "I never gave them the satisfaction of saying I didn't want to do it."

Citarella soon learned the dangers of welding firsthand. One cold winter day while working high on a ship's mast, she took a tumble down through a manhole and onto a sharp piece of steel. The injury paralyzed her for a week. Luckily, she'd been wearing long johns beneath her coveralls, which helped to shield her body. "When I came back, the job I got hurt on nobody had wanted to do, so I finished it," she says.

Welding also had its payoffs. Over the two years she worked at the Navy Yard, she worked her way up through three levels to become a first class welder, where she made more money and was trusted with more complex tasks. She says she felt like "one of the boys," unlike many women who were happy staying in the lower, safer ranks. One day after welding some large sheets of metal together, she took off her helmet to find five men

standing behind watching her. "I heard one guy say, 'Whaddya think?' and the other guy say, "She's gonna put us all out of business!"

END OF AN ERA

When the soldiers came home in 1944, Citarella's working life changed overnight. She and her fellow female workers were let go as the men reclaimed their former posts. Citarella realized she would likely never weld again. "I walked out of the Navy Yard gate and got a little teary," she recalls. "It was the end of an important era."

Realizing she wouldn't be happy in a typical office job, Citarella decided to take one of the sewing classes she'd once avoided. She went on to take a job in Boston's garment district for several years before meeting her husband in 1948 and going on to have a family of her own.

Though Citarella never picked up a welding gun again, her memories of the Navy Yard remain close to her heart. Not long ago, while waiting in the car in a store parking lot, Citarella glanced over and noticed the rear doors on a nearby truck had been welded. Getting out of the car, she stooped over to examine them. The driver came up behind her.

Peggy points to herself in a photo alongside fellow male and female welders.

During occasional power outages at the Navy Yard, Peggy Citarella made bracelets like this one by warming steel rods until they became pliable. For this piece, a 1943 quarter provides an eye catching touch.

"What are you looking at?" he asked.

"I'm just checking out the welding," she answered.

"Do you know anything about welding?" he responded.

"Yeah, a little bit," she answered.

"I did that," he told her. "Whaddya think?"

Sparks flicker in Citarella's brown eyes when she recalls her answer. "I told him, I says, you could never work for me!"

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ALL IN THE FAMILY

Citarella's Italian roots run deep. With a mother who hailed from Sicily and a father from Lombardy, she grew up speaking Italian in her Boston home. Later, after moving to Somerville, Citarella formed a tight bond with the many Italians in the neighborhood. She met her husband Armand—who passed away in 2015—through a friend who once played with him as a child growing up in Italy. The two married in 1948 and moved to Vermont soon after.

In 1977, she and Armand, a university professor, spent a year's sabbatical touring Italy from north to south with their three children.

Citarella is one of the founding members of Vermont's Italian Cultural Association (VICA), a group of Italophiles who've been meeting in the Burlington area since 1983. "It started as several people meeting in my kitchen," Citarella recalls. "I had looked in the phone book and there were few Italian names at the time, but we made plans to start a club anyway." The club eventually grew and moved to space at the library where members socialized and shared homemade Italian food.

These days, VICA has 250 registered members, many of whom meet for activities like language classes, restaurant dinners, and visits to Italian films. Citarella, who has an active social life, still attends monthly VICA coffee hours with her daughter, Judy.

When asked the secret of her youthful energy, Citarella replies with a grin, "Plenty of good olive oil and good sex!"