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IN BLOOM
INSIDE LI LIFE

In a field of men, she stood out

BY BETTINA MARKS
Special to Newsday

WAR EFFORT

Long Island's role in WWII

In 1941, female students at Lawrence High School were likely to enroll in home economics and secretarial classes.

But not Edith Gentile.

At 17, Gentile enrolled in a welding class.

The high school encouraged girls to learn the skill, she said, as the number of male students in the class was falling as they were entering military service. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had signed the Selective Training and Service Act in 1940 and, the next year, the United States entered World War II.

Ida Edith Gentile, known as Edith as she grew up in a family of 11 children in Cedarhurst, said she was one of four girls who enrolled in the stainless-steel welding class. After graduation in 1942, she said, they were recruited to work at Republic Aviation Corp. in Farmingdale.

"Victory depends in large measure on the increased war production we are able to get from our factories and arsenals," Roosevelt wrote in a message to the employees at Republic. "To Win we must Fight — and to Fight we must Produce."

"Edith the Welder," as she became known to her nephew Richard Gentile, 66, of Huntington, and the other women went on to obtain state welding licenses — they were among the first women in the state to do so — and work on

the fighter planes in production at Republic.

Edith Gentile, now 86, said the welding department had a staff of about 25 and they worked on the production of Republic's P47 Thunderbolt, a fighter plane regarded as a symbol of American air superiority.

Welding, of course, had been a field dominated by men. The role of women in that and other industries during the war was seen as a key component in the nation's war efforts and also as helping make it possible for future generations of women to enter nontraditional occupations.

Gentile said the female welders became friends with their co-workers as well as with women working in secretarial and administrative jobs. On the job, she said, most of the workers, men and women, brought their lunches from home and ate together.

Within a year of the end of the war, as men returned to the workforce, the women welders' jobs came to an end. Gentile went on to become a bookkeeper and later did administrative work at a nursing home. When she was about 35, she moved to Green-



Edith Gentile, 86, holds a replica of the P47 Thunderbolt, the fighter plane that she helped build during World War II. After high school in 1942, the Cedarhurst native went to work for Republic Aviation Corp. in Farmingdale and was among the first women to obtain a state welding license.

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