

CLESCENT KRUEGER: PIONEERING FEMALE ARC WELDER

By Justin Higner



Clescent Krueger poses for a publicity photo, welder in hand, ca. 1943.
Courtesy Sheri Martin

THE 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF the end of the Second World War provides an opportunity to salute one of the many Western New York industrial pioneers on the Home Front. The late Clescent Agnes Krueger (nee Ammerman) was hired as the first female arc welder for the Bell Aircraft Corporation. She was originally brought on to work in Buffalo at Bell's facility on Elmwood Avenue (now the site of a Home Depot). But sometime after 1941, when Bell constructed a new and larger facility in the Town of Wheatfield adjacent to the Niagara Falls Airport, Clescent moved to the new plant. Specifically, she worked on airplanes such as the P-39 *Airacobra*, of which Bell would produce over 9,500 by August 1944 when production ended. She would weld the metal blast tubes that surrounded the huge cannon that defined the *Airacobra*, as well as the smaller tubes that housed the machine gun barrels in the wings of all models up to the P-39Q-5. In time, at least 10 more women would follow in Clescent's footsteps to become arc welders at Bell.



The Bell Aircraft Corporation's original facility on Elmwood Avenue. Both the Curtiss and Consolidated Aircraft companies had previously used the plant. *Western New York Heritage collection*

Clescent Ammerman was born on November 14, 1920, and grew up in Tonawanda. On November 4, 1942, she married farmer Henry Krueger. The couple resided on a farm on Krueger Rd., on the grounds and homestead of the current Kreuger Estates site, where they raised four children. Besides farming, Henry served for many years as the Town of Wheatfield highway superintendent before he passed away suddenly in 1977 and was succeeded by Don Mante. Clescent passed away in 1985 and both are buried in North Tonawanda.

The following article, spotlighting Clescent's experience, appeared in an issue of the *Buffalo Courier-Express*, ca. 1943.

The feminine side of the house has made so much progress in recent years, especially as home-front production soldiers, that it is no longer startling or strange to see women working in jobs previously monopolized by males. Until Clescent Krueger invaded the Arc Welding ranks of Dept. 50, Elmwood Plant [of the Bell Aircraft Corporation], the department had figuratively hung out a "Men Only" sign. Clescent was the first Belle to do this type of welding and opened the path for approximately 10 more women to this enterprise.


When Clescent was interviewed at the Employment Office almost a year and a half ago, she was queried about welding.

"I didn't even know what the interviewer meant, but was curious and willing to try anything," she explained. "For several weeks on the new job I was actually afraid of the sparks shooting out in all directions. But I soon got over that feeling and now I wouldn't trade my job for any other."

Clescent has already passed two of the Army-required welding tests and is aiming for a third. She has two button awards for the carbon arc welding and stainless steel metallic welding. The chrome-moly test is the next on the list.

Most of the welding she does is performed on the cannon blast tubes which protrude from the nose of the Airacobra and on the wing blast covers concealed in the wings of the ships.

Clescent is very proud of her huge Victory garden. Living on a farm where her husband spend his full time, entails a great many chores. So far she has canned strawberries and rhubarb, products of her garden, and will can other vegetables and fruit as they become ready for processing.

"Although I like my welding job very much, I will gladly give it up to the first returned soldier after the war is won." Clescent declared. 

Justin Higner serves as the Town of Wheatfield Historian

Several P-39 Airacobras sit on an airfield at New Caledonia in the South Pacific, 1943. The short, cylindrical blast tubes, like those welded by Clescent Krueger, can clearly be seen protruding from the propeller spinner of each aircraft.
Private collection

