

Wings Across America's
VISUAL HISTORY
OF THE
WASP

During the early months of World War II, there was a critical shortage of combat pilots. Jacqueline Cochran, America's foremost woman pilot, convinced General Hap Arnold, the Commanding General of the Army Air Force, that women pilots, if given the same training as the male aviation cadets were receiving, would be equally capable of flying military aircraft. They could then take on some of the military flying assignments in the states, which would release male pilots for combat duty.

25,000 young women pilots applied for this experimental flight training program, but only 1,830 were accepted and took the 'oath'. 1074 graduated and, together with 28 WAFS (Women Auxiliary Ferrying Service) became WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots), the first women in history to fly America's military aircraft.

The WASP forever changed the role of women in aviation.



Avenger Field, Sweetwater, Texas is the only air field in history used exclusively to train women pilots to fly military aircraft. It is also the only field where all three phases of military flight training (primary, basic and advanced) were taught simultaneously.

WASP trainees were under the command of, and supervision of, 40 Army Air Force commissioned officers and 81 enlisted men, who were stationed at Avenger Field. Aviation Enterprises, Ltd. (civilian contractors), with 700 civilian employees, maintained the aircraft and facilities and trained, housed and fed the WASP trainees.



Trainees lived in wooden barracks with rooms called 'bays'. Six trainees lived in each bay, which contained 6 Army cots, 6 lockers, 2 study tables and 6 chairs. It was connected to another bay, with six more trainees, by a latrine, with 2 showers, 2 sinks and 2 commodes.

From bugle call at 6am to lights out, trainees were required to march everywhere they went. As they passed by the wishing well, they often tossed coins into the fountain and made a wish, usually to pass a check ride or an exam. It was also used to 'dunk' the first trainee to solo in each phase of training



Winter of 1943: Trainees are weathered in due to a terrific snowstorm which blanketed West Texas and grounded all the aircraft at Avenger Field.

The primary phase of training (70 flying hours) was primarily flown from the auxiliary fields, due to the congestion of basic and advanced training planes flying from the main field. PT-19s (Fairchild) were flown until Nov. 1943, then phased out and replaced with PT-17s (Stearman).

One half of each day was spent on the flight line and one half in ground school (560 hours). College level required courses included physics, math, meteorology and navigation. Other requirements included Morse Code, physical education, Link Trainer, and military training .



The AT-6 advanced trainer (70 flying hours) was used to teach night flying, cross country flying and aerobatics (minimal). Both AT-6s and AT-17s were used until Oct. 1943, when the AT-17s were phased out.

The basic phase of training (70 flying hours) was flown in BT-13s, learning to fly by exclusively relying on instruments. Most of the training was done 'under the hood', with an accompanying instructor, or another trainee, as the 'observer'.



After 7 months of training, it's graduation day!

WASP trainees and the Big Spring AAF Band pass in review at each graduation. Jacqueline Cochran (Director of Woman Pilots), Army Air Force 'brass', government officials and other dignitaries attended graduations.

Each graduate received her silver wings and official Army Air Force orders to report for duty at a specific Army air base or Army air field.

WASP FLYING ASSIGNMENTS

Tow target pilots

- B-26s to train gunners for combat

- A-25s and A-26s for anti-aircraft practice

- AT-6 for pursuit pilot proficiency

Engineering test pilots

Cargo/utility pilots

Administrative pilots

Ferry pilots

- from factories to points of embarkation

- from factories to bases

- base to base

- to salvage areas

Troop carrier pilots

Top secret transport for atomic bomb project

Weather observation pilots

Smoke laying

Flying drone planes

Radar tracking

Flying gliders

Instrument instructors

Bombing range runs to train bombardiers

Navigation training flights

Flight checks for returning overseas pilots

Night target towing

Radar deception missions

Piloting radio-controlled aircraft

Flying B-26s to prove to male pilots they were safe

Flying B-29s to prove to male pilots they were safe

Instrument safety pilots

Check pilots

Flying pursuits for photographic 'shooting'

Flying pursuits for range estimation

Searchlight missions

Slow timing aircraft engines

Instrument safety pilots

Towing gliders

Instrument calibration missions



1,102 WASP were stationed at 120 Army air bases and Army air fields across America.

They flew more than 60 million miles in every type aircraft and on every type mission or assignment any male AAF pilot flew, except combat.

Although 38 WASP (including trainees) were killed while serving their country, the safety flying record of the WASP exceeded that of the male pilots.



As victory in Europe seemed certain and combat pilots began returning home, the civilian flight instructors realized their draft exempt jobs would soon be in jeopardy. They successfully lobbied the predominately male Congress for the deactivation of the WASP, so they could take over some of the women pilots' flying duties and avoid being drafted into the 'walking Army.'

On 20 December 1944, the WASP were unceremoniously disbanded, with no honors, no benefits and few thanks. They had to pay their own way back home.

THE REST OF THE WASP STORY

The WASP records were sealed, stamped 'secret' or 'classified' and filed away in the government archives for 33 years, unavailable to the WWII historians who recorded the history of WWII, left out of the history textbooks in America's classrooms and forgotten by the country they had so courageously served.

In 1977, after months of lobbying Congress, with the help of Sen. Barry Goldwater and Bruce Arnold (Gen. Arnold's son), the WASP were finally granted the Veteran status they had earned.

Seven years later, their medals came in the mail.



Poster design by Nancy Parrish, Director Wings Across America ©2007 www.wingsacrossamerica.org



A

R

N

O

L

D



GENERAL HENRY HARLEY (HAP)ARNOLD COMMANDING GENERAL, ARMY AIR FORCES, WWII

General Henry 'Hap' Arnold is one of the greatest American military figures and Air Force proponents in history. In 1907, Cadet 'Hap' Arnold graduated from the United States Military Academy as a 2nd Lt. in the Infantry. In 1911 the Wright Brothers taught him to fly in a Wright 'B' aircraft, and he became one of the first pilots in the Army Signal Corps. During his 39 years of service to his country, 2nd Lt. Arnold progressed up the ranks to a five-star General, the only officer to attain five-star rank in both the United States Army and the United States Air Force.

In 1939, as Hitler began his march across Europe, General Arnold met with Pres. Roosevelt regarding America's shortage of combat aircraft. Following the General's recommendation, Pres. Roosevelt ordered 11,000 new combat aircraft be built and flying training schools be established to train male cadets to fly military aircraft.

During the early months of WWII, America lost so many combat pilots over North Africa until there was a severe shortage of pilots. General Arnold finally accepted a plan, submitted by Jacqueline Cochran, America's foremost woman pilot, to establish an experimental AAF flying training school, commensurate with the AAF's flying schools for cadets, to train qualified, licensed women pilots to fly military aircraft.

General Arnold's concept included militarizing the women pilots. However, because he desperately needed pilots and felt it would take Congress too long to militarize them, he ordered they take the 'oath' and start training as civilians and he would worry about militarizing them later. His expectations were that the women pilots would be used as ferry pilots of the lighter aircraft, as he was not sure 'a little slip of a girl' could handle the faster and heavier aircraft.

Under the direction of Ms. Cochran, the program was so successful until General Arnold soon approved that the women pilots no longer be restricted to ferrying, but should be assigned to every command and allowed to fly any mission and any aircraft any AAF pilot flew, except combat.

In March, 1943, General Arnold ordered Ms. Cochran to select a group of WASP to train to fly the B-26 Martin Marauder (aka Widow Maker) to prove to the male pilots, who were refusing to fly it because of its crash record, that they were safe to fly. The experiment worked.

In August, 1943, it was General Arnold who named the women pilots 'Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)'. The following month he approved a Santiago blue uniform for the WASP. (The same color the Air Force adopted for its new uniforms in 1947, when it became a separate service from the Army.)

In March, 1944, General Arnold appeared before the House Military Affairs Committee and requested militarization and commissions for the WASP. In June, after General Arnold left to lead the D-day invasion in Europe, the Congress refused to militarize the WASP, the only request General Arnold had ever made to the Congress which they refused. After he returned, he reluctantly ordered the WASP be disbanded on December 20, 1944.

On December 7, 1944, at the graduation of the last class of WASP, General Arnold said,

"WASP have been pioneers in a new field of wartime service... You, and more than nine hundred of your sisters, have shown that you can fly wingtip to wingtip with your brothers...."

I want to stress how valuable I believe this whole WASP program has been for the country... I salute you. We of the Army Air Force are proud of you. We will never forget our debt to you."

Let not there be any doubt of the WASP' pride in General Henry 'Hap' Arnold, a man who had the imagination to see success and the confidence to create it.





Poster design by Nancy Parrish, Director Wings Across America ©2007 www.wingsacrossamerica.org

★
C
O
C
H
R
A
N
★

MISS JACQUELINE COCHRAN

FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF WOMEN AIRFORCE SERVICE PILOTS, WWII

Jacqueline Cochran went from being a little girl, who never owned a pair of shoes until she was nine, to being a young woman entrepreneur who owned a multi-million dollar cosmetic company, a fearless pilot who still holds more speed, distance and altitude records than any other pilot in the world, and a visionary who founded and directed the Women Airforce Service Pilots of WWII.

In 1939, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt presented the Bendix Air Race Trophy to Ms. Cochran. Inasmuch as Hitler's Army was already marching across Europe and Americans were growing apprehensive about the possibility of war, Ms. Cochran used the opportunity to express to President and Mrs. Roosevelt her belief that, if women pilots were given the same training as the male military pilots, they would be equally capable of flying military aircraft and could be used as military pilots if America ever needed them.

In 1941, Ms. Cochran drew up detailed plans for the training of licensed women pilots to fly military aircraft, commensurate with the training the AAF male cadets were receiving at flight schools all over the south. She presented the plan to General Arnold, but he turned it down, saying that he 'needed fighter pilots, not ferry pilots'.

At the request of the British and the approval of General Arnold, in January, 1942 Ms. Cochran recruited a group of 25 of America's most experienced licensed women pilots and took them to England to fly as ferry pilots for the Royal Air Force. At the request of the AAF, she remained in England as a commissioned AAF officer to help guide the operations of America's 8th Air Force.

During the early months of 1942, America was immersed in WWII and was losing so many combat pilots until General Arnold was desperate for pilots. Already convinced by Ms. Cochran that women could learn to fly military aircraft and take over some of the military flying jobs in the states so male pilots could be released for combat, his message to Ms.

Cochran was immediate: come home and put your plan into effect. In September, 1942 her plan was officially authorized, and she was appointed Director of Women's Flying Training for the Army Air Force.

The first women trainees (all licensed pilots) started training at the Municipal Airport in Houston. The facilities were totally inadequate. Ms. Cochran soon located a suitable field in Sweetwater, Texas, which was being used by the AAF to train Canadian cadets. The cadets were relocated and the military flying training base (Avenger Field) was then used exclusively to train women pilots.

In 1943, Ms. Cochran was appointed to the General Staff of the Army Air Force in the Pentagon as the Director of Women Pilots. She directed all phases of the WASP program at 120 air bases all across America, where they flew every type aircraft and every type mission any AAF pilot flew.

During WWII the WASP flew more than 60 million miles for their country, all because one woman was convinced women could fly anything men could fly, never took 'no' for an answer, and believed that, with God's help, nothing was impossible.

Following the deactivation of the WASP, Jacqueline Cochran continued to excel in the world of aviation, including being the first woman to break the sound barrier. She died in 1980, but her legacy in the field of aviation will long endure. Jacqueline Cochran and her Women Airforce Service Pilots, the first women in history to fly America's military aircraft, forever changed the role of women in aviation.

