

Shattering traditional concepts of women's roles, the Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II compiled an admirable record. Here a former WASP tells their little-known story.



UNITED STATES AIR FORCE PHOTOGRAPH NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM BETHLEHEM INSTITUTION

# We Also Served

by Doris Brinker Tanner

*By performing essential flying duties in the United States—thus freeing male pilots for combat-related service overseas—Women Airforce Service Pilots contributed to the U.S. war effort during 1942–44, blazing a trail as the first women military pilots in American history. The four WASPs above were photographed during multi-engine training in 1944, preparatory to ferrying B-17 Flying Fortresses from factories to operational airfields.*

**P**lunged into World War II on December 7, 1941, the United States soon experienced a desperate labor shortage, necessitating that women participate in many activities previously reserved for men. Government agencies launched a nationwide media blitz through newspapers and radio, urging women to work outside the home and thus help bring the war to an early, victorious end. Women responded in overwhelming numbers.

No field of endeavor during that time was more tradition-shattering than women's roles in the military services—and none of these was more revolutionary than women flying aircraft for the Army Air Forces. The World War II achievements of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) have received slight attention from military historians, but their record nevertheless stands as an important and interesting milestone in history. Except for nurses, very few women had previously served in military units, and none in the dangerous, demanding jobs of military aviation. Later, following disbanding of the WASP, it would be 1977 before women would again graduate from Air Force pilot training. This subsequent accomplishment came about in large part due to the performance of the courageous group of women who earned silver wings during the war years of 1942 to 1944.

The idea of enlisting women pilots for domestic military flying duties, thus releasing men for combat-related operations overseas, was primarily the brain child of aviatrix Jacqueline Cochran. Less well-known than her friend Amelia Earhart, Cochran had a remarkable flying career. In 1935 the twenty-five-year-old flyer became the first woman entrant in the famous Bendix Transcontinental Air Race, and three years later she took first place over experienced male competitors. In 1940 Cochran broke speed records for both men and women, and over a twenty-five-year period she would set some two hundred other flying records. Her many awards would include the Harmon International Trophy for the world's outstanding woman flyer (fifteen times), the Distinguished Flying Cross (three times), and the Air Force Distinguished Service Medal (for which she was the first woman to be so honored).

Cochran also made aviation history on July 1, 1941, when she became the first woman to ferry a Lockheed Hudson bomber across the Atlantic for delivery to the besieged British. This exploit brought her headlines in the *New York Times* and a luncheon invitation from the White House that resulted in a long conversation with President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Roosevelt was so impressed with Cochran's ideas about women's potential for military flying duties that he arranged for her to talk with his assistant secretary of war for air, Robert Lovett. This meeting led in turn to conferences with the officer in charge of the Ferry Command, Colonel Robert Olds, and the commanding general of the Army Air Forces, Henry "Hap" Arnold.

General Arnold assigned to Cochran the monumental task of compiling data on the number of women pilots qualified for military flying jobs, and to formulate a

plan for utilizing their skills. Her comprehensive proposal was presented to him in August 1941.

But even an innovative, advanced thinker like General Arnold—one of the first American military leaders to visualize the potential of air power—was skeptical about putting a "slip of a young girl" into the cockpit of one of his planes. Although he knew the duties that both British and Russian women pilots were already performing, Arnold decided that the United States was not yet in need of such extreme measures. However, as preparation for a possible emergency, he suggested that Cochran return to England to gain firsthand knowledge and experience with a group of English women pilots serving in the Royal Air Force Air Transport Auxiliary. Commanded by Pauline Gower, they were dubbed "ATA girls," and as ferry pilots were making a significant contribution toward retaining aerial superiority above the British Isles.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 led Cochran to question entering service with England, since the security of her own country was now in jeopardy. But General Arnold assured her that the experience would be a vital preliminary step toward the formation of any such group in the United States—and that while no such organization was yet planned, he would recall her if and when such a move was made.

Consequently, in the spring of 1942 Cochran was commissioned a flight captain with the ATA. Twenty-two other experienced American pilots joined her in the venture; these women serving with the Royal Air Force constituted the first organized group of American women pilots in the war.

**D**uring the bleak summer of 1942 General Arnold informed Jacqueline Cochran that the time had come for her to return home, where her expertise was now needed to plan, organize, and direct a program to train women pilots for service with the Army Air Forces. As quickly as possible, she completed her responsibilities to the Royal Air Force, and returned to New York on September 10, 1942. To her amazement, that same day's edition of the *New York Times* contained an article announcing the formation of an organization of women pilots under the Army Air Forces Transport Command, with Nancy Harkness Love as director.

Twenty-seven-year-old Nancy Love, a skilled pilot and wife of Colonel Robert Love, deputy chief of the Air Transport Command, had urged the employment of women ferry pilots by the command for many months. An announcement at a conference of the air staff that a women's program had been approved prompted General Harold L. George, commander of the Ferry Command, to authorize immediate action; the need for pilots to fly new planes from factories to military fields was critical. Air Transport Command orders authorizing the employment of women flyers were issued on September 5, 1942. Eighty-three experienced women pilots received applications; twenty-three were immediately accepted, and four more joined later.

When informed of this swift action by a subordinate,



*The author prepares for a checkout flight in a twin-engine, North American B-25 Mitchell bomber in 1944. She and her sister WASP pilots completed training identical to that for male cadets in the Army Air Forces, and they flew virtually every type of Air Force plane on a variety of noncombat missions. But wartime legislation that would have granted them official status as members of the armed forces failed to pass, and it would take until 1977 for them to finally receive such recognition.*

General Arnold summoned his officers of the Ferry Command and explained that a much larger and more comprehensive program than hiring a few women civilians to ferry planes for the Air Transport Command was planned. Nevertheless, these unusual circumstances resulted in the initial coexistence of two fledgling organizations of women pilots.

The organization responsible for recruitment and training of women pilots was designated the 319th Army Air Force Flying Detachment and was based in Houston, Texas. Jacqueline Cochran was named director and Leni Leoti Clark Deaton chief administrative officer.

At the same time, Nancy Love headed the Air Transport Command Squadron, comprised of women pilots with at least five hundred hours of flying experience. It was designated the Women's Auxiliary Ferry Service, or WAFS, and was based at New Castle Army Air Base in

Delaware.

The two units operated separately until June 1943, when Arnold ordered their consolidation into one organization, known thereafter as Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP. Cochran became director of all WASP activities, while Love was made staff director of all WASPs assigned to the Air Transport Command. Love and the women already employed continued their ferrying duties, but all others, even veteran pilots returning from ATA service in England, were now required to complete a rigorous military training program.

**N**ews of the opportunity for women to fly for the Army Air Forces spread like wildfire across America. More than 25,000 young women flooded Cochran's office with applications; of these 1,830 were accepted.

Requirements stipulated that successful applicants must be American citizens between twenty-one (later reduced to eighteen and one-half) and thirty-five years of age, stand at least sixty (later raised to sixty-four) inches tall, and pass the high standards of the Form Sixty-Four physical examination by a flight surgeon. The key requirement was that applicants have at least two hundred (subsequently reduced to thirty-five) hours of logged, certified flying time. Cochran or her representative personally interviewed each applicant before acceptance and assignment to a class.

The first class of twenty-eight recruits assembled on



*Captain Barbara Garwood, a flight instructor at Williams Air Base in Arizona, briefs author Doris Tanner (here wearing her World War II WASP uniform) on the operation of the T-38 jet trainer. Garwood—president of the Women Military Pilots Association and one of 647 women aviators currently serving in the armed forces—says that “I’m convinced there would not be any women flying military aircraft today unless the WASP had paved the way.”*

November 16, 1942, at the Howard Hughes Municipal Airport in Houston, Texas. Aviation Enterprises Limited, a civilian contract school under the Gulf Coast Air Force Training Center of the Training Command, was awarded the contract to train the women in the Army method of flying.

Legislation giving the women pilots complete military status was awaiting action in Congress; in the meantime the students were accepted as federal employees on temporary Civil Service status. As such they did not qualify for flight pay or other standard military benefits, nor did the organization yet have an official uniform.

The training program included over four hundred hours of ground school, with instruction in aircraft design and theory of flight, engines and propellers, mathematics, physics, navigation, instruments and instrument flying, weather, code, calisthenics, and close-order drill. The most important part of the course, however, was the

210 hours of flight instruction. Twenty-seven weeks were scheduled to complete the program.

To compensate for delays caused by fog and other bad weather, the women often flew six and seven days a week. But they had come to Texas to fly and to serve their country during the crisis of war, and they willingly and cheerfully endured the grueling schedule. Their training compared in every way to that of male cadets, except that formation and aerobatic instruction were not included officially; such skills were needed for combat duty, and law forbade women in combat.

Chief Administrative Officer Leni Leoti Deaton was responsible for much of the initial success of the unique and “avante garde” project, finding solutions for the unprecedented problems arising from trying to make civilian volunteers fit into a military organization. Cochran and Deaton followed military procedures and Army regulations wherever possible, but the quasi-military, quasi-civilian structure hampered operations severely. Adding to their difficulties were the challenges of obtaining adequate transportation, food, living quarters, and medical services in a region already flooded with war workers and military personnel.

The second class of trainees arrived in December 1942, and another new group each month thereafter. By the time several classes had entered training, flying conditions at Houston were becoming increasingly overcrowded and dangerous. Plans to increase the number of

students to 750, then to 1,000 for 1944, made it obligatory to find more adequate facilities.

When a male cadet program was scheduled for phasing out at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, Deaton was asked her opinion of moving the women's program there—being cautioned at the same time that the move would temporarily involve side-by-side training with male cadets, and that any resulting problems would be hers. Deaton's enthusiastic "My grandfather pioneered coeducation, let's go," made it possible to turn the 319th into a much better organized, equipped, and disciplined unit: the 318th Army Air Force Flying Training Detachment. Until the last male cadets at Sweetwater were graduated, this was the first, though brief, coeducational flight training program in American military aviation history.

**C**onditions at Sweetwater, located two hundred miles due west of Dallas-Fort Worth, were a great improvement over those at Houston, but the training remained extremely difficult and exhausting. The ninety-five women of Class 44-W-4 who reported to Avenger Field on November 1, 1943 (the author was a member of this group), were typical WASP trainees. The students had come from all parts of the United States and from many backgrounds, and included former teachers, nurses, secretaries, factory workers, waitresses, students, housewives, debutantes, actresses, and the wife of famous Broadway playwright Damon Runyon.

Following check-in and the filling out of myriad government forms, we were assigned alphabetically to typical one-story Army barracks, six women to a bay. We soon found that the total lack of privacy necessitated a frank and open attitude and willingness for cooperation. Surplus Army mechanics' olive drab overalls, size forty-four and up, dubbed "zoot suits," replaced our civilian clothes, while cosmetics and fancy hair styles quickly became relics of the past. Biting winds from the west Texas plains drilled sand into our clothes, skin, teeth, ears, eyes, and hair.

Our typical day began before the chilly dawn with the trumpet blast of reveille, followed by a hasty dressing in three or four layers of clothing, and falling in for roll call and breakfast formation. We then policed our quarters and fell in again for ground school or flight line. For one week Flight I attended ground school each morning while Flight II (my group) flew; then the schedule was reversed. Saturday morning was the occasion for a stringent inspection of our quarters by male officers.

The seventy-hour primary phase of flying began in a 175-horsepower Fairchild PT-19 primary trainer, a silver, streamlined, open-cockpit, low-wing monoplane. It was the fastest and heaviest plane most of the trainees had ever flown, as most of their prior experience was in 65-horsepower Piper Cubs. Soon after 44-W-4 started flying, the PT-19 was replaced by the Stearman PT-17, a sturdy, stable, 225-horsepower, bi-wing trainer.

Following approximately six to eight hours of "dual" instruction on takeoffs, climbs, turns, stalls and spins,

and landings, the civilian instructor climbed out of the plane and the student flew her first solo flight. The first woman to solo was hailed as the class "hot" pilot and dunked in the cold water of a fountain called the wishing well; the honor for 44-W-4 went to Dorothy Britt from Oklahoma.

Subsequent solo flights involved long hours of intense practice to perfect loops, chandeliers, pylon eights, spins, and all of the elementary maneuvers necessary to prove one's proficiency on an Army "check" ride. Total concentration was imperative to master the exact precision demanded for an "S" or satisfactory grade. It was easy, especially on a hazy or windy day, to concentrate so completely on maneuvers that check points or markers back to the home base were lost.

Faye Wolfe of Grand Rapids, Michigan, for example, had been practicing spins for an hour when she realized that her "point" had disappeared. She flew in each direction looking for a familiar landmark without success. Just as panic began to set in, another Stearman with a woman pilot came reassuringly into view. Saved, Faye happily followed it, but when her guide continued on a steady westward course, Faye realized that it was not headed for Avenger Field at all. With sunset approaching, she now had no alternative but to follow. The two planes finally landed at an Army field forty miles from Avenger, where Faye learned that her guide was not another student but a graduate WASP ferrying a new Stearman to California!

Martha McKenzie from McKenzie, Tennessee, was even less fortunate than Faye. Following one last practice spin late one afternoon, she realized she was lost. As the sun plummeted lower and lower, her engine sputtered out on its last drops of fuel. Selecting a field clear of obstacles, she managed to bring the Stearman down unharmed, then climbed out and began walking toward the lights of a nearby farmhouse. Suddenly McKenzie grew aware of some approaching presence behind her, then heard the sound of pounding hooves. She turned to face an approaching herd of Herefords aroused by the roar of the plane's engine. A burst of adrenalin enabled her to run faster than ever before, and she outdistanced them all, including the bull, to the fence. McKenzie beat on the front door of the house until it was opened by an incredulous old deaf farmer who kept repeating, "Well, I'll be darned, it's a girl," as he drove her down the road to the nearest telephone.

**N**o less alarming than getting lost was encountering one of the numerous natives of west Texas—rattlesnakes. During a solo flight Shirley Tannehill looked out on her right wing to see—slowly inching its way up the aileron and onto the leading edge—the biggest, meanest-looking snake she had ever seen. Fortunately the slipstream caught the rattler and it sailed off into space, much to the shaken pilot's relief. The size and validity of Tannehill's snake story went unchallenged by her barracks bay mates as she awoke screaming from nightmares on several nights. Thereafter, trainees examined



*The most demanding part of WASP training was the 210 hours of flight instruction. Above, students at Avenger Field near Sweetwater, Texas, get a preflight briefing next to one of their Fairchild PT-19 primary trainers.*

their cockpits very carefully before taking off, and especially before climbing in for the first flight of the day.

Occasionally a primary student became a member of the Caterpillar Club. The women of Class 44-W-4 were always careful to fasten their seat belts after hearing of the experience of a Class 44-W-1 trainee who, accompanied by her instructor, was practicing spins. After holding the plane in a right wing spin for the customary three revolutions, she recovered with the standard technique of pushing hard opposite rudder and popping the control stick forward as far it would go, which resulted in a steep dive. The student, whose belt had inadvertently become unfastened, was stupefied to find herself sailing out into space while the plane and startled instructor cruised on past her. Automatically she pulled the D-ring ripcord, her parachute opened, and she landed frightened but unharmed.

Flying dominated every waking moment as well as some sleeping moments for the students, as some mumbled acronyms for cockpit procedures, such as CIGFTPR [controls, instruments, gas, flaps, trim, prop, radio] throughout the night. Flying was their sin-

gle-minded consuming passion, and they were determined to master the skills that led to graduation and silver wings.

Despite that great determination, students usually experienced various degrees of debilitating stress prior to the periodic check rides. Called "checkitis," it was accompanied with loss of appetite and sleep, which caused even more anxiety and tension.

A flustered pilot was a dangerous pilot, and instructors often deliberately tried to rattle a student suspected of instability. All the maneuvers taught during the primary phase had to be executed precisely, from regular takeoffs and landings to emergency or forced landings. Unexpectedly the testing pilot would pull the throttle back to kill the engine; the trainee then had to quickly point to the field selected for such an emergency, and "dead-stick" the plane to a low-level simulated landing. It was essential to think quickly, calmly, and carefully under such pressure, and there was no tolerance for emotional reaction or hysteria.

The results of each test ride determined whether the student passed and moved on to the next phase of training or failed and was sent home. The elimination rate for females for flying deficiencies during training was comparable to that of male cadets. It varied from time to time, but averaged 30.7 percent over the duration of the program.

For those women who washed out, the sting of failure



*Ground school and flight instruction for WASP trainees lasted twenty-seven weeks; 1,074 women completed the demanding program during 1943-44. Here class 43-W-2 passes in review at graduation ceremonies at Avenger Field on May 28, 1943.*

often left deep scars despite the knowledge that elimination was preferable to an accident or fatality. No alternative training as bombardiers or navigators—options for men failing pilot training—was available for the women.

Following successful completion of the Primary phase of flying, Class 44-W-4 ordinarily would have gone into the Basic phase, which included instrument flying. However, the Army was searching for a way to eliminate the waste of time and money when cadets passed through Primary and Basic only to wash out during the final or Advanced phase. Class 44-W-4 served as guinea pigs to test the feasibility of skipping directly from Primary to Advanced. The policy proved completely successful and was thereafter instituted for the training of all cadets, male and female.

But the abrupt change to the North American AT-6 advanced trainer gave the women of 44-W-4 some anxious moments. The "Texan" had a 650-horsepower Pratt & Whitney engine and a retractable landing gear, which made it a "hot" plane to fly in comparison with the slower, sturdy Stearman. When grounded because of

snow and ice, the students would spend their time in the AT-6 cockpit just to get used to its more complex instrument panel.

As familiarity with the AT-6 increased, however, it became a great favorite with the women. It epitomized the joy and pride we found in flying—explanations as to why always sounded vague, poetic and mystical, corny, or jingoistic. But to walk out on the ramp in front of the hangars to see the neat rows of handsome, powerful planes shining in the sun always produced a thrill and a sense of pride.

Self-confidence grew as our skills increased. The satisfaction of achievement brought a profound sense of self-sufficiency and a deeply personal possession of one's own soul, which produced an even deeper sense of worth and a feeling of dignity and integrity.

Then suddenly AT-6 training was finished and instrument training began. A renewed sense of humility quickly returned with the realization of how much more we still had to learn.

Instrument training was part of the curriculum for every military aviator, and for this the fixed-gear, 450-horsepower, closed-canopy BT-13 was used. Dubbed the "Vultee Vibrator," it shuddered violently in a spin and recovered level flight slowly.

Contact flying "by the seat of your pants" was impossible when the weather turned stormy and a thick overcast cut off all visual contact with the world. The "feel"

of the plane, developed so carefully over so many hours of practice, now became a liability. Flying under the hood with reference only to the instrument panel required total concentration, patience, endurance, and determination, but it was an essential skill in case of an emergency or the necessity of flying at night.

After mastery of the essentials of instrument flying with an instructor, we flew together on "buddy rides." One acted as a lookout for other aircraft while the other pulled the blackout curtain around her canopy and practiced flying straight and level, then climbing and turning with reference only to the instruments, and finally working into even more difficult navigation using radio beams.

The "buddy rides" led us to develop greater trust and respect for one-another's flying ability, for we were literally putting our lives in each other's hands. No instructor was there to bail you out of trouble—only another student such as yourself. Each fervently hoped the other was capable. It took only a few rides to discover that she was.

Exacting as such flying was, flying at night challenged us even more. What had been so familiar in the daylight grew eerie and unreal when the plane shot up into the black void of night. Disorientation resulted at first, as it seemed almost impossible to get one's bearings when stars above, stars to the right, stars to the left, and a confusion of lights on the ground all merged together. But initial twinges of panic passed as proficiency increased, and soon night flying, too, was "duck soup."

A favorite pastime for us was to stand out on the flight line and watch the red and green wing lights as the planes circled overhead. The steady drone of the engines became sweet, familiar music. But one night that steady drone sputtered and stopped abruptly. An engine had quit on takeoff. The nose dropped into a glide but held a straight course dead ahead. Then a brilliant flash lit the sky as the ship plowed through high tension wires and plunged the entire field into darkness.

Fear engulfed the entire base—fear for the woman in the plane, fear for those waiting on taxi strips to take off, fear for those circling overhead. Within seconds the control tower operator announced in a matter-of-fact voice what had happened and calmly called each plane down by number. All came in with beautiful, smooth landings in clock-like precision, each clearing the runway quickly for the next incoming plane. No pilots anywhere, at any time, could have handled the emergency more efficiently.

Two hours later rescuers located the trainee still safely buckled in her cockpit, flashing her lights in the SOS Morse distress signal. She had cut the engine switch to avoid fire, and when she felt the gear drag through brush and strike ground, she pulled back on the stick and pancaked the plane into the ground. She escaped with no more than bruises and scratches, and was in the air again the next morning. Daylight revealed that the plane had stopped only a few feet short of a ravine.

Not everyone was so fortunate, for night flying had

already claimed its first victim. Apparently an engine caught fire in flight and the plane crashed. The bodies of Jane Champlin and her instructor, Henry Awbrey, were found in the charred wreckage. Such tragic accidents increased our determination to succeed at any cost and justify the faith Cochran and Arnold had placed in us. The cost was high. During World War II eleven WASPs were killed in training, and twenty-seven more died during performance of active duty.

**B**y the spring of 1944, Class 44-W-4 entered the final phase of its training—cross-country navigation. We studied maps and charts, and learned to plot wind drift and courses with precision. Small groups went out on short flights in primary trainers; then we flew AT-6s for longer distances east to Shreveport, Meridian, and Atlanta, or west to Tucson, Yuma, and Santa Fe.

For many this was their first sight of the rugged western mountains and magnificent stretches of desert valleys. The peacefulness of the seemingly endless land, and the dazzling, unforgettable beauty of blazing orange, pink, and gold sunsets made indelible impressions. Here many found a new appreciation of the beauty of nature and a sense of the presence of God. We women pilots viewed America from a perspective then shared by few other groups—and we deeply, sincerely loved our country.

By the time of these cross-country flights, the May 23 graduation seemed assured. New Santiago-blue uniforms were issued and altered, and group photographs taken for the class yearbook. Of the original ninety-five entrants, fifty-three could now visualize the approaching touch of silver wings.

A fifteen-miles-per-hour southeasterly wind, with ceilings and visibility unlimited under sunny Texas skies, were the weather conditions on April 16 as members of the class headed back to Sweetwater from cross-country flights to a variety of destinations. We were in high spirits, with the anticipation of visits from families and friends on graduation day, and excited over our prospective active-duty status, assignments, and new flying duties ahead. Almost six months had passed since November 1, 1943, but it seemed a lifetime ago. Few families realized the rapid maturity their "girls" had achieved, or could relate to these changes in them.

Twenty-five-year-old Mary Howson's family was no exception, but they appreciated their only daughter's sense of accomplishment even though they may not have fully understood it. With two sons already in military service, the Howsons were making plans for the long trip from Philadelphia to Texas to see Mary receive her wings.

Howson's April 16 cross-country hop to San Antonio and back would bring her total flying time to 165 hours, with nearly 50 of these in the AT-6. Approaching Avenger Field early in the afternoon, she descended to the eight-hundred-foot traffic pattern altitude and turned west onto the forty-five-degree leg for entry onto the downwind leg.





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At the same moment Elizabeth Erickson of Class 44-W-6, with ten hours in the AT-6, was on her first solo flight out of traffic. She started her re-entry onto the forty-five-degree leg from an easterly direction. Suddenly the peacefulness of the Texas sky was shattered by a deafening explosion as the two planes roared head-on into each other. Mary attempted to jump, unfastening her seat belt and pulling her ripcord pin. The canopy and shroud lines burst from the case, but there was insufficient altitude left for the chute to open. Her body was found about thirty feet from the scattered fragments of wreckage. Elizabeth Erickson was pinned in her aircraft and died instantly.

The tragic circumstances of the two fatalities cast a pall over both classes, but depression was especially acute for the seniors. Mary Howson's body was accompanied to her birthplace of Wayne, Pennsylvania, by one of her classmates, Mickie Carmichael of Tyler, Texas. The military escort and government-issue pine box provided for deceased male fliers were not available. Her classmates provided Mary's coffin, and all of the trainees, army officers, and other personnel at Avenger Field contributed to the casket blanket of purple irises with WASP spelled out in yellow daisies. No military services or flag were authorized, despite the WASP director's condolence telegram to the Howsons that "Mary had lost her life in the service of her country."

Not even death could cancel the absolute necessity of

*An important but tedious and occasionally dangerous assignment for WASP pilots was towing target sleeves for anti-aircraft and air-to-air gunnery practice. Here WASP Helen Snapp flies a Curtiss A-25 on a target towing mission over Camp Stewart, Georgia, in 1944.*

keeping up the daily schedule. Class 44-W-4's flight leader reminded them that flying would go on the following day.

Graduation day soon came, and families and friends arrived. VIPs occupied the reviewing stand on the flight line. Class 44-W-4 was the first group of WASPs to be honored with an all-trainee wing review parade. Each class composed and sang a special song in tribute to the departing graduates; one favorite parodied "Yankee Doodle Dandy":

*We are Yankee Doodle pilots,  
Yankee Doodle do or die;  
Real live nieces of our Uncle Sam,  
Born with a yearning to fly.  
Keep in step to all our classes,  
March to flight line with our pals;  
Yankee Doodle came to Texas  
Just to fly the PTs,  
We are those Yankee Doodle gals.*

Singing had been an important feature of their daily life, for they were usually an exuberant, energetic, and



happy group. Their lyrics combined bawdy with bravado. They sang to keep cadence while marching from barracks to mess hall or flight line, or while riding the "cattle" trucks to auxiliary fields. Singing bolstered their spirits when they were discouraged, tired, or just plain scared, and it helped develop the great camaraderie among them.

Of that camaraderie one wrote:

"All of us realized what a terrific spot we were on and drew closer together as a result. I've seen everything now, for I have seen the miracle of women working together in cooperation and friendliness; for we knew that on our efforts hung the fate, at least in any military form of endeavor, of not us alone but of the untold future of women pilots. . . ."

The climax of each graduation was the moment the trainee had her official silver wings pinned to her stunning Santiago-blue uniform. The WASP were the first to wear Air Force blues, and their uniform, selected by the Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, was considered by many to be the most attractive of all the World War II uniforms.

One of the most impressive WASP graduation ceremonies was held on March 11, 1944, when General Hap Arnold delivered the principal address to an assemblage that included seven generals as well as Jacqueline Cochran and Nancy Love.

*During three years of service, WASPs ferried more than twelve thousand aircraft from factories and between military bases. Here Louisa Thompson prepares to take off in a four-hundred-miles-per-hour Lockheed P-38 Lightning. Flying such high performance aircraft was often dangerous: twenty-seven WASPs died in crashes while on active duty.*

By that date, 441 trainees had graduated and were performing a variety of essential jobs in active service, many of which were nevertheless considered monotonous by most male pilots.

One of the most tedious of such duties was towing target sleeves for ground antiaircraft gunnery practice and for B-17 gun crews, on missions sometimes lasting up to five hours in duration. Not every such flight was boring, however: on one occasion bullets came so close to the tow plane cockpit that the unflappable WASP pilot informed the gunners over her radio that she was pulling the target sleeve, not pushing it!

Other WASPs "slow-timed" new engines and test-hopped planes newly repaired by maintenance crews or modified at repair depots. They transported administrative officers from base to base; acted as copilots for male officers logging their required flight time; transported nurses and medical personnel; served as flight instructors; and flew Chinese cadets on cross-country training

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flights. One WASP spent her free Sunday mornings flying a Catholic priest to remote Army bases in Arizona so that mass could be held.

One of the chief flying duties for WASPs remained ferrying aircraft. The experiences of Ann Hamilton, assigned to the Air Transport Command, were typical:

"The modification center was located at Evansville [Indiana]. Each day for three weeks I flew a P-47 to Oakland, California, returning at night on a military C-47 shuttle where I got my sleep. The C-47 had bucket seats, but I preferred to sit on the floor. I had a way of sitting with my knees to my chest, curled up. I'd get inside my parachute bag and have someone zip from both sides. There was no heat in the cabin."

In all, the WASP delivered more than twelve thousand aircraft, logging over sixty million miles in every type of plane (over seventy) the Air Force had in operation. They took their duties seriously and performed them in an unobtrusive, matter-of-fact, common sense manner with as little fanfare as possible. Their World War II service and records contributed significantly to establishing knowledge and respect for women's capabilities and potential.

**A**t the WASP graduation exercises on March 11, 1944, General Arnold concluded his laudatory speech by stating that, if necessary, everything needed short of actual combat could be done by women pilots. He paid the organization further tribute by presenting a bronze plaque dedicated to the "Best Women Pilots in the World."

Despite these accolades, just seven months later each WASP received a letter containing stunning and disappointing news from her general:

HEADQUARTERS OF THE ARMY AIR FORCES  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

1 October 1944

To Each Member of the WASP:

I am very proud of you young women and the outstanding job you have done as members of the Air Forces Team. When we needed you, you came through and have served most commendably under very difficult circumstances.

The WASP became part of the Air Forces because we had to explore the nation's total manpower resources and in order to release male pilots for other duties. Their very successful record of accomplishment has proved that in any future total effort the nation can count on thousands of its young women to fly any of its aircraft. You have freed male pilots for other work, but now the war situation has changed and the time has come when your volunteered services are no longer needed. The situation is that, if you continue in service, you will be replacing instead of releasing our young men. I know that the WASP wouldn't want that.

So, I have directed that the WASP program be inacti-

vated and all WASP be released on 20 December 1944. I want you to know that I appreciate your war service and that the AAF will miss you. I also know that you will join us in being thankful that our combat losses have proved to be much lower than anticipated, even though it means inactivation of the WASP.

I am sorry that it is impossible to send a personal letter to each of you.

My sincerest thanks and Happy Landings always.

H. H. ARNOLD  
General, U.S. Army  
Commanding General, Army Air Forces

Arnold's final graduation address sounded an ironic valedictory. More than one hundred WASPs on active duty returned to Sweetwater on December 7, 1944, and listened in total dismay:

"I want to stress how valuable I believe this whole WASP program has been for the country. If another national emergency arises—let us hope it does not, but let us this time face the possibility—if it does, we will not again look upon a women's flying organization as an experiment. We will know that they can handle our fastest fighters, our heaviest bombers; we will know that they are capable of ferrying, target towing, flying training, test flying, and the countless other activities which you have proved you can do.

"This is valuable knowledge for the air age into which we are now entering. But please understand that I do not look upon the WASP and the job they have done in this war as a project or experiment. A pioneering venture, yes, solely an experiment, no. The WASP are an accomplishment.

"We are winning this war—we still have a long way to go—but we are winning it. Every WASP who has contributed to the training and operation of the Air Forces has filled a vital and necessary place in the jigsaw pattern of victory. Some of you are discouraged sometimes, all of us are, but be assured you have filled a necessary place in the overall picture of the Air Force.

"The WASP have completed their mission. Their job has been successful. But as is usual in war, the cost has been heavy. Thirty-seven WASP have died while helping their country move toward the moment of final victory. The Air Forces will long remember their service and their final sacrifice.

"So this last graduation day, I salute you and all WASP. We of the Army Air Forces are proud of you; we will never forget our debt to you."

**D**espite the continuing national emergency, services of the WASP had been terminated abruptly through the action of the United States Congress. Their dismissal at the height of mobilization appeared dangerously shortsighted, and in terms of the time, effort, and money invested in the program, such action seemed incredibly irresponsible. The failure of Congress to milita-

rize the women pilots who had proven so valuable in helping to build the greatest air power in the world can be explained only by a review of the complexities of the situation.

Requests from the military forces for legislation during the war were seldom denied. Support for militarization of the women's service detachments was relatively strong in 1942 and 1943, when their assistance was clearly essential for national security.

House of Representatives Bill 4219, the long-awaited legislation designed to grant the WASPs full military status (and with it, for the first time, insurance coverage, hospitalization, burial benefits, and veteran status) was introduced on February 17, 1944. Unfortunately for the WASPs, new factors were by this time influencing Congressional decisions.

By 1944, the Air Forces' massive flight training program was reaching its peak. Plans for the coming invasion of Europe now necessitated the shifting of priorities to ground troops. As a consequence, there was a cutback in Air Forces training programs that affected two groups of males: (1) nine hundred civilian flight instructors and five thousand civilian trainees in the Civil Aeronautics Administration's War Training Service Program; and (2) eight thousand civilian flight instructors employed by the Air Forces in their contract schools for cadets.

These men were dismissed when the Air Forces shut down various flight schools—thus removing them from the draft-deferred status many held as reservists. The Air Forces accepted as many of these men as possible, but many were unable to meet the demanding physical and mental requirements for military pilots.

Threatened with induction into the infantry, these pilots exerted intense lobbying pressure on their Congressmen to defeat Bill 4219 and instead pass legislation favorable to their employment. The resulting controversy was heightened by political and emotional overtones.

It was inconceivable to General Arnold that well-trained, qualified women pilots not be utilized. On March 22, 1944, he testified to the House Committee on Military Affairs that "we should use every means we can to put women in where they can replace men. This bill [House Bill 4219] will help to do that but will also make for more effective employment of the present WASPs that we have in our service."

Discussion in the Commission on Military Affairs centered around the protests of the released men who demanded the positions occupied by the WASPs. Statistics showed that one-third of the men had been assimilated into the Air Forces. General Arnold adamantly refused to reduce standards in order to accommodate others who could not pass qualifying tests. Military pilots held a highly respected position, and he wanted no erosion of that hard-won recognition.

In executive session with the House Military Affairs Committee, Arnold again expressed his preference for the services of the more highly qualified, trained, and better motivated WASPs over the male civilian pilots.

He was disgusted with the men's demands for preferential treatment in spite of the new needs of the country and the necessity to coordinate overall manpower requirements for the projected invasion of Normandy. He questioned the integrity and capability of a man who had held a "safe" noncombat job for so long and then insisted on dodging more hazardous duty.

The Military Affairs Committee agreed with the general, releasing a two-page report that recommended passage of the bill to commission the WASP. But lobbying efforts of the men grew stronger, even bitter.

The chairman of the Civil Service Committee, Robert J. Ramspeck of Georgia, instituted an investigation of the WASP (technically Civil Service employees), ostensibly to find out how public funds were being spent on a program about which he knew little. The majority report of Ramspeck's investigation concluded that the WASP was "wasted money and wasted effort."

Most damaging of all was the committee's accusation that the authority of Congress had been bypassed, and that Congress had never authorized the WASP program. The War Department responded that its authority for such action was based on the 1943 military budget section that provided for such "salaries and wages of civilian employees as were deemed necessary."

Ramspeck disagreed that such salaries were necessary; twelve committee members sided with him. General Arnold's arguments for the WASP failed to change the committee's recommendation that the training program be discontinued, although a minority opinion stated that the War Department, not Congress, should decide what was necessary. The committee also recommended that the male pilots be utilized immediately.

Again the War Department assured Congress that the men had received every consideration, that the two issues should be viewed separately, and that the WASPs should not be victimized by pitting them against the men.

**T**he press, earlier supportive of women pilots, now turned antagonistic. Although the *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, and *Boston Globe* favored militarization of the WASP, writers in other papers throughout the country supported the male pilots against the women. The media, which had aroused women to answer their government's call to war work outside their homes, now swung public opinion against those who had done so.

Editorial writers for the *Washington Post*, *Washington Star*, *Washington Daily News*, *Washington Times-Herald*, and *Time* magazine led the opposition to continuation of the WASP program. Several such articles, heavily weighted with emotional and social bias, were read and recorded in the Congressional Record. Repre-

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*Suggested additional reading: The Stars at Noon by Jacqueline Cochran (Robert Hale, Ltd., London, 1955) and Women Aloft by Valerie Moolman and the editors of Time-Life Books (Time-Life Books, 1981).*

representative James Morrison of Louisiana quoted a statement by a *Washington Daily News* writer that "it [WASP] smells like a racket of some kind." Representative Compton I. White of California read a May 29, 1944, *Time* editorial that stated that:

"The need to recruit teen-aged schoolgirls, stenographers, clerks, beauticians, housewives, and factory workers to pilot the military planes of this government is as startling as it is invalid . . . the present program should be immediately and sharply curtailed . . ."

An unusually vicious article entitled "Those Charming People," by Austine Cassini, appeared in the June 14, 1944, edition of the *Washington Times-Herald*:

"In the last week the shapely pilot [Jacqueline Cochran] has seen her coveted commission come closer and closer . . . One of the highest placed generals, it seems, gazed into her eyes, and since then has taken her *cause celebre* very much 'to heart' . . . She's such an attractive composition of windblown bob, smiling eyes, and outdoor skin, nobody blames him. It's whispered he's battling like a knight of olde, or olde knight, for the faire Cochran."

Such insinuations could not escape notice by Arnold's family. Public opinion was altered; morale plummeted among the women pilots. One WASP resigned, basing her action on the August 6, 1944, *Washington Post* column of Drew Pearson:

"Magnetic Miss Cochran has even persuaded the Air Force's smiling commander to make several secret trips to Capitol Hill to lobby for continuation of her pets, the WASPs. After Congress refused to let WASPs into the Army, Arnold and Cochran adopted backdoor strategy . . . The WASPs, like the WACs, claim they were recruited to release men for active service. Now they say the WASPs are just 'replacing men, period.'"

Far from being pictured as heroines, the WASPs were now regarded now as participants in a frivolous program that had wasted millions of dollars of tax money.

The competent, proven performance of the women was never the issue. Congressional debate on Bill 4219 lasted forty-two hours and culminated on Wednesday, June 21, 1944, shortly after the D-Day invasion of Europe. A roll call vote was taken, with 188 yeas, 169 nays, and 73 not voting. By nineteen votes the WASP militarization bill advocated by the Administration, the Secretary of War, the House of Representatives Military Affairs Committee, and the General of the Army Air Forces was defeated.

The message from the legislative branch of government was clear: women must not occupy positions in the military if men were available for them. The bold experiment was ended, for it could not continue without Congressional approval and appropriations. The WASP became the first of the women's services to be disbanded, and the battle to give women equal opportunity in military cockpits was lost. The backlash of official government action against the WASPs deeply hurt and bewildered them, but they clung to the knowledge that their service record had been outstanding.

On June 23, 1972, 315 former WASPs met for a thirtieth-anniversary reunion at their old training base in Sweetwater, Texas. Time had grayed their hair and wrinkled once-suntanned complexions, but none noticed or cared as they relived long-ago hours spent in the air and at the old hangar. Following an air show, the unveiling of a marker by Jacqueline Cochran, and a banquet and speeches, they gathered around their motel pool to look at old picture albums and reminisce. Conversations generated a spontaneous desire to somehow return to December 20, 1944, and correct the injustice dealt them by a strange set of circumstances.

By the next reunion in 1974, a Militarization Committee under the guidance of Colonel Bruce Arnold, U.S. Air Force (retired), the son of deceased General Hap Arnold, had been formed. Several more years of concerted political action by WASP members, under the leadership of Senator Barry Goldwater, plus help from all of the female members of Congress, produced Congressional bills and hearings.

On September 20, 1977, a select Congressional subcommittee on veteran affairs in the House of Representatives heard testimony on Bill 3277, designed to provide long-overdue recognition to the Women Airforce Service Pilots and deem their World War II service to have been active duty in the armed forces for the purposes of laws administered by the Veterans Administration.

During the hearings, committee member Margaret Heckler questioned witness Bruce Arnold why he had devoted so many hours to the cause of the WASP. Colonel Arnold replied:

"This was one of my father's desires . . . he would have been right here doing this too, if he were alive, and . . . I am carrying on some of his unfinished work. My father worked on the principle of 'get it done now and work out the details later.'"

It was indeed later, but despite forceful opposition, efforts were rewarded as Congress finally decided to recognize the WASP, providing the Secretary of Defense determined that the service had been *de facto* active military duty.

On May 21, 1979, the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, Antonio Chaves, presented the first authentic WASP discharge, stating that "the efforts and sacrifices of a talented and courageous group of women have been accorded [retroactive] status as military veterans . . . and inspire the forty-seven thousand Airforce women who now follow in their footsteps." The unknown, gutsy women of the World War II Army Air Forces at last occupied their rightful place as the first female military pilots in American history. ★

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