

The Long Flight Home

Women served--and died--in WWII. Now they are remembered

by Ann Darr

We were at war. The attack had come from a direction we weren't looking. Of course, old Army Gen. Billy Mitchell had predicted back in the 1920s that someday the Japanese would fly over Pearl Harbor and bomb it to smithereens. But nobody believed him. He was even cashiered out of the Army.

My young husband had already signed up to serve in the Navy when he finished his medical training at New York's Bellevue Hospital Center. His uncle had been an admiral in WWI. I had a job at NBC Radio writing copy for *The Woman of Tomorrow*, a half-hour daily program on fashion, food, books, and "how to keep your husband happy." More and more, I was using news bulletins about stories of courage and escape in Europe, even movements of the German war machine. We urged women to save sugar, tinfoil, gasoline--anything for the European war effort.

Our show featured a guest interview, often on current events. Once I was filling in on the air and interviewed Clarence Taylor of Taylor-craft Aviation. Growing excited as we talked, I strayed from the written page (all scripts had to be approved by the "continuity department"). I got a throat-cutting gesture from the production booth.

But flying was in my blood. I was raised in Iowa, a prairie child: All we had was the sky. After my mother was killed in an auto crash when I was 3, I was told I could see her again in heaven. The only way I knew to get there was to fly. The childhood myth followed me and, when the Civilian Pilot Training program



Graduation from Avenger meant assignments all over the country. Our jobs were aerial dishwashery, as we called them. WASPs ferried thousands of planes from factories to bases or to ports to be shipped overseas. We tested planes, flew simulated strafing and bombing missions, searchlight tracking and mountain mapping. Any flying job that needed doing, I tested planes at the advanced training base in Stockton, Calif., and once flew with a flock of UC-78s with wind-damaged wings back to the factory in Texas to have them repaired. We flew into the most violent windstorm I have ever tried to avoid.

My next assignment was towing targets at the gunnery school at Las Vegas, flying B-26s while B-17s flew beside us, firing live ammunition at the sleeve we towed. After a target run, we dropped the sleeve on the desert. The ammo had been dipped in colored wax, and the rim of the holes showed which gunner had hit the target. We used those holey red, blue, green, yellow targets for bedspreads, curtains, whatever.

We understood when we were recruited that Civil Service would provide our pay until the bill in Congress militarizing us was passed. Hap Arnold was on our side and had all the clout needed to get the bill through. Little did we know.

course began at the University of Iowa, I applied-one woman in a class of 10. I got my private pilot's license.

It was 1943 before I knew how I could use it to help the war effort. It may surprise some people today, but many of us went into the service for reasons both patriotic and humane. Human beings were being destroyed purposely and methodically. Maybe it was naive to think we could make a difference. But somebody had to stop Hitler's march across Europe. It was up to Americans to try. My college students today have no concept of the uncertainty we lived with in the 1940s. Bulletins from the South Pacific registered **loss** after loss. We could not take it for granted that we would win World War II.

In 1943, my husband outfitted a destroyer and went to the South Pacific as ship's doc. I was on my way to Sweetwater, Texas, on a train filled with troops, to begin my pilot training with the Women's Air Force Service Pilots, the WASPs.

Again and again I have met people who lived through WWII and didn't know we **existed**. **"Female pilots in WWII?** I thought all the women were Riveter Rosies." Or I hear, "So the Army taught you to fly?" No: Ail the women who went into the flying service had to know how to fly. The training was for precision flying in Air Force planes.

Army Air Forces Gen. H. H. "Hap" Arnold encouraged Jacqueline Cochran to go to England to see how the British were using female pilots. Cochran headed the Army Air Forces flying-training program for women pilots with a private license but who had fewer than 500 hours. Sweet-water's Avenger Field was our base. Over the gate was the figure of Fifinella, the flying gremlin, in her red dress, gold helmet, and blue wings, that Walt Disney drew for us-our mascot to ward off gremlins and sabotage. She was the shoulder patch on

We were even sent to Orlando, Fla., to officers' training school, where we learned military law, military history, how to protect ourselves in military maneuvers. It was there we first heard rumors that we were no longer needed. We knew they were false. How could they do without us?

I will never forget the camaraderie. Friends of my forever. To share the anxieties, aching bones, the effort to do it right. Living close-in, with all the ups and downs.

And I will never forget when a plane crashed in Las Vegas, the male pilot's body was sent home to be buried with honors. The female co-pilot., the Army said it was not responsible. The Civil Service said it was not responsible. We took up a collection to send her body home.

Thirty-eight women pilots died serving their country. When Congress took up the bill to militarize WASPs in 1944 we were advised (we heard "ordered") to act like "ladies" and keep silent. Mistake. Antagonism against women pilots was rampant, fanned by a popular male columnist whose name I have erased.

The bill did not pass. The ugly rumors were true. We were to be disbanded. The news arrived in double letters, first one from General Arnold, next from Jacqueline Cochran: Many more soldiers are returning from overseas than had been expected. You have done a fine job, goodbye. On Dec. 20, 1944, before the war was over, we were summarily dismissed. No matter there was still a need for us, doing the flying male pilots scorned or called too dangerous in those worn-out planes. No matter many of us had left jobs we could not go back to. December 20 came and we went. Paying our own way home, of course.

our flight suits. Avenger, the only all-female base in U.S. history, was fondly called Cochran's Convent.

Twenty-five thousand women applied for the training; 1,830 were accepted after rigorous testing; 1,074 of us won our wings. We flew more than 60 million miles in every type of plane, from P-51 fighters (called pursuits back then) to the B-29 Superfortress. The first women checked out in that huge ship had a specific mission: Male pilots at one base balked at flying because of B-29 "bugs." When a crew of women stepped down from that B-29, the commandant had no more trouble with male pilots. "Even women" could fly it.

"Didn't you hate being used as a guinea pig?" one of the women was asked. "To fly the B-29, I'd be any kind of pig."

At Avenger we were housed in barracks, rose to reveille, marched to the mess hall and flight line, were required to salute Army officers. We needed permission to leave the base and had a strict return time. Taps at 10. We were treated as Air Forces' trainees, with a packed schedule of ground school, phys ed, flight training with civilian instructors-and were checked out at the end of each phase by Army personnel. These were high-stress times. Coming back to our bay in the evening and finding an empty bed was jolting. Wash-out time-a baymate n her civvies, packing her suitcase for home. Or finding an empty cot and the ambulance crash siren still echoing in our tars. One girl whose plane went into an inverted spin survived her jump to learn of the cut rudder cable, leaving just enough to for a pilot to get off the ground. Sabotage. By whom?

More than 30 years later, when another bill came up in Congress to give us the title of "veteran" retroactively, we ended our silence. WASPs came from all over the country to make our case. Even though the committee chairman said publicly to Bernice Falk Haydu, a former WASP pilot, "I promise you this, young lady, the bill will never leave my committee." When the final vote was taken, we had our place in history. We now had recognition and a burial plot. No GI Bill, no insurance, but we had the name we'd fought for: veteran.

When, in 1987, Brig. Gen. Wilma Vaught began raising funds and hopes for a Women in Military Service for America Memorial, very few dreamed she could do it in 10 years. General Vaught is a determined woman and she vowed to put the memorial in place in time for the remaining WWII veterans to be alive to see it.

She knew, better than we did, I think, what it would mean, how it would feel on this Veterans Day to be remembered-finally. The memorial was dedicated last month in Arlington, Va. Many of us went to the ceremony because we thought we should. What we experienced was a need we didn't know we had. To gather as a bonded group with every body (and soul) there. Flying buddies we hadn't seen for decades. Sons and daughters of mothers who had not lived long enough came to pay their respect, their admiration. More than 30,000 women-and their friends.

We were exhausted physically and emotionally, but we marched across the Potomac from the Lincoln Memorial to our memorial with all the energy and flair we could muster. This was our day! This was our night! Recognition for the 1,800,000 women who served or are serving in the military forces of the United States. And when wwI Navy Yeoman Frieda Mae Hardin, now 101,

spoke to the crowd, reminding us she couldn't vote when she signed up, saying to the young people, "Go for it!" we were almost ready to serve again. ·

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