

EXTENDING THE WINGS OF WAR

*Nine women from Tarrant County
were part of an elite group of pilots
who ferried any plane needed in WWII*

DORA STROTHER HELD OUT her very feminine right hand and looked at it, frowning. Was that, she wondered, a four-throttle hand? She had to spread her fingers to the limit to reach an octave on a piano. Could that same hand shove four throttles forward simultaneously on a four-engine bomber? She was at an Army air base in Birmingham, Ala., during World War II, and had just been chosen as the first WASP (Women's Airforce Service Pilot) to command the world's then largest bomber, the B-29 Superfortress.

She was 5'5" and weighed less than 130 pounds. Her heart thudded with excitement and apprehension as she wondered if she and her co-pilot, another 5'5" WASP, were big enough to handle the B-29 Superfortress.

She had checked out in the A-20 Douglas attack bomber, which was why she had been chosen to fly the B-29.

By Marion S. Hodgson

But the Superfortress was still an unproven commodity — and a feared one. The popular test pilot who had flown it for its initial unsuccessful test hop had been killed doing it. The huge bomber had been put back in wraps until World War II forced its re-emergence.

Rose Palmer, poses in her "zoot" suit before she climbs into one of the planes she flew during WWII.



Our country had to have a long-range bomber that could fly to Japan and drop bombs without refueling, with enough range left over to land safely. The Boeing "29" was our only hope, but because of early catastrophes, some men were balking at flying it.

The Air Corps set out to shame them and show them how easy it really was — so easy, in fact, that "even a woman could do it."

"We would fly anything we were given a chance to and felt lucky to have the opportunity," says Strother, whose maiden name was Dougherty. "It was unheard of for girls to fly military planes in this country in those days, and they didn't do it again for 30 years.

"Sure, I was scared. But I was more eager than afraid. After flying remote-control drones for antiaircraft practice with live ammunition at Camp Stewart, Ga., the chance to fly the Superfortress was like being handed a slice of heaven."

She had two days of instruction under Lt. Col. Paul Tibbets, who later commanded the B-29 that dropped the first atom bomb on Hiroshima. "He was the best pilot, the best teacher, who ever lived," Strother declares. "He taught me that it didn't take great strength or size to be a good bomber pilot — and, yes, my hands were adequate!

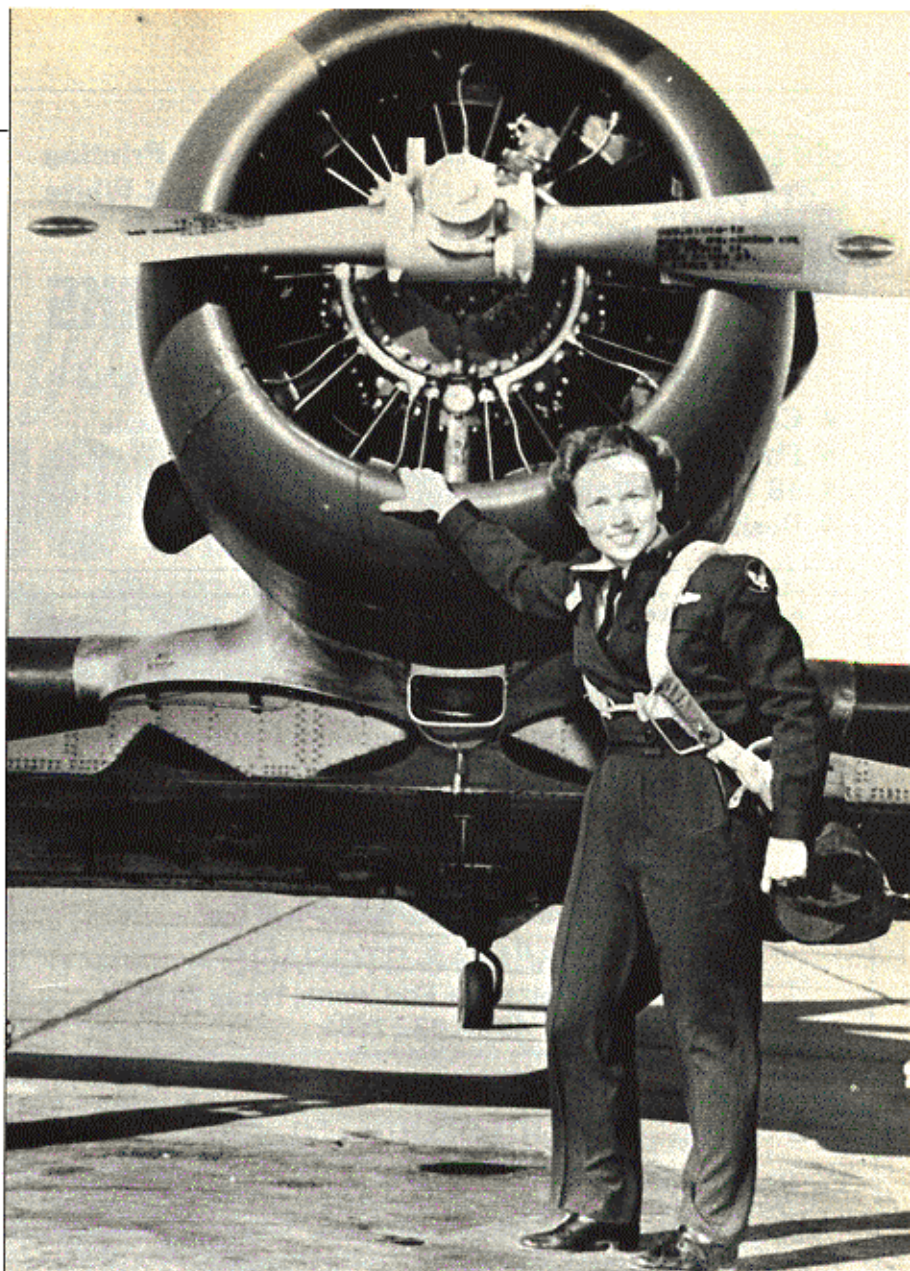
"He gave me such confidence in myself and the B-29 that when there was a crisis, I could cope without panic."

And a crisis sprang up soon enough, during a check ride given her by a Civil Aeronautics Authority inspector who rode in the co-pilot's seat.

The qualification ride was being made at the request of Tibbets because WASPs were civilians, and Tibbets was about to send Strother and another WASP out on a demonstration flight around the country. What he didn't know was that the CAA inspector had never been inside a Superfortress before.

"Still, I was supposed to demonstrate my ability to the inspector, so first we were going to 'shoot' (make) a few landings," Strother recalls. "On the first landing, on final approach, the flight engineer yelled, 'Fire!'

"Col. Tibbets had given me so many simulated fires and other 'emergencies' during my two-day training that, when an engine really did catch on fire, it was no big deal. I shouted



the instructions I'd been trained to give, and the engineer — who sat back-to-back with the inspector and had most of the instruments — quickly had things under control, and we landed.

"But the inspector didn't share my nonchalance about the fire. He declared the flight test completed then and there. No more landings!"

After the war, Strother earned a Ph.D. from New York University, then returned to aviation to fly helicopters. She snatched the women's distance and altitude records away from the Soviets in 1961, when she had only nine solo hours. She became manager of 20 scientists in the Human Factors Engineering Groups at Bell Helicopter before retiring recently. She now is on the Army Science Board.

Last year Strother was installed in the Texas Women's Hall of Fame in Austin. On the same day her picture went up in the Smith-

Ann Atkeison poses with an AT-6 "Texan" trainer, one of several planes she flew during her heyday as a WASP in WWII.



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Dave Siegel



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sonian Institution's Air and Space Museum for her many contributions to aviation.

As a WASP, she served under the high-flying "blonde bombshell," Jacqueline Cochran, controversial and legendary aviatrix. Cochran, according to Fort Worth's champion acrobatic pilot Charlie Hillard, held more world records in her lifetime than any other aviator, male or female.

Cochran was director of all women pilots trained by the Air Corps. Her office was in Fort Worth's old T&P train station, where the Training Command took up all 12 floors of the building. Like her pilots, Jacqueline Cochran was a civilian.

There are nine of her ex-WASPs living in Tarrant County. All of them completed rigorous military flight training at Sweetwater, with the intention, Gen. Hap Arnold announced, of releasing male pilots for combat duty overseas.

One of the nine is Faith Buchner Richards. Like Dora Strother, she qualified as a bomber pilot then, after the war, as a helicopter pilot.

Richards was stationed at Greenwood, Miss., where she flew as an engineering test pilot. One day another pilot abandoned an Air Corps "Yellow Peril" (Steerman trainer) in a cotton patch between Greenwood and Memphis, Tenn., because of engine trouble. Richards and a mechanic were sent to see if the plane could be repaired and flown out.

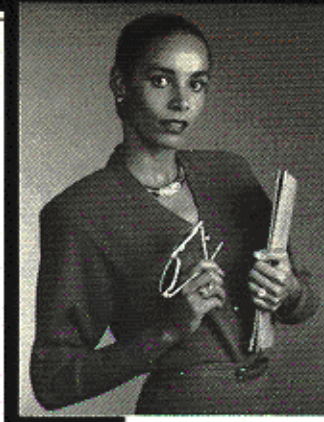
The pilot who abandoned the open-cockpit biplane had reported a dangerous drop in oil pressure. But when the sergeant checked the engine on the ground, he could find nothing wrong. So, Richards flew the plane out and headed for home base.

As soon as the engine got hot, however, the oil pressure dropped ominously. And now there was an added complication: the oil temperature shot up into the danger zone. Richards headed away from the hilly countryside toward the Mississippi River delta, looking for a smoother landing site.

Oil splattered all over the windshield, and she had to stick her head out the side of the cockpit to see. Her reward was a face full of oil, which plastered her hair to her skull.

"I coaxed the plane along until I got to a grassy field," she remembers, "and then I put her down. That was the easy part. The hard part was getting someone to give this apparition a ride to the nearest telephone.

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"Finally I hitched a ride on a hay wagon. The nervous farmer dropped me off at a store. After I made my call to the base, I turned around and saw that the whole town was pressed against the store window, looking in at me. They have their own lasting impression of girl pilots!"

Another Tarrant County WASP is Ann Atkeison, a real estate broker in Fort Worth. She knew from the age of four that she had to fly. She remembers racing her stick horse toward a field in her hometown of Munday, where she had seen a plane, which had run out of gas, go down.

"The pilot lifted me up and let me look inside his airplane. He was the most glamorous man I'd ever seen," Atkeison recalls, "in his helmet and goggles, white scarf, riding breeches and boots. I never knew his name, but I knew I had to be a pilot like him."

Her first flight was while she was in grade school. Reg Robbins, one of Texas' trailblazing pilots, took her aloft in a trimotored Ford. He was barnstorming, and he charged a penny a pound for passengers. "It cost me 66 cents," Atkeison says.

She worked at her father's grocery store to make enough money to take another ride. The next opportunity came when she was a teenager, when Fort Worth's Ed Ritchie flew to Munday in a Stinson. Ritchie, seeing how enamored the girl was with flying, encouraged her to become a pilot. His own wife, Fort Worth's Camilla Collet, flew planes, he told her.

As soon as Atkeison graduated from the University of Colorado, she headed for Fort Worth and Ritchie's flying school at Meacham Field. Our country was at war, she knew about Cochran's WASP program, and she wanted in.

It took her only one month under Ritchie's tutelage to get the necessary private pilot's license to qualify as a WASP trainee for Air Corps instruction. The next month she was at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, marching, doing calisthenics, going to ground school, and — at last! — flying those big, beautiful Air Force trainers.

But before finishing primary training, she broke her back — horseback riding on a free weekend.

"It broke my heart as well," she says. "Everything in my life had led up to this opportunity — to fly big planes and serve my country at the same time . . . I could see it all disappearing down a black hole . . ."



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She pleaded passionately with the flight surgeon at Avenger Field to be allowed to remain there. She had the feeling that if she left, she would never make it back. He told her the portable X-ray machine and facilities there were inadequate, but she didn't care. Her entreaties finally convinced him that this was the most important thing in her life. He let her stay.

Atkeison was strapped to a board for two weeks, then lay on a cot for two more weeks until she could endure harnessing a parachute to her body. She had to drop back a class, but she stayed at the field, and soon she was flying again.

After completing primary, basic, advanced, instrument and twin-engine training, she was presented her silver Air Corps wings by Gen. Arnold, commanding general of the Army Air Forces, himself. She was a bona fide military pilot, yet still a civilian. It would take 33 years and an act of Congress to make the WASPs official Air Force pilots retroactively. By then the AAF had become the U.S. Air Force.

After graduation from Avenger Field, Atkeison went on to Perrin Field at Sherman to give instrument check rides and refresher courses until deactivation of the WASPs in December

1944. With the war winding down in Europe pilots were returning home, and with cadets still graduating from flight training, the Air Corps announced that it now had more than enough pilots to fill the cockpits.

Some of the WASPs returned to more traditional roles of women in those days; but many, like Atkeison, rebelled. Once again she headed for Fort Worth and Ritchie's Flying Service, where she ferried surplus planes until there were none left to fly. After that her wings were clipped, and she worked as an engineering writer at General Dynamics for 18 years.

Two more Fort Worth WASPs, Rose Alice Palmer and Martha Harmon Rountree, both B-26 pilots, towed targets (that were fired on with live ammunition by green gunners) as their contribution to the war effort. "When we first checked out in the Marauder, we didn't know it was called 'The Flying Coffin' or we wouldn't have been so thrilled," Palmer laughs.

Another B-26 pilot living in Fort Worth is Joann Garrett, who was a recreational therapist at the former U.S. Public Health Hospital in Fort Worth.

Most WASPs had husbands, fathers, brothers or sweethearts fighting

in Europe or the Pacific. But whatever motivated them, WASPs like Fort Worth's Virginia Williams Hubbard, Kathryn J. Kleinecke, and Marion Stegeman Hodgson, pushed through six months of tough, intensive flight training in outsized "zoot suits" — coveralls inherited from the flying cadets — and went on to serve in whatever capacity Jacqueline Cochran decreed. (Toward the end of the WASP program, the girls finally had their own uniform.)

As part of the WASP program, many women pilots flew for the Ferry Command, picking up ships at factories and delivering them to air bases or points of debarkation for overseas use. "By the end of September 1944, WASPs were delivering three-fifths of all pursuit ships," Gen. William Tunner says in his book, "Over the Hump."

"Every big bomber and every cargo plane flown by woman pilots was safely delivered. In all, they delivered 12,652 planes, with only three fatal accidents" (in trainers or pursuits). "Their accident rate was lower than the men's (for the same type of flying)."

Even so, 38 WASPs — out of about 1,000 who served — were killed in the line of duty, 11 of them were killed in training.

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