

# An Opportunity of a Lifetime

by Marie (Mountain) Clark

**D**uring World War II, the home front, called the “Z-I,” or “Zone of the Interior” by the military, consisted of whatever went on concerning the war in the continental United States. My service in the Z-I was somewhat unusual because, although I was classified as a civilian, I was also in uniform, serving at U.S. Army Air Force bases and subject to military orders and regulations.

As a member of the Women’s Air Force Service Pilots (WASP), I completed a full course of air force pilot training identical to that of male army air force cadets and served as a qualified air force pilot on an army air force base. The status of the WASP, however, was that of a civil service employee, a situation that later led to controversy and the disbanding of the WASP before the end of the war. Despite this, I was extremely grateful for the opportunity to fly as an army air force pilot, an experience that exceeded my wildest dreams as a child star-struck with airplanes and aviation.

In 1939 I graduated from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, with a music degree, majoring in flute performance. For several years I played professionally as the principal flute in the Des Moines-Drake Symphony Orchestra. Following graduation, I continued in those activities as well as establishing a teaching practice. Around this time, the government started the Civilian Pilot Training Program for college students. I jumped at the opportunity. By the time I had completed seventy-five hours of flying, mostly solo, I learned that the record-setting aviatrix, Jacqueline Cochran, was recruiting women to join what was to become the WASP. To qualify, one had to have a minimum of thirty-five hours of flight time, so I applied. I was accepted in mid-1943 and was ordered to report to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, to begin flight training with Class 44-W-1. I was thrilled! Out of the 25,000 women who applied, 1,800 were accepted, but only 1,074



David Woods

Marie Mountain (far right) poses with her primary instructor, Clark Rowe and his other students in front of an AT-6 at Avenger Field, in Sweetwater, Texas, on August 1943. Edith Keene (next to Marie) was killed as a passenger in an AT-6 crash in April 1944. Marie received her Silver Wings (above) after completing flight training.



Marie Clark



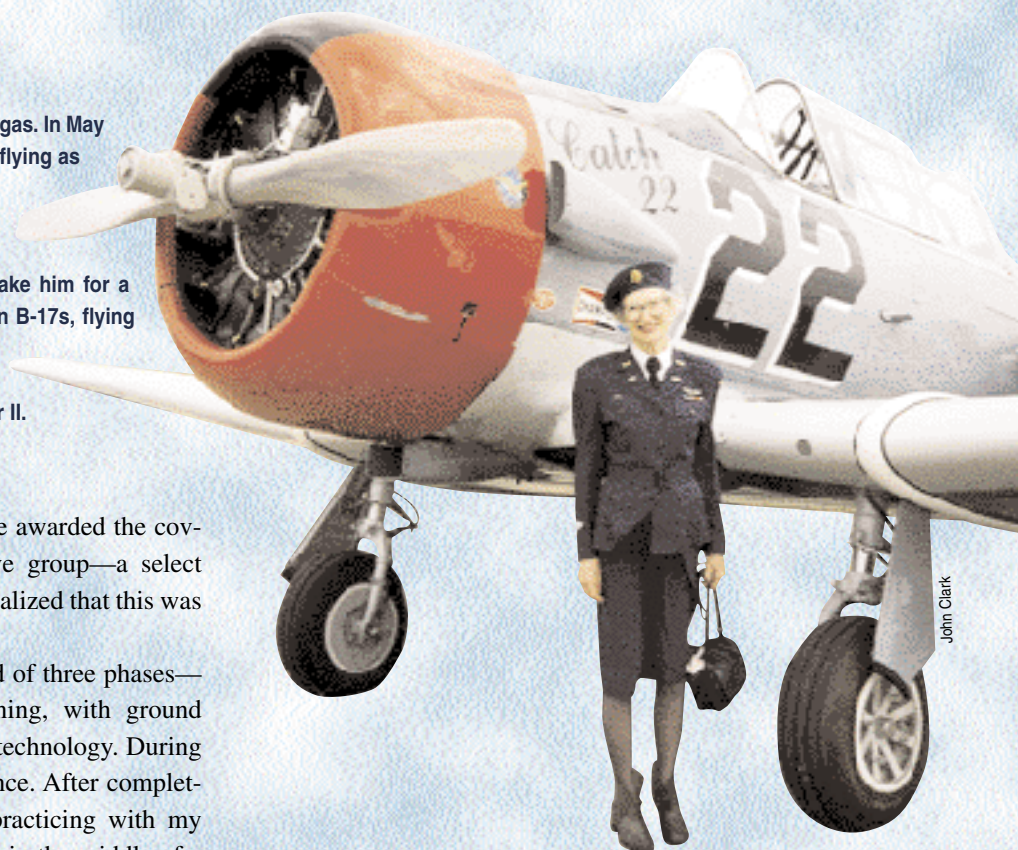
Marie and her husband, John Clark, met in Las Vegas. In May 1944, he arrived at the base for B-17 transitional flying as a newly-minted second lieutenant. They enjoyed their first “date” in an AT-6 like the one Marie stands in front of here. Because he had never flown in this plane before, John asked her to take him for a spin. John went on to complete a combat tour in B-17s, flying thirty-two missions with the 100th Bomb Group, Eighth Air Force. They were married in July 1945, six weeks before the end of World War II.

actually completed flight training and were awarded the coveted Silver Wings. We were an exclusive group—a select sorority, or so we liked to believe. We all realized that this was an opportunity of a lifetime.

Like male cadets, our training consisted of three phases—primary, basic and advanced flight training, with ground school in navigation, weather and aircraft technology. During primary training I had an unusual experience. After completing two or three spin recoveries while practicing with my instructor, my seat belt became unfastened in the middle of a spin. When I “popped the stick” to recover, the sudden negative-Gs shot me instantly out of the cockpit and into the blue Texas sky. I pulled my ripcord (which I have to this day), my parachute opened and I floated to earth. I actually enjoyed my sudden change in circumstances, although my instructor practically had heart failure. I landed rather hard in a plowed cotton field, falling face down. I was unhurt but had a mouthful of Texas soil. For this jump I became a member of the “Caterpillar Club,” an organization of those who have made emergency or—in my case—unplanned parachute jumps from military aircraft. Naturally this is primarily an all-male organization, but I know at least two other WASP members.

My flight training at Sweetwater was completed on February 9, 1944, at which time I had accumulated 315 hours of flying. I was then assigned to flying duty at the Las Vegas Army Air Base in Nevada. This was a choice assignment, as all WASP there could qualify to fly any aircraft on the base. My duties included flying simulated fighter attacks on B-17s in an AT-6 and P-39, providing instrument flying instructions and serving as an engineering test pilot on P-39 war-weary fighters.

These exhilarating experiences came to an end on December 20, 1944, when the WASP was deactivated. While we all were sorry to see it end, we knew in our hearts that we were greatly privileged to have had this almost unbelievable opportunity to serve our country in time of war and to fly military aircraft. In the end, the WASP flew every aircraft in the



army’s inventory—including P-59 jet fighters. Thirty-eight WASP were killed in crashes during training and active duty, but the overall WASP flight safety record was better than that of the male pilots. My total flying time on leaving the army was about 850 hours. I flew a small Piper Cub a few times after that, but small planes did not provide the same level of challenge as military aircraft. I resumed my musical career in teaching and music performance at Tanglewood and Boston in Massachusetts, the University of Michigan and as the principal flute of the Ann Arbor Symphony. ■

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