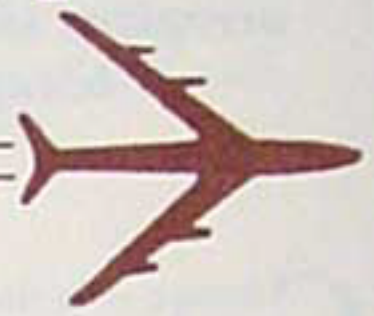


# Women in Aviation

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# Guilt Stings WASP

By Marjorie Rees

I have a confession to make. The problem is I'm not sure whom I should be confessing to. Should it be the Secretary of the Air Force, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, even the Commander-In-Chief himself? Perhaps a "To Whom It May Concern" will suffice.

I might as well get it over with quickly. In 1943 I cheated in order to be accepted as a trainee in the WASPs (Women Airforce Service Pilots). It was only a small scam - a matter of one inch and three pounds - but cheating is cheating and the time has come to clear my conscience, expiate this guilt, and throw myself on the mercy of . . . er . . . whomever it may concern. At the risk of being summoned before a military tribunal, and perhaps spending my remaining days in involuntary restraint, I have decided to own up to my misdeed and take the consequences. In the hope of leniency, however, I would like to explain the circumstances leading up to the perpetration of this crime.

Early in 1943 I was interviewed for admission to the WASP program. Soon thereafter I was notified that I had been accepted and assigned to Class 44-1 which would begin training August 1 at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. But first I had to pass the physical examination which included meeting certain height and weight requirements. For my height of 5'4", a minimum weight of 108 pounds was required, and I topped the scales at 100 then. With the examination still several weeks in the future, I thought it would be easy to put on eight more pounds - in fact, no small pleasure of a task.

The days went by in a caloric orgy of cookies, cakes, and mounds of whipped cream. But the scales refused to budge. Becoming desperate, I avoided all physical activity, restricting my movements solely to those involved in handling a knife and fork.

As the day of the examination drew near, the scales finally registered an additional two pounds - still six short. But, in the long hours of immobility I had devised a clever plan. If I were shorter, say 5'3", I would need to weigh only 105 pounds. By bending my knees slightly as I stood



Marjorie Ellfeldt Rees, WASP Class 44-1, is helped with her parachute at Douglas AAFB, 1944. Photo courtesy of the author.

against the measuring bar I should be able to slouch off an inch, maybe more. And, by gorging on bananas washed down with copious amounts of water (I had been told this would result in an immediate, if temporary, gain in weight), I should be able to pass the test.

The fateful day arrived. After a breakfast of farmhand proportions, I left home armed with bunches of bananas and a gallon thermos of water. About an hour later I sloshed into the doctor's office and advanced through the series of tests: vision, depth perception, hearing, heart, blood pressure, etc. At last I stood (or rather crouched) against the measuring bar. Success seemed certain when I heard the result: 5'3". My plan was working.

Confidently I stepped on the scales and watched - in disbelief and dismay - as they came to balance on . . . 102. It couldn't be. Just three lousy pounds between me and the wild blue yonder. But I was not about to give up. Claiming that I had just recovered from a bout of intestinal flu, I managed to convince the doctor to let me return the following week for another trial on the scales.

That night I lay awake concocting devious schemes that would tip the scales in my favor, and finally came up with the plan that worked. Since only shoes and outer garments were removed before weighing, it should be possible to conceal some contraband - say three pounds of metal - in my undergarments. I spent the



next few days in search of the appropriate merchandise, bewildering more than a few sales clerks along the way.

There is no need to go into detail concerning the strategic sites where the metal was concealed, but it was no accident that I walked as though I had lead in my britches. I can reveal that one particularly heavy piece (a fishing sinker) was strung on a hair ribbon. My coiffure of the '40s was sufficiently long to conceal the weight hanging at the back of my neck, but it made tilting the head a risky business.

Back for the final trial the following week, I moved very carefully. A slight clinking sound as I stepped on the scales went unnoticed, but I nearly blew it with a joyous leap - luckily nothing fell out - when the scales settled on . . . Hallelujah . . . 105 1/2. I was in - with a half pound to spare.

And so it was I (fraudently) entered WASP training at Avenger Field. Six months later I proudly received shiny silver wings at graduation exercises and soon was en route to my first assignment wearing the WASP uniform of Santiago blue and ten pounds of additional weight - all me this time.

For the next 11 months I flew military



Marjorie Rees enjoys the activities last September at the WASP reunion in San Antonio. Photo courtesy of the author.

aircraft at various Training Command bases, testing, ferrying, and utility flying. I was sent to Officer Candidate School at Orlando (in preparation for militarization) and back to Avenger Field for an advanced instrument training course. Then, denied the expected militarization by a Congress lobbied by civilian male pilots who feared being drafted into non-flying jobs, the WASPs were disbanded. We went home to

marry, raise families, and pursue other careers.

Years later the women began to seek each other out, to renew memories and old friendships, and to organize for the fight for recognition and veteran's status. Success finally came in 1979 when the Department of the Air Force, in response to Congressional authorization, declared WASP service to have been active military service. We had at last gained not only official veteran's status but long overdue recognition of our contribution to the war effort. Victory was sweet, but slightly soured by the secret knowledge of my duplicitous deed.

I hope it's true that confession is good for the soul. And that the top brass is too busy protesting women in combat to be concerned with the long ago transgression of a skinny girl flyer. Surely no one's going to make a mountain out of a three pound molehill. On the other hand, using a nom de plume might not be a bad idea. □

*Marjorie Rees is a retired educational psychologist. She dances with variety groups and is running for her third term as a silver-haired legislator in Kansas.*

## Kristine Kopecky — On Aviation, Time Management And Other Matters Of Importance To Today's College Women.

**W**e started our conversation at what I believed was the logical place, "Why aviation?" "Why not? It's challenging, exciting and wide open," she responded, her answer reflecting a quiet self-confidence. "Tell me more. Specifics?" She paused, rather than hesitated, before answering. "I'm studying both engineering theory and applied technology, learning about the differing requirements of the designer and the manufacturer; what it takes to turn theory into practical application." "Why Embry-Riddle?" "My guidance counselor recommended the University. I have strong math and science skills - and a fascination with flight." "Has the experience lived up to your expectations?" "It's great! Small classes where I learn theory, good labs where I can apply what I've learned and can see the results, excellent faculty, the latest course materials and an outstanding library. More importantly, I feel as though I really belong here; it's hard to

describe, but it's a great feeling."

"Extracurricular activities?"

"I'm a Student Ambassador and just getting active in the Student/Alumni Association. I wish I had time for more. There are a lot of support services for women, both personal and academic, on campus."

"Off campus activities?"

"I volunteer as a guide for the Florida Blind Rehab, for field trips and try to help out there whenever I can."

"Biggest challenge?"

She laughs, "Passing! I have three tests next week. Oh, and time management - there's just so much to do here!"

"Graduation?"

"Spring of '94."

There was no need to ask if she thought she'd make it.

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