

These WWII heroes flew under radar
Speaker says female pilots still virtually unknown

By [ART LAWLER](#)

Wednesday, January 24, 2007

Nancy Parrish came to Longview on Tuesday to talk to the Zonta Club and to honor Amelia Earhart, the famous pilot who disappeared over the Pacific Ocean in 1937.

She wound up honoring not only Earhart, but a group of women who she said were virtually ignored after World War II, but who played a vital part nonetheless in helping the United States win that war.

Parrish brought plenty of proof to back up her claims, including her own mother.

The Women Airforce Service Pilots, called WASP of WWII, were the first women in history to fly American military aircraft. They paid their own way to flight school in Sweetwater, received no benefits, low pay and virtually no honors for their efforts, Parrish told the group.

One of those women was Deanie Parrish, Nancy Parrish's mother, still alive and well and filled with stories to tell from that era.

Nancy Parrish is the founder and executive director of the national WASP WWII Museum in Sweetwater.

When Parrish decided to write about her mother and a few other former WASPs, Deanie Parrish had a better idea. "Why not interview all of the former WASP members?" she quoted her mom as saying, allowing each woman to describe her experience.

A noble idea, the daughter figured, but easier said than done.

The women were allowed to fly in the United States, so that male pilots could be free to fly U.S. planes in combat overseas, said Nancy Parrish.

About 2,500 women applied for pilot duty in the states and about 1,830 were accepted. Only about 1,074 graduated, she said.

The daughter still has about 100 women left to interview, and time, she said, is running short.

From a kitchen table discussion with her mother came what is now known as Wings Across America, "dedicated to preserving the history of the Women Airforce Service Pilots of WWII and making sure it is included as an exciting motivational educational resource in classrooms across America and into the next century," reads the explanation on its Web site (www.wasp-wwii.org).

One by one, Nancy Parrish has looked up the WASP members, taking advantage of the digital age to spread her mission across the country.

Some have died. A few have suffered from various types of memory loss. But many, the daughter said, are like her mother, still active and alert.

One by one, she has been telling their stories and posting pictures, in uniform, of the girls in their flying days.

The women were eventually allowed to fly every kind of plane in every kind of condition except one — combat. They did test flights on planes that had been repaired. If the planes didn't crash with the women, the planes were sent back overseas, she said.

The women, meanwhile, were asked to remain silent about what they were doing. "They didn't want the enemy to know that we were so hard up that we had to have girls flying planes," Nancy Parrish said.

She quoted her mother about a telegram the War Department sent the family of a friend of her's who was killed in a crash just before completing her training.

The message read: "Your daughter was killed this morning. Where do you want us to ship the body?"

Thirty-three years later, the women pilots were recognized for their accomplishments by President Carter.

The women weren't invited to the ceremony, said Nancy Parrish.

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