

Womens american service pilots wasps history essay



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Women are every bit as qualified as men to fly, but it took a lot of time and effort to prove themselves, because gender attitudes about the role of women were not conducive to freedom of choice about careers, especially hazardous careers like flying. (Carl, A., 2000). Despite the changes to women's lives through cultural expectations of sexuality and consumerism before World War II, the primary role of American women was still to take care of their men, and few ever considered leaving that traditional role or leading themselves toward a new one. (Dubois & Dumenil, 2009, p. 520).

At this time, less than one-fourth of all American women earned their own paychecks. With an average female clerical salary of only \$850 per year, few women could afford the \$750 that was required to obtain a certified pilot's license, unless they were well off and had family backing. For many American women who wanted to learn how to fly, it would take a supreme sacrifice to rise above the cultural boundaries and common expectations of others (Walker, M., *The Powder Puff Derby*, 2004, p. 134-136).

A few women made that sacrifice by working several jobs, by borrowing money or by selling everything they owned (Walker, M., 2004, p. 134-136). Once the flying bug had bit them, they were never the same. Fortunately, the Federal Government stepped in by making flying lessons more easily obtainable through a special educational program designed to increase the number of licensed pilots in the country, in case of war. Through the Civilian Aeronautics Authority and university-sponsored civilian flying schools, flying could be taught and was learned by female students, even though the ratio was 10 men to every woman. Despite the relative disparity in numbers many women took advantage of this program, which, unknown to them, would

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soon provide them with opportunities to fly they had never dreamed of, and placed them in a position of high demand. This innovative program was paid for by the U. S. Government, to which all training and tuition fees were provided free of charge (Guillemette, R., CTPT, 2009).

While a handful of glamorous female aviators such as Amelia Earhardt, Harriet Quimby, Nancy Love, and Jacquelyn Cochran won international fame in the years before the outbreak of war, the real emergence and emancipation of the female aviator came during World War II, when thousands of women learned to fly. The U. S. War Department had considered using women pilots as early as 1930, but the Chief of the Air Corps had called the idea utterly unfeasible, and stated that women were too high strung to fly. He was misinformed and mistaken (Pope, V., Flight of the WASP, 2009).

Before the U. S. entered World War II, General Henry “ Hap” Arnold, who didn’t share his colleague’s low regard for women, asked Jacqueline Cochran, the holder of numerous national and international air speed records, to command a group of 25 women pilots. He wanted them to serve their country as air transport pilots in Great Britain, and they became the first group of women to enter the war effort in an operational capacity. On September 28, 1940, a letter was sent by Jacqueline Cochran to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt further discussing the idea of women pilots serving in the war effort. She interjected that, “ Should there be a call to arms it is not my thought that women pilots go out and engage in combat, but every male pilot will be needed in active service” (Rich, D. L., 2007, p. 99). She was aware that other countries had begun using their female pilots in differing <https://assignbuster.com/womens-american-service-pilots-wasps-history-essay/>

duties, and believed that women pilots could be useful here as well. “

England’s Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) had women pilots who ferried planes under combat conditions and the Soviet Union formed several battalions of women combat pilots, including bomber units and fighter plan squadrons” (Central Flying Training Command, Army Air Forces, 1945).

This pioneering group of American women pilots returned to the U. S. in 1942, and their success in England led to the establishment of the Women’s Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs) program.

On September 1, 1942, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt petitioned the public-at-large through her syndicated newspaper column entitled “ My Day”, she stated the following:

“ I believe in the case, if the war goes on long enough and women are patient, opportunity will come knocking at their doors. However, there is just a chance that this is not a time when women should be patient. We are in a war and we need to fight it with all our ability and every weapon possible. WOMEN PILOTS, in this particular case, are a weapon waiting to be used... Hence, I am speaking up for the women, because I am afraid we cannot afford to let the time slip by now without using them” (Roosevelt, E., My Day, 1942).

In that same month, the Army Air Force created the Women’s Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) and appointed Nancy H. Love to be its first commanding officer. Love subsequently recruited highly skilled and experienced female pilots who were sent on non-combat missions ferrying

planes between production factories and Army Air Force installations (Rickman, S. B., Nancy Love, 2008, p. 72 - 97).

While the WAFS were being organized, the Army Air Force appointed Jacqueline Cochran to be the national Director of Women's Flying Training. The first flying equipment provided the new military flyers were obsolete aircraft and described by some as quite motley. The first cadet class reported at Houston Municipal Airport, Houston, Texas, where on April 28, 1943, the Women's Air Service Pilot Class 43-W-1 graduated from the school (TWU. edu, 2010).

The WASPs eventually moved to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, where over 1, 000 women completed flight training. Between 1942 and 1944, 25, 000 American women signed up to join the innovative WASP Program that created much controversy among the top leadership of the U. S. Army Air Force. The prerequisites for entry into the WASP division were stringent, and the training was hard. Less than 2, 000 of the 25, 000 applicants were admitted to flight school, and about half of them graduated and became pilots (Keil, S., 1994).

To be accepted (like the WAFs), women were required to be high school graduates and American citizens between the ages of 18 and 35, pass the same physical that male pilots training for combat would receive, 200 hours flying time as a pilot, and meet the height requirement of 60 inches. The average WASP was 64 inches tall and weighed 128 pounds. After all requirements were met, they embarked on a personal interview with an

authorized recruiting officer (Cochran, J., Final Report on Women Pilot Program, 1944).

The working wardrobe of the WASP trainee left something to be desired, because all the garments were designed for men. The women joked that their flying suits came in only three sizes, “ large, Large, and LARGE.” It took some creativity to adjust the size 44 overalls enough to be able to walk in them, much less fly an airplane in a tight cockpit. Directions about dress ranged from practical to comical. WASPs’ hair was to be bobbed and no scarves were allowed. Trainees were not allowed to wear toeless shoes or cowboy boots, because program administrators feared the women would tromp about and make holes in the wings of the planes (Carl, A. B., 2000).

Women’s Air Force Service pilots served a vital role in the struggle against fascism in World War II. They finally received the acclaim and attention they so rightly deserved after so many years of silence. After 35 years, Veteran status for WASP military service was finally approved after the WASP files were unsealed and declassified (Gomez, M., 2009). On July 1, 2009, President Barack Obama signed into law the WASPs Congressional Gold Medal and on March 10, 2010, the surviving WASPs came to the U. S. Capitol to accept the medal from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other Congressional leaders (Yahoo. com, 2010).

The WASPs found themselves flying almost everything the Army Air Corps owned, including old BT-13 Vultee bi-winged trainer planes, the huge, rumbling C-47 transport planes, P-51 fighters, and some were the first to pilot the brand new multi-engine Boeing B-29 bombers that many of their

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male counterparts hesitated to even board because of early crashes. (Keil, S., 1994).

The WASPs were limited to flying within the borders of the U. S. and what then were the territories of Hawaii and Alaska. They ferried aircraft from factories to ports for shipment to the fronts. Some were also transport pilots and flight instructors. Unlike their male counterparts, who were trained to fly certain types of aircraft, a WASP pilot delivering a four-engine B-17 bomber, might make the return trip in a single-engine P-51 fighter. In total, these brave women flew 78 different aircraft, carried out over 12, 000 ferrying assignments and logged over 60 million miles of flying (Hornblower, M. (1995). The Air Force command structure may have stubbornly maintained its prejudicial stand concerning women pilots, but it could not deny their courage and tenacity. They were all confident of their abilities, but understood that in the service, luck played its roll in everything they did.

Although not allowed to fly planes in combat missions, WASP pilots served grueling, often dangerous, tours of duty. Ferrying and towing planes were risky activities, and even though aviation had advanced a long way from the Wright Brothers' first wobbly adventure over the sand dunes of Kitty Hawk, flying was still not an exact science, instruments were still far from perfect. Landing gear didn't always lock in place, and fuel indicators weren't always accurate.

Thirty-eight WASP members (11 in training and 27 on active duty) lost their lives in those haphazard days of war when courage and luck played an enormous hand in the deadly gamble of flying long hours in all kinds of

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weather. Under the existing policy at the time, WASPs were not considered military but civil service. When WASPs were killed, they were sent home at the family's expense without military honors. This meant that for fallen WASPs, the Army did not allow the U. S. Flag to be draped over caskets out of respect for their service to the Nation (Bonn, H., *Unsung Heroes*, 2009).

The women who served their country during World War II in the WASP Program were heroes who came from every corner of the Nation and every walk of American life. They were clerks, debutantes, secretaries, teachers, businesswomen, housewives, and daughters of farmers and factory workers. Those women who were accepted into the rigorous Army Air Force flight training program and received their wings were the best, but everyone who even applied was a hero, for it took a lot of courage just to consider doing so. WASPs flew with dedication to duty under all conditions, endured long hours, dealt with desert sand in their eyes, ice on their wings, and served side by side with male flyers (Keil, S., 1994).

Yet for all of their daring in the air, determination on the ground, and commitment to their duty, these courageous WASPs still had to battle bureaucratic red tape, jealous insinuations from other women who envied them and from men motivated by chauvinism, and political pressure from leaders in Washington who should have known better. Still, they flew on into history, often outclassing their male pilot counterparts in efficiency, reliability, and physical stamina. Their inspiring story, and the courage, romance, and adventure of their lives, have been overlooked for far too long, and it is about time for historians to salute the lives these thousands of extraordinary women lived. (Verges, M., 1991, p. 7).

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An excellent account of the history of the WASPs of World War II is provided by historian Marianne Verges in her book, *On Silver Wings: The Women Air Force Service Pilots of World War II 1942-1944*. The author introduces the reader to several women before the U. S. enters World War II, and then follows them through their service years as they did their part to defend their country. Some of the women went to England to fly for the British ATA, some were WAFs, and others became WASPs, and Verges is very thorough in relating how each group was formed and what each group's experiences were during the war.

Another source I consulted while researching and writing this paper was *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines*, by Sally Keil. Keil notes in her book that, "The WASPs lived a paradox. They studied aerodynamics and sunbathed at Avenger Field, in blistering, windswept West Texas. They flew hooded takeoffs totally by instruments and received coveted nylon stockings for Christmas at four-engine bomber school in Columbus, Ohio." (Keil, S. , 1994)

In other words, there is irony and paradox in the fact that the WASPs of World War II were women who treasured their femininity, but at the same time, were very intent upon distinguishing themselves in the formerly macho profession of aviation and proving beyond any doubt that female pilots could be just as good as male pilots.

It should be noted as well that although the WASPs were trained on military bases and flew military aircraft in a time of war, they were considered by the U. S. Government to be Civil Servants, and were not officially in the Armed

Forces. They were paid \$150 a month while in training and \$250 a month upon graduation (austinwomanmagazine. com, 2010). They received the regular rate of \$6 a day when they were away from their bases and when at the base they paid for their own rooms and meals (austinwomanmagazine. com, 2010).

In conclusion, the Women's Air Force Service pilots served a vital role in the struggle against fascism in World War II, and deserve the acclaim and attention they have finally received in books such as *On Silver Wings: The Women Air Force Service Pilots of World War II 1942-1944* by Marianne Verges, *A Wasp among Eagles* by Ann Carl, and *Women Pilots of WWII* by Jean Hascall Cole.

Over 25, 000 women applied, 1, 830 were accepted into the rigorous Army Air Force flight training program and 1, 074 of them received their silver wings and, together with 28 WAFS and 38 others who lost their lives, they became the Women's Air Force Service Pilots. They flew under all conditions, served long hours, blinked away desert sand from their eyes, ignored dangerous ice on their wings, and served side-by-side with male flyers. Over the course of the war, WASPs averaged 33 flying hours a month, and cumulatively flew an estimated 60 million miles

The WASP motto was " We live in the wind and sand, and our eyes are on the stars." Their dedication to defending their country blazed the way for later generations to take more active roles in the military, and the Air Force, in particular. Women such as Lieutenant Jeannie Flynn, an F-15E fighter pilot; Major Jackie Parker, an Air National Guard F-16 fighter pilot and graduate of

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the Air Force Test Pilot School; and Lieutenant Colonel Sue Helms, an Air Force astronaut, owe them a debt of gratitude for showing the way.

In today's U. S. Air Force, there are over 300 women pilots, 100 navigators and almost 600 enlisted air crew members. The Army, Navy and Marine Corps also have hundreds of women air crew, navigators, and pilots. Thanks to the pioneering aviators of World War II's Women's Air Force Service Pilots, these women, and thousands of other American women, are serving with distinction in the United States military.