



Zoot Suits, Parachutes, and Wings of Silver, Too

by *Shelia Henderson*

Millie Davidson and Kay D'Arezzo drove through the gate of Avenger Field on November 5, 1943, they saw what looked like a typical Army air base: barracks, control tower, aircraft hangars, and two runways with planes landing and taking off. But mounted on the roof of the administration building was a 10-foot-high sign with a giant portrait of Fifinella, the Walt Disney gremlin who served as mascot to the Women's Airforce Service Pilots.

"Fifi was a real show-stopper in her gold and red outfit, with matching blue wings and goggles," Kay recalls. "I grew up on Army bases, since my father was a career officer. But Avenger was going to be different. It was an exciting place to be in those days. We felt we were getting the chance to show what we could really do."

That day, 93 young women from all over the United States joined Millie and Kay at the base, just outside the small West Texas town of Sweetwater. They belonged to class 44-W-4 of the 318th Army Air Force Flying Training Detachment, one of the most remarkable experiments in military aviation -- a program to train women to fly "the Army way."

The Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD), as the 318th was first known, was the brainchild of Jacqueline Cochran, the famous American aviatrix. Cochran saw an opportunity for women flyers because of the enormous demand for qualified men to fly in combat. She persuaded the Army to create a training unit to prepare women pilots to ferry military aircraft from manufacturers to embarkation points for shipment overseas or to stateside military bases (much like the Women's Auxiliary Ferry Service, known as the WAFS).

The WFTD was formed in November 1942, and was based at Howard Hughes Field in Houston. However, within only a few months the unit had outgrown its makeshift operation at Hughes. With requests from the U. S. Air Transport Command for 750 women pilots before the end of 1943 and an additional 1000 pilots during 1944, the 318th desperately needed a larger and better-equipped facility. Avenger Field, on

WASPs had plenty of Texas-style challenges to cope with as they learned to fly. In the summer, temperatures boiled and tumbleweeds blew onto the runways. In the winter and spring, heavy rains sometimes grounded the planes, forcing student pilots to scramble to make up lost flight time on the weekends. Howling dust storms, plagues of crickets, and rattlesnakes that crawled up inside the warm metal planes were simply part of life in West Texas. Nevertheless, the prairie surrounding Sweetwater did offer plenty of open space for hundreds of planes to fly, and also it supplied ideal navigational aids, since all the roads ran north-south and east-west. This was particularly helpful during the early phases of training, when the student pilots flew planes without radios or navigational equipment. However, Millie learned firsthand that "contact flying" wasn't always easy.

"About half of our flight had been sent out to our practice area, which was about 40 miles from Avenger, to work on aerobatics," Millie recalls. "It was cold and had started to snow. We wore fleece-lined pants and jackets, a helmet and goggles, but those open-cockpit planes had no heaters, and I continually wiped the snow off my goggles as I did the spins, loops, and lazy-Ss. During a snap roll, my compass spilled out, but I wasn't worried because I knew I just had to follow the railroad tracks back to the base. But when our practice hour was up, all trace of the tracks had disappeared under the snow! The only landmarks were the section fences and a watering tank here and there, but otherwise the country was barren."

Huddled miserably in their planes, the trainees flew in circles, and communicated by waving their arms. Finally, an Army pilot came to the rescue, sent out to look for the missing pilots when they didn't return to the base on schedule.

"We heard through the grapevine he later told his friends that, after 50 combat missions over Europe, this was the most dangerous of all, trying to evade all those Stearmans coming at him from every direction!"

the rolling prairie 40 miles west of Abilene, was the solution.

In March 1943, new classes began training at Avenger while a program to train British cadets was phased out. Classes that had begun training in Houston transferred to the new base in stages. When the last of the British cadets left that spring, Avenger became the only all-female Army air base in American history.

As the war progressed, demand grew for pilots to perform a variety of essential but undramatic flying responsibilities, ranging from towing target sleeves for antiaircraft gunnery practice, to breaking in new engines or testing repaired planes. Cochran convinced General Henry "Hap" Arnold, commander of the Army Air Forces, that women could handle these noncombat duties. In June 1943, General Arnold ordered the WFTD and WAFS to consolidate under Colonel Cochran's command into the Women's Airforce Service Pilots, better known as the WASP.

Millie Davidson heard about the formation of the WASP while she and her friend Kay D'Arezzo were working as secretaries in the Adjutant General's office in Austin. The two young women had been drawn to each other because they were in similar circumstances. Millie's husband had been shot down over the German coast early in 1943. Kay's husband had been in the Philippines during the fall of Corregidor in April 1942. Both men were listed as missing in action. Kay and Millie were waiting for news.

Both had also studied flying. Millie persuaded Kay the waiting would be easier, and their contribution to the war effort more meaningful, in the cockpit of a plane than in a secretary's chair. They pushed to earn their private pilots' licenses and log the 35 hours necessary to qualify for the WASP, passed the required physicals and aptitude tests, and were accepted.

Millie and Kay joined 1828 other women who took part in the WASP experiment. From all over the country and from all walks of life they came -- teachers and actresses, secretaries and journalists, heiresses and housewives. The women had one thing in common: they loved to fly. And they got plenty of opportunity during the six-and-a-half months they spent at "Cochran's convent," as Avenger came to be known. (During its first week as an all-female base, Avenger experienced more than 100 "forced" landings by male cadet pilots from nearby training schools. Cochran immediately sent down the word: Avenger was closed to all outside air traffic except in emergencies.)

Millie remembers with a laugh. "I know all I wanted to do was get right under his wing so he wouldn't run off and leave me."

When she was learning to fly the AT-6, Kay had an adventure of her own. "This day I was out with my instructor, and we had been practicing coming down low for forced landings. After a while, he took over, and the first thing I knew we were buzzing someone's ranch, going full speed just a few feet off the ground, with people on the ground watching and waving. As we were gaining altitude, he must have been looking back at his audience (I was sitting in front, so I couldn't see him). Suddenly, trees appeared in front of us and he clipped the tops, putting a bite in about two or three feet across and one foot deep," she remembers.

He immediately radioed the base for an emergency, but I was already into the wind and told me not to lower the flaps until the last minute. I think he was afraid they might not work. We landed without serious problems, but my heart was in my throat the whole time. The instructor was fired, and I was confined to the base for about eight weeks."

Later that spring a more serious incident occurred, one no member of Class 44-W-4 could forget. On April 16, members of 44-W-4 headed out over the Texas countryside on short cross-country flights to various destinations. Coming in for a landing early in the afternoon, a member of 44-W-4 collided head-on in midair with a plane flown by Elizabeth Erickson of class 44-W-6. Both pilots were killed.

"No one knew who it was," Kay remembers with sadness. "Two people were overdue, and Millie was one of them. When we saw the last plane coming in, I hurried down to the flight line to meet it. I was so relieved when I saw Millie, but that meant that Mary Howson had been killed. It was such a tragedy."

Millie recalls, "The return route for my cross-country flight was within 30 miles of my grandparents' ranch near Llano, so I deviated from the course to wiggle my wings and wave at them. I had called to let them know I was coming, so they were out in the yard, waving madly. I didn't buzz or fly very low, but I could see them quite clearly. The bluebonnets were in bloom, and the whole area was a sea of blue. It was a wonderful excursion and only put me about 20 minutes off my ETA. But that was enough to scare Kay and the others."

Eleven WASPs lost their lives while training at Avenger. Most accidents were not that serious, however, and some were even amusing. The aerobatic

Life at Avenger was tough and exciting but also often tedious. The women lived six to a bay in eight barracks. The furnishings were standard Army cots and double-sized footlockers. Somehow everything had to be kept spotlessly clean for the periodic white-glove inspections, despite the ever-present West Texas dust.

Like all soldiers (although technically WASPs were civil servants), the student pilots marched everywhere, [singing funny and bawdy cadences](#) as they tromped between barracks, mess hall, and flight line. And when they weren't marching, they were tiding in the crowded "cattle trucks" that hauled them out to auxiliary fields or into Sweetwater.

The standard uniform of the day, Army surplus mechanic's overalls, size 44 and up, quickly became known as a "zoot suit." This was complemented by a piece of ladylike headgear nicknamed "Urban's Turban." for Major Robert K. Urban, who began serving as base commander in June 1943. Early classes had no uniforms to wear for more formal occasions, such as graduation -ceremonies and visits by dignitaries. But the general store in Sweetwater and the BX at Dyess Field in Abilene solved that problem -- an official trainee ["uniform"](#) of short-sleeved white shirt, men's khaki pants (which had to be altered to fit WASP anatomy), and a general's cap.

The lack of the alphabet made Kay and Millie bay-mates. Kay's military background made her a natural for class commander for Flight 1, and she promptly used her authority to appoint Millie as one of the two flight lieutenants. The other was Madge Leon, a native of Haskell, Texas, who came to Sweetwater from Dallas, where she had been going to college. As flight lieutenant, Millie was in charge of waking everyone up for breakfast and shouting the marching commands for the flight. Because of the shortage of planes and instructors, they alternated ground school and flying time with the students in Flight 2.

WASP training was almost identical to that of male aviation cadets. Initially, the training program consisted of 115 hours of flight training and 180 hours of ground school. Later the numbers grew to more than 200 in the air and nearly 400 on the ground, the equivalent of a college degree in aeronautics. The women spent many hours during primary training perfecting loops, chandelles, and spins, the basic aerobatic maneuvers they would need to do their jobs and perhaps even save their lives. Then they went on to instrument flying, radio-beam navigation, night

maneuvers of primary training initiated more than one WASP into the Caterpillar Club -- those airmen (and women) who had safely bailed out of an airplane. The first caterpillar at Avenger had fallen out of her plane when her seat belt unfastened during a practice spin. Her instructor brought the plane in, then sent a jeep toward the white spot drifting down toward the horizon. She was retrieved safely, scratched and braised, but smiling and waving her caterpillar badge of honor- her parachute ripcord handle.

Although the women spent most of their time in training, they still had some time left over for fun. The townspeople of Sweetwater did what they could to make the WASPs feel welcome, inviting the young women to attend their churches and including them in Sunday dinners afterwards. They also contributed the Avengerette Club where, on free evenings, the trainees could spend a little R&R time, listening to music and drinking Coca-Cola until the 10 p.m. curfew. Though Nolan County was dry, some WASPs managed to put their hands on liquor to spike their Cokes every now and then. Lunch or dinner at the Bluebonnet Hotel was a welcome treat. And those with access to a car would often spend their days at Lake Sweetwater, sometimes in the company of young men from Dyess Field and neighboring bases.

While at Avenger, both Millie and Kay got news of their missing husbands. For Millie, the news was tragic. Bill Davidson was declared killed in action. Kay learned that Al had been captured at Bataan and was being held in a prisoner-of-war camp. She wrote to him, but never let on she was doing anything more dangerous than typing letters for the Judge Advocate General in Austin. When Al was released at the end of the war, she learned that he had been telling his fellow POW officers that she was a pilot. When he heard that women were flying, he figured Kay had to be involved.

Graduation day for 44-W-4 was May 23, 1944. Kay and Millie stood proudly with 50 other graduates in new Santiago blue uniforms to receive their silver wings. During the ceremony, Millie also received Bill Davidson's posthumously awarded Air Medals and Purple Heart. Kay was named outstanding graduate and awarded a War Bond. Despite the buzzing incident, her record was exemplary. After graduation, Millie was stationed at Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama, and Kay went to Love Field in Dallas. Seven months later, they and all their sister WASPs were permanently grounded.

For many months, Jacqueline Cochran had worked for militarization of the WASP. In February 1944, the Military Affairs Committee of the House of

flying, and cross-country navigation.

The first milestone of flight training was the solo. after six o to 10 hours of instruction. When the first woman in a class soloed, she became the acknowledged "hot" pilot and was honored with a dip in the Wishing Well, zoot suit and all. The Wishing Well was a shallow reflecting pool near the barracks. Anxious trainees would toss in pennies before their ail-important Army "check rides," praying that they" wouldn't receive a dreaded "pink slip" for an unsatisfactory rating. At any stage, trainees could wash out. More than 550 WASP hopefuls over two years didn't meet the stiff requirements.

"All of our instructors were civilians," Millie recalls. "They were severe and profane, but we learned. Or at least some of us did. The washout rate was grim. Primary training was first in the Fairchild PT-19A, but after 10 days we were switched to the bi-wing Stearman PT-17. In January, we stepped up to the North American AT-6. We all loved our Sweet Six, but some couldn't handle the greater power and faster landings, so our ranks were decimated even more. Ground school was getting tough, too. but I don't think anyone washed out because of classroom deficiency. Instrument flying was done in the Vultee BT-13, and we learned cross-country navigation in both PTs and AT-6s."

Class 44-W-4 was thc first to skip Basic-level training. They went directly from Primary to Advanced in order to complete the program more quickly.

[\(up\)](#)

Representatives reported out a bill in Congress granting full military status to the WASP. However, the tide of the war was turning. As the demand for pilots declined, many male Civil Service flying instructors faced unemployment. The original purpose of the WASP -- to fill in for men who were needed elsewhere --was no longer operative. The bill was defeated in June, and four months later Cochran issued the order for deactivation.

The 18th and last class of WASP trainees graduated on December 7, three years to the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Avenger Field gymnasium was filled to overflowing with families, AAF officers, and more than 100 active-duty WASPs who had returned to say goodbye. General Hap Arnold commended and thanked the WASPs for their im pressive record; Colonel Cochran expressed her pride and appreciation for the women who had been under her command. Then General Arnold pinned silver wings on the 68 WASPs in class 44-W-10. They were the last of their kind.

The great experiment was over. and it had been a resounding success. One thousand and seventy four women had completed training at Avenger Field. The women had flown every type of aircraft the Air Force had, including the heavy bombers, like the B-17 Flying Fortress. and the "hot" pursuit planes, like the P-47 Thunderbolt. They had logged more than 60 million miles, ferrying more than 12,000 planes and performing other essential wartime jobs. In the process, they had freed 1000 men for air combat and had proven that women were capable of handling the rigors of military aviation.

However, not until 1977 did women again graduate from Air Force pilot training. It is unlikely that there will ever again be an all-female military base. Certainly, never one like "Cochran's convent."

this article was scanned from "**CODE ONE**"
A Product Support Publication of **General Dynamics** Fort Worth Division,
October 1988 Vol. 3 No. 3 pp.22 - 27

WASP SONGBOOK



First and foremost, I apologize beforehand to the boistress singing WASP who may take offense at my censorship. The colorful language in some of the songs has been censored so that we could keep our PG rating.

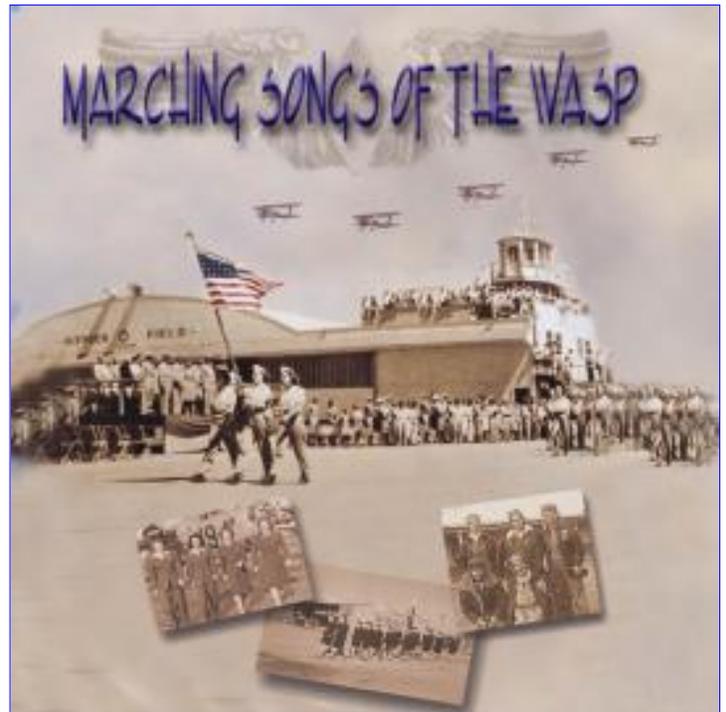
We get many visitors from elementary schools and we'd like to keep this site suitable for ANYONE to visit... substituted words are in quotes.

These are either original WASP songs or songs with familiar tunes and WASP words!

Many of these songs are available from the [WASP WWII Stores](#) on audio cassette--sung by the WASP in the 1980's. Please click on the stores link for more information.

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