

## Flying High

The true story of a Woman Airforce Service Pilot who knew she wanted to fly when she was seven

**W**HEN FLORENCE SHUTSY-REYNOLDS OF Connellsville was seven years old, she knew what she wanted to do with her life. "I'm going to learn how to fly," she announced to her family during dinner one night.

She recalls her three siblings' reactions. "They all laughed," says the Fayette County native. Keep in mind that this was in 1930 when flying itself was a relatively new venture, let alone one pursued by young girls. But, true to her word, when Shutsy-Reynolds graduated from Dunbar Township High School in 1940, she applied for the Civilian Pilot Training Program. She beat out 40 others vying for five scholarships to learn to fly at the local airport.

"My first time up in the sky was my first lesson," Shutsy-Reynolds says. Any worries she had about flying were soon put to rest.

"I loved it," she recalls. "All those years I had been dreaming about flying, and it was everything that I thought it was going to be."

Three years later, she became a member of the WASP, the Women Airforce Service Pilots, and would make history as one of the first women pilots trained to fly American military aircraft. Although the role that she and her fellow pilots played in the war was overlooked for decades, these pioneering women most certainly helped to blaze a path for female pilots today.

### WASP TRAINING AND DUTIES

Formed during WWII, WASP pilots replaced male pilots in domestic military flight duties so that the men could be assigned to overseas combat. From 1943 to 1944, WASP women worked at 120 bases across the United States, flying every type of aircraft used by the Army Air Force. They ferried planes from factories to bases, towed targets for anti-aircraft training, tested airplanes in need of repair, and taught male cadets how to fly. Although WASP pilots never entered combat, their work was dangerous. Many of the women were injured in the line of duty, and 38 were killed.

Of the 25,000 women who applied to the WASP program, 1,830 were accepted and fewer still—1,074—graduated and were assigned to flight duty. Like Shutsy-Reynolds, most were trained at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. Shutsy-Reynolds remembers arriving at Avenger on December 7, 1943, and being assigned to a barracks that held six women to a bay. Each trainee was



issued a leather jacket, a flight jacket and two cast-off, well-used mechanic's coveralls. Although they were the smallest men's sizes available, she says the women found the clothing "big, bigger and way too big."

Female trainees were considered civilians and had to pay for their uniforms and room and board. "We were given clean sheets every week, but we had to wash our own clothes," Shutsy-Reynolds says. "There were no washing machines, so I would just wear my zoot suit into the shower. That was easier than washing it in a bucket."

Days at the training site began at 6 a.m. sharp with reveille blasted over loudspeakers. After breakfast, the women participated in a rigorous training program that included push-ups and pull-ups designed to build the upper body strength that they would need to fly the planes. After physical training, they alternated between ground school and the flight line.

### CLOSE CALLS

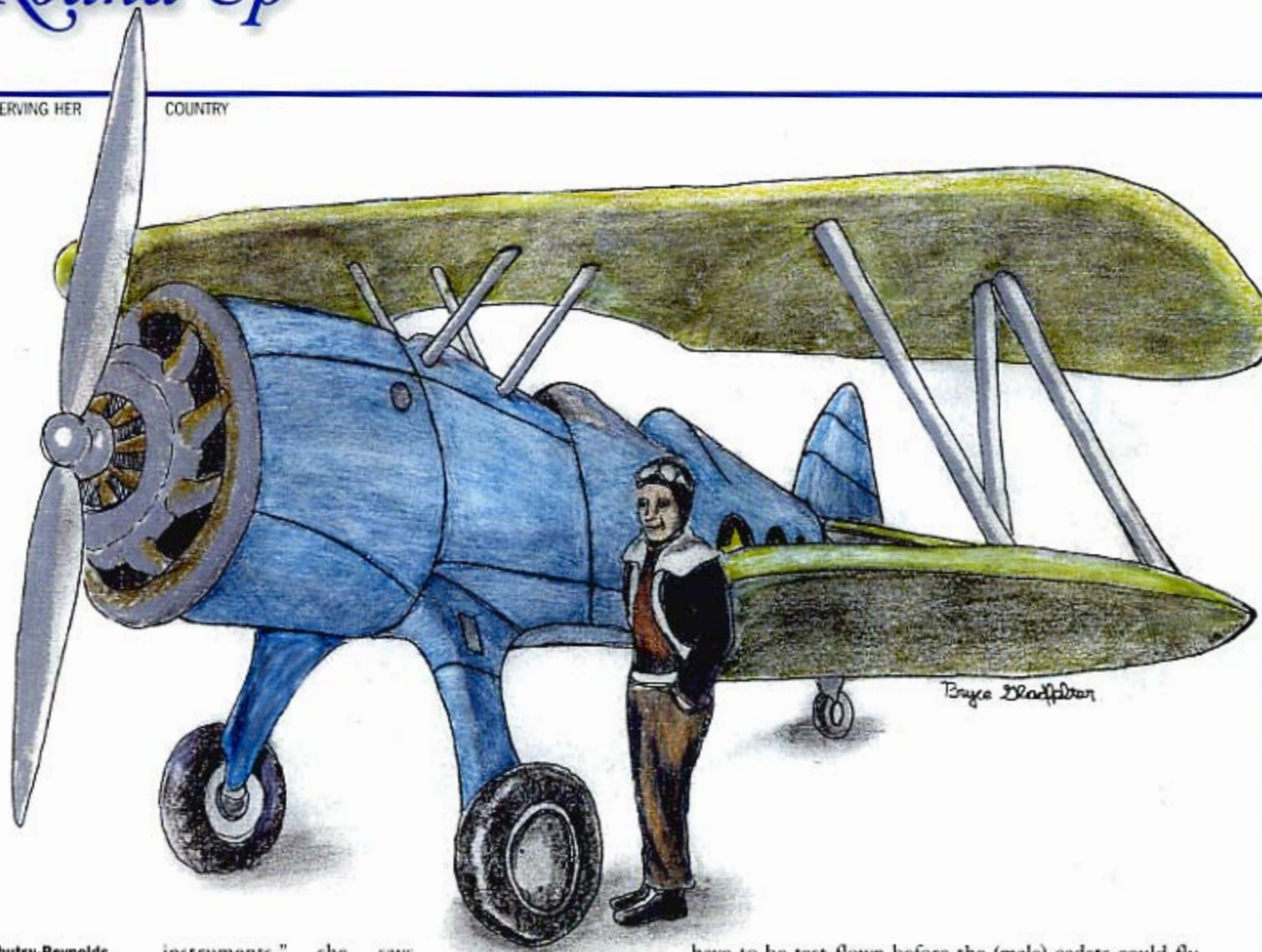
Challenges in the sky were common for a WASP. Shutsy-Reynolds recalls when the electrical system in her plane shut down during one of her night-flying sessions. "I was in the dark on the takeoff and couldn't see any of the

Florence Shutsy-Reynolds of Connellsville makes her handprints in cement at the opening of the WASP Museum at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas.

# Round Up

SERVING HER

COUNTRY



Shutsy-Reynolds flew a wide variety of aircraft, including Boeing Stearman and North American AT-6 planes. She tested planes that had undergone repairs before they were given to male cadets to fly.

instruments," she says. Needing both hands to fly the plane, she held a flashlight between her teeth so that she could read the instrument panel and return to base.

Another time, the cowl (a metal covering that houses the engine) came off an AT-6 she was flying. "No problem, stay in the pattern, bring it back in," she told herself. She found out later that the cowl on the AT-6 had a bad habit of coming off and going through the canopy.

"I stayed in the pattern, and by this time part of the side was peeling off, too," she says, describing how her training kicked in and she was able to land the plane safely, knowing everyone would be watching.

The women worried constantly about losing their place in the program. "Washing out was always in the back of our minds," she says. "You would come back from an afternoon session and find a bay mate's mattress rolled and know that she was gone. I don't remember ever saying goodbye to a washout trainee."

But Shutsy-Reynolds persevered through the training program and upon graduation was assigned to the engineering branch at Merced Army Air Field in California.

"If planes underwent maintenance, especially overhauls, engine changes, or any major changes, they would

have to be test flown before the (male) cadets could fly them. That was my job as a WASP," she notes.

## AFTER THE WAR

As the war wound down, the government disbanded the WASP program in 1944, and with an influx of returning male pilots, finding a job as a commercial pilot was almost impossible for a woman. Shutsy-Reynolds was able to keep flying by working for the Army Air Force as a civilian flight dispatcher in North Carolina, and then instructing on the Link trainer, a type of flight simulator, in Alaska.

Sixty-some years later, the camaraderie felt among the women of the WASP program remains. "At Avenger, when we were training, we helped each other out," Shutsy-Reynolds says. "The esprit de corps was very strong." She still feels that bond when she attends reunions of the women pilots, including one held in May 2005 at Avenger Field to celebrate the opening of the National WASP WWII Museum.

Shutsy-Reynolds spends many of her days now reliving her WASP experience by conducting research on the group's history, including its uniform and wings. As a jewelry maker who learned the trade during frequent visits to Mexico years ago, she fashions silver rings in the shape of



COURTESY OF FLORENCE SHUTSY-REYNOLDS

WASP wings. She also designed the Kids of the WASP patch, the WASP scarf and the group's official flag.

Although Shutsy-Reynolds may be an expert on the WASP uniform, she no longer has the one she wore during her stint in the 1940s. It hangs today in the Lone Star Museum in Galveston, Texas, the result of a trade she brokered about five years ago with the public relations officer there.

"I heard them talking about how the WASP uniform was rare," she says. "I told them that they could have mine if they let me fly the B-17 they had." A deal was struck, and Shutsy-Reynolds spent the next hour flying the B-17 Flying Fortress.

"That was the first time I had flown a B-17," she explains. "It's a beautiful aircraft."

The experience was well worth the trade, she says, and taking this bomber plane up among the clouds was just as thrilling as she had expected it to be when she was a young girl growing up with one eye to the sky. ●

—Margaret Clevenger writes from Tuscaloosa, Ala.

### RECEIVING THE RESPECT LONG DUE

In December 1944, the U.S. government deemed the Women Airforce Service Pilots no longer necessary and stopped the program. The women who had flown the military aircraft were not considered veterans and did not receive any benefits. The 38 women who died in the line of duty were buried without honors, their bodies shipped home through donations from fellow WASP members.

After years of campaigning for military recognition by former WASP members, both the Air Force and Congress finally declared in 1977 that members of the WASP were military veterans, eligible to receive minimal VA health benefits, and were permitted the honor of a flag-draped coffin. In 1984, 40 years after the program ended, the government gave each WASP member the Victory Medal.

Approximately 400 former WASP women are still alive, and at least nine members live in Pennsylvania today. ■