

# WOMEN OF THE WASP

by [Dora Dougherty Strother](#)

written as an introduction to  
**"FOR GOD, COUNTRY, AND THE THRILL OF IT"**  
by Anne Noggle

The flyers of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) of World War II were pioneers, the first licensed women pilots in the United States to fly military airplanes for a military service. With enthusiastic response they gladly volunteered when their country asked for help in its time of greatest need.

The WASP was formed in August, 1943, from two earlier, relatively independent programs for women pilots: the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), an experimental squadron of experienced women pilots employed to ferry aircraft for the Air Transport Command, and the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD), a training program established to supply pilots for the squadron. The intent of the women-pilots programs was (1) to see if women could serve as military pilots, and if so, to form the nucleus of an organization that could be rapidly expanded; (2) to release male pilots for combat; and (3) to decrease the Air Forces' demands on the cream of the manpower pool.<sup>1</sup>

As they performed their first flight assignments in light planes, they proved their capability and stamina. They were then allowed to check out in bigger, faster, and heavier aircraft. Eventually they came to fly every aircraft operated by the Army Air Forces, demonstrating that a woman's hand could guide a fighter plane to a perfect landing as well as any man's.

Their duties included almost all noncombatant stateside missions: ferrying, towing targets for antiaircraft and air-to-air gunnery practice, test flight (including tests of the first American jet pursuit plane, the YP-59A), engineering test flying, flying of antiaircraft drones by remote radio control, flight instruction, smoke laying, administrative flight, and cargo and personnel transport.<sup>2</sup>

The program to use women pilots for military flying began in the summer of 1942, when noted flyer [Jacqueline Cochran](#) recruited twenty-five American women pilots to ferry airplanes for the British Air Transport Auxiliary.<sup>3</sup> England was desperately in need of trained pilots.. Existing pilot reserves had been drained, and though flight schools were working at full-speed, training new pilots took too much time. Women pilots, English and those of the allies as well, were asked to help out.

By mid-1942, the United States, by then deep into the war, was also beginning to suffer similar problems. The losses in the Philippines and the early battles of the Pacific had sapped the reserves of trained pilots. Cochran, who had interested Eleanor Roosevelt in the prospect of using women pilots for military purposes as early as 1939, urged Pentagon

brass to establish a training program for ferrying and other missions with some of the three thousand women pilots already flying in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Another experienced pilot, [Nancy Harkness Love](#), whose husband was Deputy Chief Of Staff of the Air Transport Command (ATC), also proposed that a small, elite group of highly trained women pilots be used by the ATC to ferry liaison and training aircraft on domestic flights. Both Cochran's and Love's initial proposals were rejected.

Finally, though, in September, 1942, because the need for pilots was accelerating, the Army Air Forces decided to give women pilots a chance to ferry light planes within the continental limits of the United States, and Love's proposal to employ women as civilian pilots was accepted. To be a member of the WAFS, a woman had to be a U.S. citizen with at least a high school education, had to be between twenty-one and thirty-five years of age and at least sixty inches tall, had to have a commercial pilot's license with a 200-horsepower rating and over five hundred hours of flight time, and had to pass a flight physical and a flight test administered by the Army.

Twenty-five women met those requirements and were hired as civilian employees at \$250 per month (\$50 less than male civilians hired to do the same work).<sup>5</sup> Love was put in charge of the ferrying activities of all women pilots, and with the first group and later with graduates of Cochran's training program she set up new squadrons of the WAFS at Romulus, Michigan; Dallas, Texas; and Long Beach and Palm Springs, California. She also established detachments at special training bases: Brownsville, Texas, for pursuit aircraft training and Saint Joseph, Missouri, for instrument training .

About the same time the WAFS was organized, Cochran's plans to establish Army flight training of women pilots were implemented, and recruiting began. Over the life of the program, twenty-five thousand women applied for the training..<sup>6</sup>

After initial selections were made, the first class of twenty-eight reported to the Houston, Texas, municipal airport (Howard Hughes Field) on November 17, 1942. The unit, known as the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD), and among themselves as the "Woofteddies", was officially designated the 319th Army Air Forces Flying Training Detachment (AAFFTD).

Already accomplished Pilots, the women of the first class of the 319th had only slightly less flight time than the five hundred hours required for direct admission to the WAFS. Only a short refresher course was needed to bring them up to the proficiency level required of WAFS pilots. Despite trying conditions in Houston, including their being scattered in boarding houses, motels, and hotels throughout the city, early hours and poor eating facilities that often precluded meals for the entire day, and cold, uncomfortable transportation to the flight line, twenty-three women pilots graduated in the first class at ceremonies held at Ellington Army Air Base on April 24, 1943.<sup>7</sup>

On August 5, 1943, the WAFS and the women of Cochran's WFTD school were united as the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). Cochran was named Director of Women Pilots, and Love continued in the WASP as executive of the Ferrying Division of the Air Transport Command.<sup>8</sup>

Classes entered the WFTD program at monthly intervals. A total of eighteen classes completed training: eight in 1943 and ten in 1944. Of the 25,000 women who applied for flight training, 1,830 were accepted, and of those, 1,074 received their wings.<sup>9</sup> The entrance requirements remained essentially the same as those for the WAFS, except that the age requirement was dropped from twenty-one to eighteen years, and the flight experience requirement was set at only two hundred hours. That requirement was later dropped to thirty-five hours, and the 200-horsepower rating requirement was eventually eliminated.

The second, third, and fourth classes, designated 43-W-2, 43-W-3, and 43-W-4, also entered training in Houston, but in April of 1943 all training was shifted to the 318th AAFTD at Avenger Field near Sweetwater, Texas. The first classes in Houston flew civilian aircraft that had been taken over by the Army. Gradually, however, military trainers were made available, and the military aircraft were ferried to Avenger Field by the cadets during the transfer of operations. The first to leave Houston were the primary trainers, ferried by 43-W-4, Class 43-W-3 then ferried the basic trainers a month later, and the second class arrived in Sweetwater in the advanced trainers on May 16, 1943, in time for their own graduation on May 28.<sup>10</sup>

At Avenger Field the women found a class of male cadets training to be transport pilots. The men remained at the field for about two weeks after the women arrived, resulting in the earliest coeducational flight training in the history of the American armed forces.<sup>11</sup> At first, the female cadets were housed at Bluebonnet Hotel in the town of Sweetwater. Later, they resided at Avenger Field in new barracks that provided for six women to a room, with a foot locker and standing locker for each. There was a small latrine and shower for every two rooms.

Training for the women paralleled but did not duplicate that given male Army Air Forces cadets. Because the women were expected to go into ferrying, emphasis was placed on cross-country flying. Gunnery and formation flight training were omitted. Training time increased as the initial experience of the women pilots entering the course decreased. The first class had received 115 flight hours over five months. By the close of the program the women were receiving seven months' training with a total of 210 flight hours.

Success in flight training was very important to the women, and great emotion accompanied the approach of the end of phase of training, for it meant a check ride was coming. Looking for any help possible, the women continued a tradition established at Sweetwater by the male trainees who preceded them; on their way to a check ride they would toss coins into a "wishing well", a rock-walled fountain in the center of the barracks area. The well had been altered for the women by the addition of a plaque reading, "*To The Best Women Pilots In The World, General H. H. 'Hap' Arnold, March 11, 1944.*" Each cadet prayed that she would be one of those to whom General Arnold had referred.

During the early stages of the program, an 80-percent graduation rate had been anticipated for the women trainees. The actual rates proved to average out at 74 percent for the 1943 graduates and 53 percent for the 1944 classes, the latter actually considerably better than the attrition rate for male trainees in the Central Flying Training Command in 1944. The increase in the washout rates for the women from 1943 to 1944 probably reflected less

previous flight experience among the later classes. The women eliminated included not only those dropped for poor flight proficiency but also those with medical and personal problems. The women, unlike the male cadets, because of their civilian status could resign voluntarily.

The WASPs remained employed under the Civil Service program. It was always assumed that they would become a part of the Army when a proper place within the military organization could be found for them, and in fact bills were introduced in Congress to give them military rank, and many of them were sent to an Army Air Forces school to learn how to be officers. Yet even with General Arnold's support of the bills, all efforts to absorb the organization into the military failed. [12](#)

Nevertheless, the women maintained a military attitude that belied their civilian status. Nancy Love and the women of the WAFS selected gray slacks and a patch-pocket gray jacket as their flight uniform. In the early WFTD classes there had been no standard uniform. Initially, any combination of civilian clothes, except cowboy boots, was allowed. When the flight school moved to Avenger Field, cotton mechanics' overalls, and later white turbans (called "Urban's turbans" after the 318th's commander at that time), were required wear during duty hours. But soon esprit de corps demanded a professional military appearance. For graduation and dress ceremonies the cadets purchased khaki cotton trousers to wear with a white shirt and a khaki overseas cap.

Upon graduation and assignment to their operational units, each flyer bought khaki shirts and trousers for summer flying and Army green or "pink" gabardine for winter. Then in the spring of 1944 each woman was issued dress and flight uniforms and flight coveralls of Santiago blue, similar to French ultramarine blue. The [dress uniform](#) consisted of a straight, knee-length skirt and a belted coat or jacket worn with either an oxford-cloth blue or white shirt and black tie. The flight uniform was slacks and a short Eisenhower jacket with the blue shirt either open at the neck or with the tie. A beret, pulled to the right, with a gold U.S. coat of arms pinned front and center, was the headgear. Insignia, in addition to the flight wings, included gold lapel wings and Dins spelling out "WASP". A black over-the-shoulder purse, black shoes, and gray overcoat completed the outfit. [13](#)

Of course, like any military-issue clothing, the new uniforms often had to be altered to fit. One base commander with a detachment of WASPs at his field was delighted to hear of the release of the new uniforms and so called a special inspection and review. When the uniforms arrived on the morning of the inspection, all were found to be too large. By exchanging pieces, the twenty-five WASPs thought they could clothe eight or ten women in complete uniforms for the inspection. When the commander heard the predicament, he thought for a moment, then replied: "Well girls--I want all of you at inspection. You can solve your problem by pinning the uniforms up in back with clothes pins and safety pins. I will only inspect the front."

Also an object of unit pride was the WASP emblem designed by Walt Disney, who was intrigued with the work of the WASPs. The symbol was a dainty little winged sprite called Fifinella. Fifinella was considered to be a sister of the prank-playing "gremlin" that caused pilots trouble, but unlike her brother, she was a kind-hearted little elf who helped the

WASPs out of tight situations.

The flight wings were a special object of individual pride to the women. Those WAFS pilots who went directly in the Ferrying Division of the ATC, though they had not graduated from an Army flight school, wore the wings of the Ferry Division's civilian pilots--wings with a stylized globe and obelisk in the center. Graduates of the first seven classes of women cadets received modified Army pilot wings as a personal gift from Jacqueline Cochran. <sup>14</sup> On these wings the face of the shield was smoothed and the number of the graduating class was engraved on it. Above the shield a scroll carried the number of the flying training detachment, either the 318th or the 319th. Official WASP wings were designed and made available in time for the graduation of Class 43-W-8 on December 17, 1943. In their center was a diamond or lozenge, the traditional heraldic woman's shield.

After receiving their wings, the women pilots of all the classes reported directly to their assigned commands. At their new bases they were checked out on the aircraft they were to fly, and at times they were sent to specialized transition flight courses to learn complex aircraft. One woman, sent to check out on the largest, most powerful pursuit airplane they flying, the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt, was, as might be expected, the only woman in her class. She recalls that she was treated as an intruder until she proved her capabilities by being the fourth pilot in the class to solo. Then she was accepted as "one of the boys".<sup>15</sup>

A dramatic use of women pilots in the Ferry Command is recounted by Lt. Gen. W. H. Tunner. The male ferry pilots were establishing a high accident rate in the hot P-39 pursuit plane. The men called it a "flying coffin". Aware that the men were not flying the plane "according to specifications", Tunner noted that the women pilots "paid attention in class, and they read the characteristics and specifications of the plane they were to fly before they flew it". He assigned a group of women to check out on P-39's and then to take deliveries on the high-speed aircraft. Sure enough. Tunner writes, "They had no trouble, none at all. And I had no more complaints from the men."<sup>16</sup>

Probably the next job after ferrying in which the women were tested to see if they could perform military flight duties was the towing of antiaircraft targets. The 'little black puffs' the WASPs saw around the targets, and sometimes around their aircraft, showed that the ammunition was live and they were playing for keeps. <sup>17</sup> When the enlisted men on the flight line of the 3rd Tow Target Squadron at Camp Davis, North Carolina, heard that women pilots were coming to learn to tow targets, they all immediately requested transfer. The camp commander asked them to help him train the women and told them he would transfer them as soon as possible. Six weeks later, the story goes, he asked them if they still wanted the transfer, and they replied, "Well, sir, we think maybe we better stick around here and see that these girls get through this damned course".<sup>18</sup>

In many other cases, too, the WASPs not only were proving their capability but also were often being used to demonstrate the safety of aircraft and missions, as they had done with the P-39. Two graduates of the Sweetwater school, Dorothea Johnson Moorman and I, were assigned to check out in the new B-29 Superfortress and then to demonstrate it for training purposes. This new bomber, built especially for the long-range bombing desperately needed in the Pacific theater, was considered a "killer" or a "beast" by the men pilots assigned to

train in it. Lt. Col. Paul Tibbets, Jr., later to gain fame as the pilot of the Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the first atomic bomb, was our check pilot.

We completed our checkout by the end of the third day (despite an engine fire during the first flight)<sup>19</sup> and thereafter demonstrated our ship, Ladybird, decorated with a painting of Fifinella on the nose, at the very heavy bomber training base at Alamogordo, New Mexico. After a short time, the purpose of the flights had been achieved. The male flight crews, their egos challenged, approached the B-29 with new enthusiasm and found it to be not a beast, but a smooth, delicately rigged, and responsive ship.

WASP Ann Baumgartner, assigned to Fighter Flight Test at Wright Field, Ohio, had a unique experience. She checked out in every fighter and bomber operational during 1943 and 1944 and in addition flew the YP-59A twin-jet pursuit airplane in October, 1944. <sup>20</sup>

Who were the women attracted to the WASP? Their employment before the war had been as varied as that of any similar group of women. They were housewives, mothers, debutantes, students, secretaries, beauticians, flight instructors, and even an actress and a movie stunt woman or two. But their purpose for joining was the same: they wished to serve their country. Some had obvious reasons' Anne McClellan's pilot husband had been missing since the Bataan Death March. Ah Ying ("Hazel") Lee, an American of Chinese ancestry, was engaged to a major in the Chinese Air Force. Some of the women, like twenty-two-year-old Rebecca Edwards, were already widows of the war. Most had husbands, fiancées, sweethearts, fathers, or brothers in uniform. <sup>21</sup> No doubt the women loved to fly as much as the male pilots, and some were accused of joining to seek 'affairs of the heart'. But over and above all other reasons was the feeling that they were making a direct and useful contribution--that they were able to do something for the war effort.

The women of the WASP fulfilled all the expectations of those who initiated the program. They could serve as pilots of military aircraft, releasing male pilots for combat, and their flight performance approximated that of the men in terms of safety and number of available duty days. In total, they flew over sixty million miles in operational flights in every type of aircraft flown by the Army.<sup>22</sup> Thirty-eight of them sacrificed their lives in the service of their country during World War II.

Many accolades and commendations were made to the WASPs. At the graduation of the last class of WASP cadets at Sweetwater, Texas, on December 7, 1944, [General Hap Arnold](#) said:

Frankly, I didn't know in 1941 whether a slip of a young girl could fight the controls of a B-17 in the heavy weather they would naturally encounter in operational flying. Those of us who had been flying for twenty or thirty years knew that flying an airplane was something you do not learn overnight.

Well, now in 1944, more than two years since WASPs first started flying with the Air Forces, we can come to only one conclusion--the entire operation has been a success. It is on the record that women can fly as well as men.

Certainly we haven't been able to build an airplane you can't handle. From

AT-6s to B-29s, you have flown them around like veterans. One of the WASPs has even test-flown our new jet plane. So, on this last graduation day, I salute you and all WASPs. We of the AAF are proud of you; we will never forget our debt to you.<sup>23</sup>

On December 20, 1944, the WASP program was deactivated. The women pilots were told they were no longer needed, that enough men had returned from combat fronts to be able to do their jobs. The legislation in Congress to retain the WASP in the military had failed after encountering a strong opposing lobby from male flight instructors, who became eligible for the draft as their government-contract flight schools closed and who understandably coveted the flight assignments given to the WASP.<sup>24</sup>

The WASPs' lives as military pilots abruptly ended, and they returned to civilian life with no veterans' benefits. For many the transition was not an easy one. In 1949 the Air Force offered commissions to all former WASPs. One hundred fifteen women accepted these commissions, and twenty-five of them went on to become career officers.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, though their commissions were based on their service as WASPs, they were never again allowed to fly military aircraft. Finally, in March of 1979, the Department of the Air Force, in response to Congressional authorization, announced that WASP duty was considered active military service for the purpose of veterans' benefits. The first honorable discharges were presented the following May. <sup>26</sup>

Strong ties of friendship were welded during the trying but exhilarating times when they flew with the Army star on their wings, and since the war the WASPs have met in reunion fourteen times. Each year fewer attend the reunions, and the absent ones are missed. The co-founders are gone now--Nancy Love, founder of the WAFS, died in 1976, and Jacqueline Cochran, the founder and commander of the WASP, in 1980. In 1986, Leoti Deaton of Wichita Falls, Texas--the woman with the title Chief Staff Executive of WASPs, but who acted as the confidante, overseer, and mother superior to all WASP cadets--passed away.

A memorial gathering was held during the 1986 reunion in Sweetwater. After a tribute to all WASPs, living and dead, and to their leaders, the names of those WASPs who lost their lives during the war were read. Every woman present had lost friends. All paused to remember them and to grieve for the bright young lives sacrificed for freedom.

The feelings of the women toward the WAFS and WASP programs, toward their service with the Army Air Forces, toward the aircraft they flew and the jobs they were given, are summed up in the words of WAFS pilot Cornelia Fort, one of the first to volunteer when the service was formed and one of those who lost her life in the service. During her few short months as a ferry pilot she wrote:

As long as our planes fly overhead the skies of America are free and that's what all of us everywhere are fighting for. And that we, in a very small way, are being allowed to help keep that sky free is the most beautiful thing I have ever known.

I, for one, am profoundly grateful that my one talent, my only

knowledge, flying, happens to be of use to my country when it is needed. That's all the luck I ever hope to have. [27](#)

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If you've had the opportunity to see "Flygirls," then you've seen Dora!

