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Veterans Notebook
Richard Smith
60 years later, female pilots' unit gets formal recognition

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Clay Wilkins had his head in the clouds as a youngster on the prairies of West Texas. In those clouds, during the early years of World War II, was a fascinating combination for a 12-year-old kid: airplanes and young women who were flying them.

Wilkins, who now lives in Waco, said he would catch a ride back then from farmers around his hometown of Colorado City, Texas, and travel the 28 miles to Avenger Field in Sweetwater. That was where training took place for what Wilkins says is one of the most neglected units in American military history, the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or **WASPs**.

"I would hang out on a barbed-wire fence and watch these planes do their transitions," said Wilkins, who said that he didn't care if the pilots were women. In fact, Wilkins said he was just beginning to notice girls, so he thought it was pretty dandy that these planes were being driven by young women.

Watching the **WASPs** fly was more than a passing fancy for an awestruck kid. Instead, he said the experience helped encourage him to realize his dreams. That dream was piloting fighters, which he flew in both Korea and Vietnam. Wilkins later retired as a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force. His post-military career included heading what was the former Texas Aeronautics Commission as well as chairing aviation studies in Waco at both Texas State Technical College and Baylor University.

"They affected my life as an 11-, 12-, 13-year-old kid who had his head in the clouds," said Wilkins about the **WASPs**. "I could absolutely walk on the clouds on my way back home from Avenger."

Today, Wilkins is part of a grassroots effort to honor the some 1,100 women who served as **WASPs** between 1942 and 1944. These women flew every type of aircraft the military had and on every type of mission except combat. Some 25,000 young women applied for the experimental program and 1,830 were accepted for the job that helped unencumber stateside military pilots so they could go to combat overseas.

Nancy Parrish heads the Waco-based Wings Across America. The project began six years ago compiling histories of the **WASPs**, a project with which the former Public Broadcasting Service television producer has a special link. Parrish's mother, Deanie, was a **WASP** pilot and is the organization's associate director.

Now in their 80s

It is easy to see when you sit down to talk with Deanie and Nancy Parrish that both mother and daughter are very passionate about capturing history through the interviews of former **WASPs**. So far, 105 former members of the **WASPs** have been interviewed in 19 states. Fewer than 500 are still alive and most, if not all, would be in their 80s.

If possible, the Parrishes are perhaps even more enthusiastic about an effort to build the National **WASP** World War II Museum at Avenger Field, now a part of Texas State Technical College's Sweetwater campus.

The Parrishes lived the nomadic military life. Deanie met her husband, a B-24 bomber pilot, while she was stationed in Florida. She was with the **WASPs** towing gunnery targets behind the B-26 bombers she flew.

Nancy Parrish said her dad served 25 years in the Air Force and was always the "hero" in the family. But after his death 11 years ago she became interested in what Deanie had done during the war. The former PBS producer set out to gather information for a documentary she ultimately would not make about her mother's outfit but that would lead to other pursuits.

Deanie downplays her service as a **WASP**. She said that she learned to fly before her days as a **WASP** because her hometown in Florida was home to an Army pilot instructor's school "and they had all the good-looking men."

Once old enough, Deanie joined the **WASPs** and trained in Sweetwater. Her service later ended back in Florida when the government decided it didn't need the **WASPs** any longer.

"When the **WASPs** were disbanded, I hung up my parachute and paid my way home," Deanie Parrish said.

Paying one's own way was one of the catches about joining the **WASPs**.

"They had to pay their own way there and their way back home," Nancy Parrish said.

It would be some 33 years after the **WASPs** disbanded, in 1977, that the government even considered them veterans. And unlike their male counterparts, the families of the 38 **WASP** pilots killed in the line of duty were not allowed to put gold-star banners in their windows to recognize their service-related deaths.

"They got cheap pine boxes and we would take up a collection for burial," said Deanie Parrish of her fellow **WASPs** who were killed.

'Mini-museum' at BU

A former church parsonage at Baylor now houses a "mini-museum" with **WASP** uniforms and photos. The Parrishes take some of this material on the road with them for presentations. But both clearly envision a more permanent home for the museum at the place where the **WASPs** were trained. That home will not just showcase pictures, uniforms or even airplanes.

Nancy Parrish said there are plenty of other museums in Texas with aircraft displays. Instead, the museum will likely house traveling aircraft exhibits while the facility itself will feature educational exhibits such as a re-creation of Avenger Field, a virtual reality simulator of aircraft experiences ranging from Stearman biplanes to the space shuttle as well as an "electronic quilt" one may touch and hear a **WASP's** story. The Parrishes believe those stories will be a source of inspiration for generations to come.

'You can do anything'

"These women proved that you can do anything if you're willing to work," Nancy Parrish said. "It goes beyond race, it goes beyond country, it goes beyond sex. It's universal. You can listen to any of our 105 interviews and get that message."

The **WASP** museum project is off to a good start, according to the Parrishes. Wilkins is one of the 390 members nationwide of the National **WASP** Museum Association and serves on its board of directors. The museum project also has a national advisory council. That body's membership includes such dignitaries as former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, a niece of a **WASP**, and John Truesdell, deputy assistant secretary of the Air Force for reserve affairs.

A 57-acre tract of land has been leased for 99 years to the museum by the city of Sweetwater. The museum will use the original Avenger Field hangar for the museum.

A combination of private funds and grant money is anticipated in the building of the museum, said Nancy Parrish, who said they welcome new members. Anyone interested in the **WASPs** and the museum project may go to www.avengerfield.com.

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