



A group of Women Airforce Service Pilots walks by a Boeing B-17. More than 1,000 American women joined the WASP during World War II.

BOEING ARCHIVES PHOTO

True trailblazers

Women Airforce Service Pilots did everything short of combat flights

BY EVE DUMOVICH

During World War II, 1,074 American women left homes, families and jobs to risk their lives as the country's first female military pilots. As Women Airforce Service Pilots, they flew more than 60 million miles on every type of mission except actual combat. Although 38 died in service, more than 30 years passed before Congress recognized WASP as war veterans.

These pilots trained, flew and served as hard, and as well, as their male counterparts. They trained new male and female pilots, tested new planes and towed targets through live ammunition. In 1943 and 1944, the WASP took more than 12,000 aircraft, from P-51 fighters to the big Boeing bombers, to battle theatres. Yet unlike the male pilots in the Army Air Forces

(renamed U.S. Air Force in 1947), WASP were considered part of the Civil Service and received no military benefits. In fact, when a WASP member made the ultimate sacrifice for her country, her family and friends paid for her unceremonious final trip home.

Jacqueline Cochran spearheaded the formation of WASP in 1942 when there was a shortage of male pilots, and training women as pilots would release more men for air combat. Cochran was an accomplished aviator who in 1953 would become the first woman to break the sound barrier, in North America's F-86 Sabre jet, and the first woman to fly at twice the speed of sound, in a North American A-5 Vigilante. She went on to serve for 30 years as a member of the board of directors of North American Aviation, a predecessor of Boeing.

In her final report to Army Air Forces Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold in 1944, Cochran wrote: "It was of importance to prove that a whole group of women, without special selection except for physical requirements, could be assigned to the Fortresses

or the B-26s or the B-25s, pass through their transition training as successfully as male pilots and thereafter carry on regularly in operations without undue fatigue or higher-than-normal accident rate."

Cochran convinced Arnold and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the value of this concept after she ferried a Lockheed Hudson bomber across the Atlantic in 1942. At the time, both England and Russia were using women to ferry airplanes.

By September 1942, the U.S. Air Transport Command authorized the employment of women flyers, and the Ferry Command was training women as pilots. Cochran headed the 319th Army Air Force Flying Detachment, based in Houston. Nancy Love, another skilled pilot, headed the Air Transport Command Squadron, designated the Women's Auxiliary Ferry Service, based at New Castle Army Air Base, Del. The two units operated separately until 1943, when Arnold consolidated them as the WASP, directed by Cochran. Love became staff director of WASP serving with the Air Transport Command.



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Jackie Cochran, who helped with the formation of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, sits in the P-51B Mustang that she flew in the 1946 and 1948 Bendix Trophy Race.

While legislation giving women pilots complete military status waited for Congressional approval, WASP trainees were accepted as federal employees on temporary Civil Service status, so they did not qualify for flight pay or other standard military benefits.

More than 25,000 women applied and 1,830 were accepted for WASP training. Of these, 1,074 graduated. Applicants had to pass a tough physical exam, be interviewed by Cochran or her representative, and have a high school education and at least 35 hours of flying time.

The 27 weeks of WASP training included more than 400 hours of ground school and 210 hours of flight instruction. With the exception of formation and aerobatic flying required for combat, the training was identical to that taken by male cadets.

The first class of 28 recruits began training Nov. 16, 1942, at the Howard Hughes Municipal Airport in Houston. New classes began every month, and soon the Houston facility became too crowded. On Nov. 1, 1943, WASP relocated to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. For a brief period they shared the facility with the last class of male cadets; after that Avenger Field became a women-only training center.

At WASP graduation ceremonies in 1944, Arnold presented the WASP with a bronze plaque dedicated to the “Best Women Pilots in the World.” He told the new graduates that women pilots could do everything needed, short of combat.

But by February 1944, plans for the coming invasion of Europe shifted the military emphasis to ground troops. Thousands of men in Air Forces training programs, in-

cluding the Civil Aeronautics Administration’s War Training Service Program and the contract schools for cadets, were dismissed. They were no longer eligible for the draft-deferred status many held as reservists and would likely be drafted into the infantry. These pilots lobbied Congress to squash House Bill 4219, designed to grant the WASP full military status, and with it, insurance coverage, hospitalization and burial benefits, and veteran status.

The Military Service Committee agreed with Arnold that the WASP should be commissioned. However, the powerful Civil Service Committee claimed Congress never authorized the formation of the WASP and voted to discontinue the program. On June 21, 1944, the bill was defeated by 19 votes.

On Oct. 1, 1944, each WASP received a letter from Arnold saying that all the Women Airforce Service Pilots would be released Dec. 20, 1944. At bases across the United States, WASP hung up their parachutes and paid their own way back home.

“I salute you and all WASP. We of the Army Air Force are proud of you and we will never forget our debt to you,” Arnold told the last group of WASP at Sweetwater. Yet America did forget. For 30 years, records of WASP service at the air bases were sealed and stamped “top secret.”

Then, in 1972, a reunion of 315 former WASP at Sweetwater sparked a new fire. By their next reunion in 1974, a Militarization Committee under the guidance of Col. Bruce Arnold (retired)—the son of deceased Gen. Arnold—started a process of new Congressional bills and hearings.

Former WASP Doris Brinker Tanner was among those who testified before Congress. In an article called “We Also Served,” published in the November 1985 issue of *American History Illustrated*, she wrote: “On May 21, 1971, the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, Antonio Chayes, presented the first authentic WASP discharge, stating that ‘the efforts and sacrifices of a talented and courageous group of women have been accorded (retroactive) status as military veterans ... and inspire the 47,000 Air Force women who now follow in their footsteps.’ The unknown, gutsy women of the World War II Army Air Forces at last occupied their rightful place as the first female military pilots in American history.” ■

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WASP displays



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This group of WASP pilots completed B-17 transition training.

A Women Airforce Service Pilots display is currently part of the Personal Courage Wing at The Museum of Flight in Seattle. The traveling WASP exhibit “FLYGIRLS of WWII” is on display through April 1 at the Mayborn Museum Complex of Baylor University in Waco, Texas.