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The Women Airforce Service Pilots

During World War II, the lack of a sufficient number of army pilots to fly for the United States of America became a large issue for the country at war. In order to deploy more pilots overseas, the United States Army started a new, unique program in 1942, something that had never been attempted before in America: The Women Airforce Service Pilots, or the WASP. The women who were part of the WASP served the United States bravely and paved the way for women in the army as well as in other aspects of life for years to come. Founded by Jacqueline Cochran, the WASP underwent extensive training, completed important tasks for the Army Air Force, and continually proved the worth of female pilots until the program was terminated in 1944¹, making strides in the struggle for equality for women.

The WASP program was created by well-known female aviator Jacqueline Cochran. Born to a poor family, Cochran was once employed as a floor-sweeper in a beauty parlor, but worked hard in order to earn her pilot's license in 1932. She became close friends with Amelia Earhart, entered and won well-known air races, and even broke the 2,000 kilometer speed record in 1940. Among other awards, Cochran won the Minneapolis Air Classic Award, was awarded the Clifford Burke Harmon International Trophies of the International League of Aviators 15 times, and won the General Willie E. Mitchell Memorial Award for her contributions to the field of aviation.² In 1939, Cochran spoke with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and together the two presented an idea to General Hap Arnold. Their proposition discussed the possibility of women

¹ "Jackie Cochran (1906-1980)." PBS. Accessed May 14, 2015. "Jackie Cochran (1906-1980)." American Experience. PBS, n.d. Web. 13 May 2015.

² Ibid

assisting with flying military aircraft should the United States enter World War II. Arnold rejected the idea, but in 1941, as the president of the female aviator group known as the 99s, Cochran was sent to England in order to observe the program of women pilots training with the British Royal Air Force. Cochran stayed overseas with, organized, and led a group of twenty-five women who flew for the Royal Air Force in England.³ In an attempt to encourage the creation of a similar female flying program in America, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her newspaper column “My Day” in 1942 that “Women pilots, in this particular case, are a weapon waiting to be used... I am afraid that we cannot afford to let the time slip by just now without using them.”⁴ The same year, due to a shortage of male pilots in the United States’ Army Air Force (AAF), Cochran was asked to return to America and put her plan of training women pilots into action. She was named the Director of Women’s Fly Training and began training young women as pilots at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. Soon, the Women’s Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, which was under the leadership of aviator Nancy Harkness Love, which consisted of already licensed female pilots, and the Women’s Flying Training Detachment, which included an intense training program, merged to form the Women Airforce Service Pilots.⁵ The purpose of the WASP was for women to ferry planes and perform other necessary aerial tasks on the home front in order to free male pilots who could fight on the front lines overseas.⁶

In order to become part of the program, the Women Airforce Service Pilots had to complete AAF flight training as well as pass the Army physical and written tests.⁷ The trainees were required to have a high school education, weigh at least 110 pounds, and stand at least 60

³ Ibid

⁴ Roosevelt, Eleanor. "My Day." 1942.

⁵ "Jackie Cochran (1906-1980)." PBS. Accessed May 14, 2015. "Jackie Cochran (1906-1980)." American Experience. PBS, n.d. Web. 13 May 2015.

⁶ Wackerfuss, Andrew. "Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)." Airforce Historical Support Division. August 5, 2013. Accessed May 14, 2015.

⁷ Parrish, Deanie Bishop. "WASP WWII Scrapbook." Wings Across America. Accessed May 14, 2015.

inches tall. Male pilots in the AAF had to be between the ages of 18 and 26, as this was deemed the target age for the best and most effective pilots. However, the WASP had a slightly different age limit- the women were required to be at or between 21 and 35. Only 3% of WASP were over the age of 32, and 57% fell between 22 and 27 years old.⁸ Each woman involved with the WASP had to finance their own flight lessons to independently obtain their commercial pilots licenses, while male army pilots were taught how to fly as part of their training.⁹ Many male pilots, some of whom completed part of their training with the WASP¹⁰, were hostile toward the female trainees because they viewed the WASP as incapable of flying and as a threat to their own positions in the army. As Katherine Sharp Landdeck noted, "It was unacceptable to have women replacing men. They could release men for duty- that was patriotic- but they couldn't replace men."¹¹ However, the women of the WASP program soon proved that they were able to fly every type of military aircraft that they attempted.¹² The training portion of the program was very intense. At the start of the program, training took 23 weeks, with 115 hours of flying and 180 hours of ground school.¹³ Two years later, the training had been extended to last 30 weeks, including 210 hours of flight and 393 hours of flight school.¹⁴ The women were required to learn military guidelines and customs and to complete ground school classes such as physics, mathematics, first aid training, and navigation. According to Cochran, the WASP received essentially the same primary, basic, and advanced training as most male flying cadets in the

⁸ Cochran, Jacqueline. Jacqueline Cochran's Final Report. 1944.

⁹ Stamberg, Susan. "Female WWII Pilots: The Original Fly Girls." NPR. March 9, 2010. Accessed May 14, 2015.

¹⁰ "WASPs Demonstrate Their Abilities." National Museum of the US Air Force. February 20, 2015. Accessed May 14, 2015.

¹¹ Stamberg, Susan. "Female WWII Pilots: The Original Fly Girls." NPR. March 9, 2010. Accessed May 14, 2015.

¹² "WASPs Demonstrate Their Abilities." National Museum of the US Air Force. February 20, 2015. Accessed May 14, 2015.

¹³ Stamberg, Susan. "Female WWII Pilots: The Original Fly Girls." NPR. March 9, 2010. Accessed May 14, 2015.

¹⁴ Cochran, Jacqueline. Jacqueline Cochran's Final Report. 1944.

AAF. The women trained at over 120 bases, which were overseen by Cochran, and worked hard to earn their right to be a WASP. By the end of the program, 58.7% of the WASP trainees completed their training and earned their spot in the program after graduation.¹⁵

The Women Airforce Service Pilots program was designed so that women, who at the time were not allowed to be in combat, would fly military planes in the United States in varying capacities so that the men would be free to fly overseas in the war.¹⁶ “Fly Girls”, as the WASP were nicknamed¹⁷, ferried planes from factories to military bases, tested newly overhauled planes, completed tracking and searchlight missions, flew for radio control tests, and completed other similar tasks. In addition, they towed targets in the air for male gunners, who fired practice rounds at these targets with live ammunition.¹⁸ The flying equipment at Avenger Field, where the women were based and completed their training¹⁹, included over 200 airplanes.²⁰ More than 1,100 women were a part of the WASP program, all of whom were civilian volunteers.²¹ The Fly Girls bonded over their training and their shared experiences as WASP. They lived six women to a barracks and, together, they sang boisterous marching songs such as “We Got the Stuff, the Right Stuff”, “Do You Have Your Wings?”, “Deep in the Heart of Texas”, and “The WASP Song”.²² The women spent their free time sharing stories and writing letters home. Converted cattle trucks were used to transport people to and from Avenger Field.²³ They wore “zoot suits”- large flying suits that were the source of many jokes among the pilots. “I wish you could see our

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Hilyard, Scott. "Her Story Is WWII History." Bradley Hilltopics Online. 2009. Accessed May 14, 2015.

¹⁷ Stamberg, Susan. "Female WWII Pilots: The Original Fly Girls." NPR. March 9, 2010. Accessed May 14, 2015.

¹⁸ Stamberg, Susan. "Female WWII Pilots: The Original Fly Girls." NPR. March 9, 2010. Accessed May 14, 2015.

¹⁹ "Avenger Field AKA Sweetwater Army Airfield." Texas Escapes. 2008. Accessed May 14, 2015.

²⁰ Cochran, Jacqueline. Jacqueline Cochran's Final Report. 1944.

²¹ Stamberg, Susan. "Female WWII Pilots: The Original Fly Girls." NPR. March 9, 2010. Accessed May 14, 2015.

²² Cochran, Jacqueline. Jacqueline Cochran's Final Report. 1944.

²³ Parrish, Deanie Bishop. "WASP WWII Scrapbook." Wings Across America. Accessed May 14, 2015.

flying outfit,” wrote WASP Madge Rutherford Minton in a letter to her sister. “‘Zoot suits’, we call them. They are GI coveralls... They come in three sizes-- large, larger, largest.”²⁴ Though the WASP pilots did not fly in actual combat, their job was certainly not free of danger. The Caterpillar Club was the nickname of the unofficial group of women who had been forced to parachute to safety from an aircraft in an emergency.²⁵ Among the WASP, fatigue and illness was very common due to the fact that the women were constantly exposed to extreme weather and spent hours each day pushing themselves to their physical limits. Accidents were unavoidable; over the two-year course of the program, there were 402 air accidents.²⁶ Thirty-eight women died in aircraft incidents during the WASP program due to the dangers of their work.²⁷ As the WASP were not considered an official part of the army and did not receive any type of military benefits, the army would not pay for their funerals, nor could the families of the deceased place an American flag on the coffin.²⁸ The dangers of the job were prominent, but the Fly Girls demonstrated their daring and bravery by continuing to fly for their country. In total, the WASP flew approximately 60 million miles, equal to 2,500 times around the world.²⁹ Trainees received \$172.50 a month, but were required to pay for their own transportation to and from Sweetwater. Once they finished their training, the women were paid \$250, with no promotions or pay raises available.³⁰ The Fly Girls were also in the public eye while the WASP program was in effect. *Life* magazine featured a WASP on the cover in July of 1943 and included

²⁴ Minton, Madge Rutherford . "WASP Uniform Quotes." Texas Women's University. Accessed May 14, 2015.

²⁵ Clark, Marie Mountain. *Dear Mother and Daddy: World War II Letters Home from a WASP*, an Autobiography. Livonia, Michigan: First Page Publications, 2005.

²⁶ Cochran, Jacqueline. *Jacqueline Cochran's Final Report*. 1944.

²⁷ Stamberg, Susan. "Female WWII Pilots: The Original Fly Girls." NPR. March 9, 2010. Accessed May 14, 2015.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ "WASPs Demonstrate Their Abilities." National Museum of the US Air Force. February 20, 2015. Accessed May 14, 2015.

³⁰ Cochran, Jacqueline. *Jacqueline Cochran's Final Report*. 1944.

an article about the women in the program (Appendix A).³¹ Fly Girls' images were also used as propaganda for the American war effort. The fact that they were women in the military, an industry heavily dominated by males, was exploited in posters and other types of propaganda, and the WASP were used to demonstrate the more 'glamorous' side of the war effort (Appendix B).³² The WASP even had their own mascot named "Fifinella", a female gremlin created by Walt Disney (Appendix C).³³ The Women Airforce Service Pilots faced dangers and challenges in their daily lives while serving, and were visible to the public as a new and different aspect of the United States military.

The Women Airforce Service Pilots program was terminated on December 20th, 1944, only two years after it was founded.³⁴ As the Commanding General of the AAF, Hap Arnold, stated, if the the WASP were to continue serving, they would "be replacing instead of releasing our young men... So, [Arnold] directed that the WASP program be inactivated and all WASP be released on 20 December 1944".³⁵ Though Arnold assured the WASP that the pilots and their immense contributions to the war effort would not be forgotten after they were disbanded, the WASP' records were sealed from the public and were forgotten until decades later.³⁶ The WASP were not recognized by the government for their work during the war, nor were they given military status and the benefits included until November 23, 1977. On this day, President Carter signed Public Law 95-202, which stated that "The service of any person as a member of the Women's Airforce Services Pilots... shall be considered active duty for the purpose of all laws

³¹ "Fly Girls of WWII." Pinterest. Accessed May 14, 2015.

³² "WW2 Posters." Pinterest. Accessed May 14, 2015.

³³ The Rose Garden. Accessed May 14, 2015. www.fifinella.org.

³⁴ Wackerfuss, Andrew. "Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)." Airforce Historical Support Division. August 5, 2013. Accessed May 14, 2015.

³⁵ Cochran, Jacqueline. Jacqueline Cochran's Final Report. 1944.

³⁶ Wackerfuss, Andrew. "Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)." Airforce Historical Support Division. August 5, 2013. Accessed May 14, 2015.

administered by the Veteran's Association."³⁷ A ceremony was held when the law was signed, but, as former Fly Girl Deanie Bishop Parrish noted, "The WASP were not invited."³⁸ The fact that WASP were granted the same military rights of other World War II veterans was a victory for the program, but came years too late. Immediately after the closing of the WASP organization, founder Jacqueline Cochran called for the militarization of any future female flying group in order to prevent similar issues from occurring again.³⁹

The women who served as pilots as well as the program as a whole had a large impact on the war effort and paved the way for women in the military as well as in other aspects of life. The AAF thanked the WASP for helping the number of combat losses in World War II end up at a much lower total than expected.⁴⁰ Prior to the WASP program, very few women were pilots, especially compared to the number of male flyers. Some female aviators were famous, like Jacqueline Cochran and Amelia Earhart, but the women faced long odds in a field dominated by men and worked extremely hard in order to obtain their pilot's license. During the time period, females were considered incapable of flying any aircraft, especially the heavy and high-tech army planes. However, the women who trained as WASP proved to the US military as well as to the general public that they were equal to men in their abilities as pilots. When he issued a statement detailing the end of the WASP, General Hap Arnold noted that the Fly Girls' "very successful record of accomplishment has proved that in any future total effort the nation can count on thousands of its young women to fly any of its aircraft"⁴¹, demonstrating a radical change in the mindset of the AAF, who had previously doubted the abilities of female pilots. In her final report, which was published after the WASP organization had ended, Jacqueline

³⁷ 95th Congress. "Public Law 95-202." November 23, 1977. Accessed May 14, 2015.

³⁸ Parrish, Deanie Bishop. "WASP WWII Scrapbook." Wings Across America. Accessed May 14, 2015.

³⁹ Cochran, Jacqueline. Jacqueline Cochran's Final Report. 1944.

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

Cochran discussed the fact that female pilots were just as effective as their male counterparts and were therefore acceptable choices to release male pilots for other duties. “Physiology peculiar to women is not a handicap to flying or dependable performance of duty in a properly selected group,” she wrote. “...The physiological, aptitude, and other tests used in the case of male pilots have approximately the same usefulness in the case of women pilots... Women pilots have as much stamina and endurance... [as] male pilots doing similar work. Women pilots can safely fly as many hours per month as male pilots”.⁴² These reports displayed an unpopular opinion at the time, but the success of the WASP program and its participants proved Cochran’s conclusions correct and established the undisputable equality of women and men as pilots. In fact, Cochran noted that “Fatal accident rates [of the WASP] compare very favorably with corresponding rates for men... the fatal accident rate for WASP was .060 per 1000 hours of flying... This compares with a fatal accident rate for men during 1934 and 1935 of .062 per 1000 hours”.⁴³ Arnold addressed the WASP in 1944, assuring them that the AAF was aware that the WASP “have shown that you can fly wingtip to wingtip with your brothers. If ever there was any doubt in anyone’s mind that women can become skillful pilots, the WASP have dispelled that doubt. I want to stress how valuable I believe the whole WASP program has been for the country... we... know that you are capable of ferrying, target towing, flying training, test flying, and... countless other activities”.⁴⁴ By working hard to overcome obstacles, the WASP proved their own worth to the AAF as well as showed the value of women to the army in general. Countless young women and girls who aspired to be someone important looked up to the pilots of the WASP due to their bravery and hard work. “The WASP were and still are my role models” stated Colonel Eileen

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ "WASPS: Breaking Ground for Today’s Female USAF Pilots." National Museum of the US Air Force. February 20, 2015. Accessed May 14, 2015.

Collins, a retired Air Force member and a NASA astronaut.⁴⁵ In addition to influencing generations of women and girls, the WASP served as inspiration for male aviators. Chuck Yeager, an Air Force pilot known as the first person to fly faster than the speed of sound⁴⁶, said in 1997 that he had “the utmost respect for all members of the [WASP]. They were hard working, dedicated pilots who served our country well, playing an important part in the war”.⁴⁷ Lieutenant Colonel Nicole Malachowski summed up the impact of the brave females for the nation as well as for the world when she said that “[The WASP]’ legacy to all military aviators, women and men alike is the knowledge that perseverance, commitment, and the desire to serve can overcome tremendous obstacles.” Malachowski also noted that she was able to become a female fighter pilot due to the impact and legacy of the WASP.⁴⁸ The influence that the WASP had and continue to hold in the world of pilots as well as for women of all backgrounds is evident in the respect that others demonstrate toward the organization and its members.

The Women Airforce Service Pilots, a group of dedicated and fearless young women, underwent months of training and hard work in order to become the first women to fly United States military aircraft. Though they did not fly in combat, the women were exposed to many dangers in their line of work. In addition, they faced discrimination based on their gender and were required to overcome stereotypes that existed in the early twentieth century in order to serve their country. The WASP helped to end the war with a lower casualty rate than the AAF had been expecting and proved to the nation that women were able and willing to support America in new ways. They paved the way for women in the military, in aviation, and in other

⁴⁵ "Quotes." Wings Across America. Accessed May 14, 2015.

⁴⁶ "Chuck Yeager." Biography.com. 2015. Accessed May 14, 2015.

⁴⁷ "Quotes." Wings Across America. Accessed May 14, 2015.

⁴⁸ Ibid

aspects of life due to their participation in this ground-breaking program, and have earned the respect of hundreds of men and women in the United States today.

Appendix

A.⁴⁹



B.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ "Fly Girls of WWII." Pinterest. Accessed May 14, 2015.

⁵⁰ "WW2 Posters." Pinterest. Accessed May 14, 2015.



C.⁵¹



⁵¹ The Rose Garden. Accessed May 14, 2015. www.fifinella.org.

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