

They flew military airplanes in the 1940s, but many years went by before they were recognized as veterans.

By Bruce D. Callander

The WASPs



These pilots on the flight line at New Castle AAB, Del., were among the more than 1,000 women who flew for the AAF in the continental US during World War II.

IN October 1943, the Army Air Forces checked out several women ferry pilots in the B-26 bomber. Women also flew P-38 fighters and the B-29 bomber, both of which had bad reputations when they were introduced, so bad that some male pilots balked at flying them.

As members of the unit known as the Women Airforce Service Pilots—the WASPs—they worked as test pilots, towed targets for gunners, pulled weather reconnaissance missions, flew student navigators and bombardiers, and instructed male pilots.

In all, more than 1,000 women flew for the AAF during the war, and 38 were killed, 11 in training and 27 in line of duty. They served in civilian status, wore made-over men's uniforms, and when there were enough males to fill the flying jobs, were sent home with little more than an official thank you. It would take Congress more than 30 years to recognize their contributions.

The program traces its origins to two women who could not have been more different in background and temperament.

Jacqueline Cochran was a founding raised by impoverished foster parents in a north Florida mill town. She had little formal education and began working in a beauty shop before she was in her teens. Yet she wound up running a prosperous cosmetics business and becoming one of the foremost female aviators of her day.

Nancy Love, a few years younger than Cochran, was the daughter of a successful physician. She attended a private school, then spent a couple of years at Vassar College, and helped to build up a successful Boston-based aviation company.

Where Cochran was brash, outspoken, and competitive, Love was quiet and conciliatory. But they had two things in common.

Two Similarities

One was their love of flying. Cochran originally took lessons for business reasons, but aviation soon became her consuming interest. By 1938, she had won the Bendix Transcontinental Air Race and become a leading aviatrix. Love received her private pilot's license at 16. Later, she sold airplanes on commission

US Air Force photo



All eyes are on Jackie Cochran, director of women pilots, as she gestures to illustrate a flying maneuver to women trainees at Avenger Field. Along with Nancy Love, Cochran championed the idea of women pilots in noncombat roles.

and flew for the Bureau of Air Commerce, where she tested airplanes and marked water towers as navigational aids.

The second similarity was that both women married men influential in aviation. Cochran's husband, Floyd Odlum, was a millionaire industrialist and defense contractor with important contacts in Washington. Love's husband, Robert Love, founded the Boston aviation company and was a reserve officer in the Army Air Corps, rising to colonel in Air Transport Command.

When war erupted in Europe, both women approached government officials with ideas for building a cadre of women pilots to fly for the Army.

Love's plan was to recruit experienced female pilots to ferry airplanes. In May 1940, she presented it to Lt. Col. (later Gen.) Robert Olds, who was setting up the Army Air Corp's Ferrying Command (later Air Transport Command). Olds passed the idea to Maj. Gen. H.H. Arnold, AAC chief.

Although nothing came of the idea at the time, two years later, Lt. Col. (later Lt. Gen.) William H. Tunner was searching for experienced pilots to serve with Ferrying Command, and Love's plan resurfaced. On Sept. 10, 1942, the Army Air Forces created the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron with 27 female pilots and Love as director.

Cochran had begun selling a similar idea even earlier. In September

1939, she wrote to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, saying the government should start thinking about using women in noncombat roles in case the US entered the war.

Later, she approached Arnold, who suggested she go to England and study Britain's Air Transport Auxiliary, which used women to ferry airplanes. She did. When she returned, she went public with her views and was invited to discuss them with President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Arnold initially rejected her plan but suggested that Cochran recruit qualified women pilots (she selected 25) and return to Britain to fly with the ATA and refine her plan.

By the summer of 1942, the US was in the war and hurting for pilots. Arnold called Cochran home to set up a program to teach women to fly for the Army. On Sept. 15, five days after the formation of Love's WAFS, he announced the formation of the Women's Flying Training Detachment, with Cochran at the helm.

Officials of Air Transport Command, thinking they had Arnold's approval, had OK'd Love's WAFS program while he still was negotiating with Cochran. There was little to do but go ahead with both programs. About a year later, however, the two groups were merged into the WASPs. Cochran was named director of women pilots and assigned to Arnold's staff. Love became executive, Ferrying Division, but remained director of women in ATC.

Love's Limited View

"Kaddy" Landry (now Katherine L. Steele of Gainesville, Fla.) trained with Cochran's group and recalls the situation. "The major difference was that Nancy Love had a very limited view of what women could do," she said. "All she was thinking about was the same program used by the British ATA, which didn't do any training. I don't think that she minded being subordinate to Cochran because she didn't have that big ambition that Cochran did. She just wanted to do her own thing, and Cochran let her."

Another difference between the approaches of the two women was that Cochran hoped to see women pilots integrated into the AAF while Love seemed content with their remaining in civilian status. Ultimately, Cochran did not get her wish. Her insistence on it may actually have shortened the life of the program.

While the idea of using women in the military flying role was new, it was not unprecedented. In the late 1930s, the US had launched the Civilian Pilot Training program to develop a pool of potential airmen, many of whom became military pilots. Under pressure, CPT later accepted a small number of women (one for every 10 males), some of whom eventually would fly for the Army. The Army also was commissioning older men who already had private pilot licenses as "service pilots" to fly in noncombat jobs. Although women service pilots were not given the same military status, they served much the same function.

Love's WAFS set up shop at New Castle AAB, Del., in September 1942. Applicants had to have commercial licenses with 200 horsepower ratings, 500 hours of flying time, and cross-country experience. After four weeks of transition training they were assigned to ferrying duties, at first delivering only light airplanes but eventually checking out in cargo aircraft, fighters, and bombers.

Cochran's WFTD program began at Houston Municipal Airport in Texas, with the first women entering training in November 1942. The government commandeered trailer parks to house them, and their first airplanes were cast-off civilian aircraft.

In early 1943, a second program opened at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Tex., where the AAF had been training male cadets. Eventually, the

women received the same AAF trainers used by male students. Operations at both Houston and Sweetwater, including flight instruction, were handled by a private operator under AAF contract.

The first WFTD applicants had to be at least 21 but not older than 35 and have a high school education and 200 hours of flying time. Each had to pass a medical exam by an Army flight surgeon and undergo an interview either by Cochran or by one of her representatives. The initial program called for 23 weeks of training, including 115 hours of flying and 180 hours of ground school.

Changing Criteria

As the pool of qualified applicants dwindled, the entry criteria and the course changed. The minimum age dropped to 18.5 years. Required flying time was lowered to 100 hours, then to 75, and finally to 35. Over the same period, the course was beefed up to cover 30 weeks, including 210 hours flying and 393 hours of ground school. Early on, the women went through primary, basic, and advanced training, but later, the basic phase was dropped.

"I was in Class 43-7," said Landry. "Then, everybody had to have at least 75 hours. Toward the end, they ran out of women who had even that much. There weren't that many women pilots in the 40s, but we all had some flying time and some of those first women in Ferry Command not only had a lot but had heavy horsepower time. They were mostly wealthy women who had their own airplanes. The ATA in Britain was able to require a lot of time, too, but they had a broader base to pick from, not only English women but those from Australia, South Africa, and all the colonies."

Rules laid down by Cochran said, "Applicant will have to be qualified at the end of training to pass commercial, written, and flight tests, and earn instrument rating." She added, "Applicant can be eliminated at any time during the process of the course at the discretion of the instructors."

Despite the lowering of the entry requirements, Cochran maintained high training standards. Of the more than 25,000 women who applied, 1,830 were accepted for training. A mere 1,074 were graduated. Of those who washed out, 552 were elimi-

nated for flying deficiencies, 27 for medical problems, and 14 for disciplinary reasons. Another 152 resigned and 11 women were killed during training.

The women pilots received much the same training as male aviation cadets, including courses in military courtesy, Articles of War, drill and ceremonies, plus ground school in mathematics, physics, navigation, theory of flight, weather, code, and physical training.

During training, women's basic pay was \$150 per month plus \$26 for overtime. At Sweetwater, the women paid \$1.65 per day for room and board. Male cadets received only \$75 per month in base pay, but they were not charged for room and board. The overall compensation was comparable, but women had to pay their own way to training and home again if they washed out. They were not eligible for government life insurance.

Lower Pay

After graduation, women received \$250 per month plus overtime for a total of \$287.50. On base, they paid \$15 to \$20 per month for quarters and were allowed to buy meals at the officers' mess. Living off base, they paid considerably more for rent and meals. Traveling on official duties, they drew a \$6 per diem allowance. Not only was their total pay less than that of second lieutenants but women were allowed no increases for promotion or length of service. The most

senior drew the same pay as the youngest graduates.

On graduation, some WASPs were sent directly to bases to fly the same kinds of airplanes they had flown in training, but most were given additional transition training in heavier aircraft before going to their assignments.

"After training at Sweetwater," said Landry, "several of us were sent to Mather Field [Calif.] and through B-25 transition. That lasted about three-and-a-half months. Then, they split that group and 20 went to Riverside, Calif., and the rest of us went to Biggs Field at El Paso [Tex.]."

Landry was assigned to the tow target squadron. Other WASPs at Biggs flew as "targets" to train searchlight crews and radar operators, piloted "mother ships" for radio-controlled targets, pulled low-altitude night missions to drop flares on troops and gun emplacements, and laid smoke screens.

Other women pilots fanned out to more than 120 airfields, taking on a variety of assignments. At Alamogordo, N.M., they flew flight checks, search missions, and cargo delivery in everything from the light L-5 liaison airplane to C-47s and B-17s. At Altus, Okla., they served as engineering test pilots on UC-78s. At Victoria, Tex., they worked as instrument instructors.

They flew weather missions and helped establish B-29 routes for the Army Airways Communications Sys-



Gen. H.H. Arnold awards wings at an Avenger Field ceremony in December 1944. The program was deactivated that month, as the Army cut back on flight training programs and the male pilot shortage became less acute.

US Air Force photo



Although women pilots in World War II carried out numerous flying duties for the military, they were not given full military status. It was not until 1977 that they were declared veterans.

tem. They flew bombardier and navigator students in AT-11s at Childress, Tex. At Frederick, Okla., they flew AT-6s, B-24s, and UC-78s and checked returning overseas pilots to prepare them to instruct cadets. At Wright Field, Ohio, Ann Baumgartner worked as a test pilot, checked out in the Bell YP-59A, and became the first US woman to fly a jet.

Fatalities

Cornelia Fort was instructing a student in Hawaii on Dec. 7, 1941, when they had a near collision with a Japanese warplane attacking Pearl Harbor. She returned to the States and instructed in the Civilian Pilot Training program, then became the second woman to volunteer for the WAFS. On March 21, 1943, the BT-13 she was ferrying collided with another airplane and she became the first American woman pilot killed in line of duty.

She was not the last. Evelyn Sharp, another of the original WAFS group, had 2,968 hours when she joined the ferry program. She was killed when the engine on her P-38 failed on takeoff. A third WAFS pilot, Dorothy E. Scott, was in pursuit training at Palm Springs, Calif., when she and her instructor were killed in an AT-6 in a midair collision.

Eleven women were killed during their initial training with Cochran's group. Another 27 graduates were killed while on duty. Most were on ferry missions or on cross-country

flights in training airplanes. Four died in A-24 attack bombers, two in B-25s, one in a P-39, and one in a P-63. Overall, Cochran said in her final report, the women's fatality rate was comparable to that for men.

If women pilots had proved themselves to AAF leaders, they were not always accepted by men at lower levels.

Landry recalls, "When we got to the tow target squadron at Biggs, the commanding officer was horrified. I guess he didn't know we were coming. He not only didn't want us to do anything for him, he didn't want to do anything for us. He wouldn't see about getting us proper quarters or anything."

That officer eventually shipped out. "Of course, the men we flew with every day were very easy to get along with," she went on. "They were all our age. The ones we had all the trouble with were those older men who had been there forever."

Some barriers never fell. For example, female pilots were prevented from flying outside the boundaries of the continental US. "That was something that the Congress passed," said Landry, "and it was stupid because many of those Ferry Command women were flying P-39s and P-63s that the US was giving to Russia." Women would fly them to Great Falls, Mont., where men picked them up and flew them to Alaska (which was not yet a state). Then, Russian women flew them to Russia.

"So," said Landry, "the American women could just as well have flown them to Anchorage."

Another frustration for the women was that they never were brought into full military status. It was one of Cochran's aims, but she balked at having the WASPs placed under Oveta Culp Hobby's Women's Army Corps. In June 1944, a Congressional committee considered a bill to militarize the WASPs in their own right but rejected it and recommended the program be disbanded.

One important factor in the decision was that the Army had cut back its flight training programs, leaving thousands of civilian instructors vulnerable to the draft. The AAF took some in as pilots, but many were faced with induction into nonflying jobs or other branches and lobbied against keeping the women pilots. Landry said, "All those men who had been exempt all those years by instructing suddenly were eligible for the draft and wanted our jobs. Even though they weren't prepared to take them, they didn't want to be drafted."

Arnold reluctantly ordered the shutdown, and the WASPs program was deactivated on Dec. 20, 1944, more than six months before the war ended. Some women later were commissioned in the new United States Air Force but not on flying status. Others continued to fly, but few were able to make full careers in civilian aviation. Unlike male veterans, they were not eligible for training under the GI Bill.

It was not until 1977 that Congress passed a bill, introduced by Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.), that gave the WASPs honorable discharges and declared them to be veterans. Their actions in wartime demonstrated courage and determination, paving the way for women to be admitted to military flying training again, but it had been more than 30 years before they finally completed their journey. ■

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