

# Nancy Harkness Love: Female Pilot and First to Fly for the U.S. Military

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It had gotten to be something of a lark for young Nancy Harkness. For quite a while, she had evaded the 'no flying' rule of Milton Academy, the prestigious New England boarding school where she was attending high school. No one knew that she had a pilot's license, so it was simply a matter of coming up with a good excuse for her to leave the lush Massachusetts campus. Once away, Harkness headed straight into Boston, and later Cape Cod, to rent an airplane for an afternoon of flying.

A decade later, the young girl who would rather risk expulsion than give up flying became the head of the first group of women pilots to fly for the U.S. military. Five years later still, with World War II over, Nancy Harkness Love, like hundreds of thousands of American women who had joined the country's war effort, returned home and started a family.

Nancy Harkness Love was born to Robert Bruce and Alice Graham Harkness on February 14, 1914, in Houghton, Mich. Her father was a successful physician in that small town, home of Michigan Tech, in the northwestern corner of the state.

The family enjoyed the privileges of modest affluence. Nancy and her older brother Robert were encouraged to pursue their own interests. Her biggest love was horseback riding, and she especially loved wilderness trips involving overnight camping. Dr. and Mrs. Harkness insisted that their children get a good education, and Nancy went to schools in Houghton and later in Massachusetts. In 1927, she spent a year abroad traveling and studying in Europe and was among the multitudes who witnessed Charles Lindbergh's triumphant landing at Le Bourget after his successful trans-Atlantic solo flight.

It was a pair of intrepid barnstorming pilots who made their way to Houghton in the summer of 1930 who really captured Nancy's attention. 'A penny a pound and up you go,' was their pitch to first-time customers. Gathering up her pennies, Nancy was among those who decided to go for a ride. Something magical happened during that flight. Even before she landed, Nancy was figuring out how to scrape up the cash for another flight and how to convince her parents to let her take flying lessons.

Dr. and Mrs. Harkness were ambivalent about Nancy's great plan. While Dr. Harkness had always encouraged his children to show spunk, even he was hesitant. Her mother was genuinely opposed to the idea; it simply did not mesh with her idea of how to raise one's daughter to be a well-bred lady. Nancy was persistent, however, and she ultimately won her parent's indulgence.

Nancy began taking lessons at age 16 in a decrepit old Fleet. Her instructor, Jimmy Hanson, was only two years older than she was and had very little experience. She stated later, 'I don't think he knew what made the plane stay in the air. At least he never told me. My instructions were just to 'keep up the flying speed.'" Nancy was determined to solo before she had to return to school in Massachusetts, but that left only a month to cram in all the necessary lessons. She took to it naturally.

On November 7, 1930, at age 16 1/2, Nancy Harkness was issued her private pilot's license. She was ecstatic and promptly set off on her first crosscountry flying trip. She loaded up two passengers and luggage for a flight from Boston to Poughkeepsie, N.Y., in order to visit friends at Vassar College. The weather went from bad to worse, and with only 15 hours of solo time she had not yet learned how to read the aircraft's compass. Then the oil gauge broke and Nancy knew that she must land. In her own words, she made a precarious landing, but the passengers and the airplane were intact. She knew she had made a serious mistake and immediately vowed to devote more time to flying and developing her skills. Never again would she overestimate her skills.

Thirty-one women held pilot's licenses in January 1929. By December 1930 that number had grown to 300. More than 600 women were registered in flying schools and taking lessons. The Ninety-Nines, a women pilots organization, had been founded in late 1929 by such well-known women as Amelia Earhart, Louise Thaden, Ruth Nichols, Fay Gillis, Marjorie Stinson, Teddy Kenyon, Blanche Noyes and Bobbi Trout. These women were acutely aware of their minority status in the world of aviation (when the group was founded, only about 150 of the nation's 9,800 licensed pilots were women), and they wanted to encourage more women to get involved. They believed that aviation was the way of the future and that it was important for women to be equal participants in the coming air age.

It was not an auspicious time to begin their mission. The stock market crash ended society's tolerance of a decade of feminist activism. When men could no longer be the breadwinners, a new tension between the sexes erupted. The women pilots of the period were

strong, resourceful women who did not conform to the traditional social expectations, a resource that proved critical in preserving their organization and their enthusiasm.

Nancy Love had started college in the fall of 1931 at Vassar. She was more focused on her flying skills than her academic work, however. She earned a limited commercial license at Poughkeepsie Airport by the end of her freshman year in 1932. Her aeronautical activities received national news coverage, and Nancy was dubbed 'the Flying Freshman.'

Nancy's family was not immune to the effects of the Depression. Her father, while a successful doctor, had not invested his wife's family inheritance well. By the beginning of Nancy's junior year, the family's finances were really tight, and at semester's end in January 1934, it was clear that the family could not afford to send her back for her spring semester.

By the fall of 1934, Nancy Harkness had found a flying job in Boston with a fledgling enterprise called Inter-City Air Service. The company had been founded by Robert Love (with financial help from his sister Margaret) in 1932. Robert Love had attended Princeton University before transferring to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, Mass. Love learned to fly at MIT, and he decided to abandon school in favor of starting his own company.

Inter-City offered every service from flight instruction to aerial surveying. This included a scheduled passenger service running from East Boston Airport (known today as Logan International Airport) as well as charter flights. Nancy was hired to help sell new airplanes—a new market that Inter-City was trying to enter. It was the oldest gimmick in the book, but women pilots were used not only to persuade reluctant buyers of new aircraft but also to sell the idea of aviation to the nation—after all, the logic went, if a woman can do it then it must not be so difficult.

As might be expected, given the economic condition of the United States during the early 1930s, Inter-City's sales were slow. In 1935, a new opportunity presented itself to Nancy. Phoebe Omelie selected Harkness along with four other outstanding women pilots to staff the Bureau of Air Commerce's National Air Marking Program.

Air markers were intended as an auxiliary, albeit vital, navigational aid to the nation's airway system of lights and radio beacons. Omelie's program was to aid what we today call general aviation, whereas the sophisticated technological research efforts of the Bureau of Air Commerce were intended to support commercial flying.

Each woman was assigned a specific section of the United States; Nancy's assignment was the eastern seaboard stretching from Maine to Florida. The Boston Post reported in October 1935 that she had worked with Massachusetts officials to place 290 markers throughout the commonwealth. The article also noted that Nancy had recently become engaged to Robert Love. When her mother became ill in the fall of 1935, Nancy submitted a letter of resignation to the bureau in late November. She helped care for her mother, but she also focused on her upcoming wedding. She and Bob Love were married on January 11, 1936, and promptly set off on a three-week flying honeymoon to California. Back in Boston after the honeymoon, Nancy

worked as a charter pilot for Inter-City. Later that same year, in September, the Loves returned to California to attend the National Air Races, which were being held in Los Angeles. Unbeknown to Nancy, Beechcraft had entered her in the Amelia Earhart Trophy race. Despite never having participated in a pylon race before, she placed fifth, winning \$75, but she came in more than three-quarters of an hour behind the winner, Betty Browning. Later that month she participated in a race in Detroit and came in second, flying a Monocoupe.

Love gave up air racing after that. By then she had become a methodical pilot, known for her care and close attention to the details of flying. She used written checklists for her preflights and disliked the rush and chaos that were a part of air racing.

When she returned to Boston, Love began working with the Bureau of Air Commerce again. In the fall of 1937, the board of directors of a new firm called the Gwinn Aircar Company, of Buffalo, N.Y., was casting about for the right woman to sell its new product, a small airplane with tricycle landing gear.

But instead of being put on the board she was offered a job as a test pilot. The tricycle landing gear represented an entirely new technology and a real change for pilots who had spent their entire flying careers in tail-wheel aircraft. At Gwinn, Love learned how to 'push the envelope,' to test the limits of an airplane's performance.

In 1938, while war clouds darkened over Europe, Love moved back to Boston. By 1940, Love was a member of the Massachusetts wing of the Civil Air Patrol. She helped ferry an airplane from the United States to France via Canada. She earned her instrument rating. And she answered a query from Lt. Col. Robert Olds of the Ferry Command (later known as the Air Transport Command) as to how many women pilots might be capable of flying military craft.

Olds was very interested in Nancy Love's information, and he passed to General Henry H. 'Hap' Arnold the idea of using experienced women pilots to help ferry military aircraft. Arnold rejected the idea, arguing that it would be better to hire qualified women as copilots for domestic airlines and thereby release those men for military service. Jacqueline Cochran, America's newest rising star in the world of aviation, had also been thinking about the possibility of using women as pilots. In September 1939, Cochran wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt about a plan for the use of women pilots during wartime. Jackie was committed to the concept of creating a separate military corps of women pilots who would fly military aircraft domestically. A central feature of this plan was the establishment of a training school. Jackie wanted desperately to be in charge of such a program.

Clayton Knight, who was acting head of the American recruiting committee for the British Ferry Command, upon hearing Cochran's idea, suggested that she instead recruit American women to serve in Britain's Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA). Britain had already had great success with Pauline Gower's women recruits, but Knight's real motive was his belief that the inevitable global publicity would bring much needed relief. Just as women had been used to sell aviation in the '20s and '30s, Knight thought the image of Britain desperately welcoming American women pilots would galvanize men into participating also. To further convince

Cochran, Knight suggested that her first task might be to ferry a Lockheed Hudson bomber from the United States to Great Britain. It was intended as a publicity stunt, but, Knight argued, it would also allow Cochran to meet with Pauline Gower. When Cochran came back from her famous ferry flight in July 1941, she went straight to Hyde Park to report to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Jackie had gained her connection to the Roosevelts through her millionaire husband, Floyd Odlum, who had been one of FDR's biggest financial supporters. President Roosevelt was intrigued with her idea and suggested that she conduct more research. Robert Lovett, assistant secretary of war for air, arranged for Cochran to be officially appointed to work (with out pay) on the matter. She, along with a staff of seven assistants, combed the Civil Aeronautics Administration records to identify all women with at least a commercial rating. Using the data from returned questionnaires as well as information about military aircraft, Cochran was able to demonstrate, at least on paper, that even without training there were women pilots capable of flying any aircraft in the military inventory.

The results of Cochran's findings were given to Olds, who was by then a general. Olds had retained his interest in using women pilots, but he had a serious difference of opinion with Cochran over the issue of the training program and the creation of an all-female corps. Tensions between the two mounted until Olds flat-out refused to even forward the proposal to General Arnold. Cochran was enraged and resigned her position. She presented her side of the dispute to Arnold before she left, however. Arnold, wanting to salvage a truce lest Cochran go ranting to Roosevelt, promised that if there was any change in the future concerning the use of women pilots, she would be the first to know. Having heard Arnold's promise, Cochran turned all her energies toward recruiting a group of women pilots to send over to Great Britain.

Progress toward the creation of the other women's military groups was moving equally slowly. Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers introduced a house resolution, H.R. 4906, to establish a civilian organization known as the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in May 1941, but the legislation sat undiscussed until after Pearl Harbor. The Rogers bill finally passed in May 1942. The Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service) was not authorized until July 1942. The Coast Guard followed in November 1942, but the Marine Corps did not start up its Women's Reserve until February 1943. In July 1943, the Army converted the WAAC into an official branch, the Women's Army Corps (WAC).

By June 1942, both the Army and the Navy had committed to the idea of using women. The administrative officers of the newly reorganized Air Transport Command (ATC) had changed when Robert Olds left to head the Second Air Force; Brig. Gen. Harold George and Colonel William Tunner were put in charge. The pilot supply situation was exceptionally bleak, when one morning Tunner chanced to meet the newly arrived ATC deputy chief of staff—Robert Love— at the water cooler. In the conversation, Love mentioned that his wife was making a daily commute by air between Washington and Baltimore to her job and that the weather that day had delayed her. Tunner, who had not been part of the earlier discussions concerning women pilots, had never even thought of using women. But lightbulbs went on in his head

when he heard about Nancy's aviation activity. Tunner quickly arranged to meet with Nancy Love, who outlined her ideas for recruiting outstanding women pilots. Tunner forwarded a report of this meeting to General George.

Unlike Cochran, Love recognized the need for flexibility and compromise. Essentially, she acted on the belief that experienced women pilots could offer modest assistance to the war effort, but that they could not do so as long as the top brass squabbled over the details. In her mind, it was far better to get the flying started and then work out the details. This attitude reveals one of the fundamental distinctions between Cochran and Love. Cochran wanted to administer a training program that produced women pilots for the military; Love knew she and others already had an exceptionally high level of flying experience and that this might be useful to the military.

Tunner wanted to abandon the idea of identical standards for men and women. Instantly, Love modified the admissions requirements for women. Women were then required to have 500 hours of flight time (50 in the past year), be a high school graduate, and be between the age of 21 and 35. Male candidates, on the other hand, had to have only 200 hours, three years of high school, and be between the age of 19 and 45. Tunner had thought the women would be hired as civilians for a 90-day trial period and then commissioned through the WAAC. Oveta Culp Hobby, WAAC director, offered enthusiastic support for the idea. Unfortunately, the legislation already under consideration by Congress concerning WAAC pay did not authorize additional flight pay, and when Hobby became aware of this, it was too late to amend the legislation.

In light of this legislative quagmire, Love argued that it would be pragmatic to abandon, albeit temporarily, the idea of commissioning women. Again, she gambled that it would be easier to win Congress over after its members were able to see the results of women pilots' service. To further convince Tunner and Olds that she was serious, Love stiffened the entrance requirements yet again. In addition to previously stated requirements, a woman then had to have a 200-hp rating and two letters of recommendation. Love recommended that women be limited to flying only the smaller class of military planes and that, consequently, their salary could be set at \$250 a month, \$130 less than male civilian pilots received.

General George forwarded the revised proposal to General Arnold on July 18, 1942. On July 30, Arnold stated that he wanted more up-to-date information on women pilots based on any new data that might exist from the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) and the Civil Air Patrol. It was not an outright letter of rejection, but it was clearly a stalling tactic. Arnold had met with Cochran during a visit to England earlier that month, and he knew how keen she was to be part of an American program. Love went back to the files, dejected. She sensed an intense dislike of Cochran by the ATC, and she thought her plan would get lost in a bitter battle between Arnold, Cochran and George.

The one factor Love had forgotten to consider was the effect of the pilot shortage on George's disposition. George genuinely needed the women pilots that Love had offered, so he took a chance, resubmitted the plan (with up-to-date statistics) on September 3 and told Love to prepare telegrams to go out to potential candidates. On September 5, George told her that he believed Arnold had given him the go-ahead to activate the plan. The group would be called the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) and would consist of 25 members. Love was named director by Secretary of War Henry Stinson on September 10.

Although Love was only 28 years old, George had come to respect her judgment. Her flying credentials were impeccable, and she came from a social background similar to that of other women's corps leaders. Mildred McAfee, head of the WAVES, had been the president of Wellesley College. Oveta Hobby, wife of the former governor of Texas, was a well-known newspaper and radio executive. All were described as possessing considerable diplomatic abilities, as well as high levels of personal energy and a strong sense of idealism.

Jackie Cochran was cut from a different social cloth. Having pulled herself from the depths of poverty, she had an acute sense of what it meant to be powerless in American society. In her mind, power was derived from one's economic class. Because of this background, Jackie saw the complexities of life in black and white terms. When she returned from England on September 10 and read the evening headline announcing the women's pilots program with Love at the helm, she felt wronged. She met with Arnold the next day, and it was not an exercise in diplomacy; it was a display of rage and raw political power. It was clear to Arnold that Cochran was not playing games and that he had to make good on his promise. On September 15, Arnold announced the formation of a second women's program, the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD), with Jackie Cochran at the helm.

Arnold had quenched Cochran's wrath by blaming the ATC for the events that had infuriated her. In a meeting shortly after formation of the training detach meet, Cochran made it quite clear that she was holding the ATC accountable for its actions, and she would do everything possible to take control of the WAFS away from it. Captain James Teague wrote a blistering memo to Colonel Tunner detailing the nature of her challenge and his conviction that Arnold would probably back Cochran, further undercutting the ATC's authority.

Teague's memo was the first salvo in a war of authority and jurisdiction between the ATC and the Army Air Force headquarters. The two women's pilots programs were highly visible pawns in this struggle—Cochran had recognized this fact during her first encounter with Robert Olds. Love was not ignorant of the dynamics involved, but she did not believe it was appropriate or useful to exploit the situation. Cochran had no qualms about pressing her views, however, and the subsequent restructuring and merger of the two programs in July 1943 into a single group known as the Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASP) with herself as the leader was a remarkable display of political savvy and determination.

Cochran's success in playing hardball politics came at stiff cost. She had alienated the people and organizations who should have been her most important allies: Love, the ATC, Oveta Hobby, and the WAC. Later, when she was wrapped up in the day-to-day details of planning and executing the WASP program, Cochran failed to take note of the shifting political climate that would ultimately doom her ability to militarize the WASP.

While Cochran had always been aware that the pass/washout rate of each successive WASP class was established according to the combat casualty rate among pilots overseas, she had no consciousness of the long-term political implications this might have. Her personal animosity toward Oveta Hobby knew no bounds after Hobby made it clear that she felt no special deference toward aviators, male or female. Hobby, echoing the sentiments of General George Marshall, did not believe a separate women's pilots corps was required. Just as there was no separate corps for male pilots, she believed it was administratively wasteful to create a separate WASP corps.

Love washed her hands of the matter. Patriotism and love of flying had been her motivation for suggesting the use of women pilots. However, she was deeply troubled by the fact that the lack of a military commission made it difficult for women to be perceived as equal participants by their male colleagues. She also was outraged that women's civilian status exempted them from receiving any death benefits. The greatest indignity for Love was having to pass the hat for funds to transport a woman's body to her home following a crash.

Love had extensive administrative responsibilities, first for her cadre of 25 pilots, and later for the women graduates assigned to the ATC by Cochran's training program. But she hated the office and worked hard to spend a significant amount of time ferrying planes. As the ATC expanded its aircraft options from trainers and liaison aircraft to even the most powerful fighters and bombers, Love was first in line to check out and qualify. Like all women pilots, she understood that airplanes do not recognize the sex of the pilot.

Love was feeling generally pleased with the WAFS program, even with its expanded scope. The women had maintained a successful record, and statistics were pouring in that indicated male/ female performance was equal. The women's future still remained uncertain, however, because combat pilot casualties in Europe were much lower than expected. In January 1944, General Arnold closed all primary flight-training schools and terminated the War Training Service (formerly the Civilian Pilot Training Program) schools. The 35,000 young male officers who had been on the waiting list for flight training were transferred to the ground forces. Then Arnold submitted a bill to Congress in February to militarize the WASP; he wanted the women pilots to take over domestic flying to release the remaining men for overseas duty.

The plan seemed eminently logical to Cochran and Arnold. They completely ignored the possibility that the recently fired male instructors and displaced officers would not want to give up flying for an infantry role. The men launched a public assault on the women pilots, arguing that it was unfair for a woman with 35 hours of flight time (the requirements of Cochran's program had been drastically reduced) to undergo expensive training to learn how to fly

military planes when there were men already capable of doing so. A conservative Congress was exceptionally sympathetic and the matter was turned over to Robert Ramspeck's Civil Service Committee for investigation. Preliminary queries were made in April. Love was called in to testify. She was neutral on the matter. She clearly stated the original conception for the WAFS and her satisfaction with women's accomplishments.

Love was vitally concerned that the reputations of the women pilots remain untarnished, and was less concerned with the verdict on the militarization question. Cochran, as one ATC memorandum stated, was 'determined to take the WASP program down with her if she is turned down in her efforts to militarize the WASPs. She is the main factor in the congressional criticism.'

On December 20, 1944, the WASP program was officially disbanded. Ironically, Cochran's much-hated Ramspeck Committee never intended that the WASPs who were already trained be fired.

The committee strongly recommended that women pilots continue to be used and that provisions for hospitalization and insurance be extended to them. With equal vigor, however, they recommended that the WASP training program be terminated. The committee could find no economic logic in Cochran's plan when there was a surplus of experienced pilots. Further, it rejected Arnold's argument that women were more useful than men because they were more easily manipulated to serve motivational purposes. The continued reliance on the technique of using women to 'sell' aviation that was popular among men during the '20s and '30s was viewed as sexist even then. These events represented the ultimate endorsement of Love's vision, and her male colleagues at ATC were quick to point this out to her.

Although many women would continue to fly and a few would even manage to earn a living in aviation, the overwhelming majority, including Love, made the transition to the only socially acceptable occupation of the immediate postwar period—motherhood. Nancy gave birth to three daughters and took up flying Beechcraft Bonanzas. Her husband founded a new airline, All American Airlines (later Allegheny). She loved her family, but even they would later sense that she was frustrated by not having been able to do more in aviation.

Love's plan for the WAFS, both in conception and execution, remains an important model for the integration of women into the military. One important factor was that the WAFS program was never a matter of ego. It was absolutely critical to her that both men and women believed that members of either sex had something to contribute. The presence of one sex—even in non-traditional occupations such as flying—should not be viewed as diminishing the contributions of the other. That she convinced others—both in the military and the civilian worlds—of this idea represented her most profound and lasting legacy. The gender debate in the military has never been the same since. And that makes Nancy Love one of the more productive historical figures of the first half of the 20th century—a heroine with the 'real stuff.'

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