

# Air Force women trace history to World War II

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3/5/2012 - FORT GEORGE G. MEADE, Md. (AFNS) -- The Air Force's acceptance of women into the force dates back to long before the first "Women's History Week" celebration in 1978.

In 1942, the U.S. Army Air Corps took the unheard-of step of forming and employing two women's aviation units. That same year, a unit of flight nurses who had not yet quite finished their training, were sent into North Africa on Christmas Day following the Allied invasion in November of that year.

And the history of women--civilian and military--was forever changed.

WASPS, WAFS and a Willingness to Serve

Originally, the idea of using women pilots was first suggested in 1930, but was considered "unfeasible," according to information maintained at the National Museum of the Air Force in Dayton, Ohio.

Then, in mid-1942, an increased need for World War II combat pilots, favored the use of experienced women pilots to fly aircraft on non-combat missions.

Two women's aviation units--The Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS--with a capital S) and the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) were formed to ease this need. More than 1,000 women participated in these programs as civilians attached to the USAAC, flying 60 million miles of non-combat military missions.

These two units were merged into a single group, the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program in August 1943, and broke ground for U.S. Air Force female pilots who would follow in their footsteps decades later.

Of the more than 25,000 women who applied for pilot training under the WASP program, 1,830 were accepted, 1,074 were graduated, and 916 (including 16 former WAFS) remained when the program was disbanded in December 1944. WASP assignments were diverse--as flight training instructors, glider tow pilots, towing targets for air-to-air and anti-aircraft gunnery practice, engineering test flying, ferrying aircraft, and other duties.

Although WASPs had the privileges of officers, they were never formally adopted into the USAAC. In November 1977--33 years after the WASPs program was disbanded--President Carter signed a bill granting World War II veterans' status to former WASPs.

"Winged Angels."

It was a slightly different story for flight nurses who were members of the military from the beginning. As it was with so many advances and innovations resulting from World War II, the USAAC radically changed military medical care, and the development of air evacuation and the training of flight nurses were advanced to meet this need.

After the invasion of North Africa in November 1942, the need for flight nurses exceeded the supply, and women who had not yet finished their training were called into action and sent to North Africa on Christmas Day. Finally, in February 1943, the first class of Army Nurse Corps flight nurses graduated.

Unlike their stateside-stationed counterparts in the WASPs, flight nurses (nicknamed "Winged Angels") in the Army Nurse Corps served in combat. They were especially vulnerable to enemy attacks because aircraft used for evacuation could not display their non-combat status.

These same aircraft were also used to transport military supplies. In anticipation and preparation for almost any emergency, flight nurses were required to learn crash procedures, receive survival training, and know the effects of high altitude on a vast array of pathologies.

Of the nearly 1.2 million patients air evacuated throughout the war, only 46 died en route. About 500 USAAC nurses (only 17 died in combat) served as members of 31 medical air evacuation transport squadrons throughout the world.

When President Harry Truman signed The National Security Act of 1947, creating the Department of Defense, the U. S. Air Force became a separate military service. At the time, a number of Women's Army Corps (WACs) members continued serving in the Army but performed Air Force duties.

The following year, some WACs chose to transfer to the Women's Air Force (WAFs--with a lower case s) when it finally became possible to do so.

Originally, the WAFs were limited to 4,000 enlisted women and 300 female officers, all of whom were encouraged to fill a variety of ground duty roles--mostly clerical and medical--but were not to be trained as pilots, even though the USAAC had graduated the first class of female pilots in April 1943, during wartime.

In 1976, when women were accepted into the Air Force on an equal basis with men, the WAF program ended, but not before many milestones were achieved and marked along the way in preparation for today's Air Force woman.

The WAFs in Evolution

The first WAF recruit was Sgt. Esther Blake who enlisted on July 8, 1948, in the first minute of the first day that regular Air Force duty was authorized for women. She had been a WAC, and she transferred in from Fort McPherson, Ga.

The first recruits reported to Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, in 1948. When basic training was desegregated in the Air Force the following year, many African-American women recruits joined, even though the integration of quarters and mess had not yet been achieved.

At first, WAFs wore men's uniforms with neckties. It was "a look" that didn't last long, and inter uniforms for WAFs were modeled after flight attendants' uniforms, using the same material as the men's winter uniforms.

Photos



(U.S. Air Force graphic/Sylvia Saab)

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The necktie was abandoned early on, and was replaced with tabs on the collar. The summer uniform--a two-piece dress made of cotton-cord seersucker--didn't fare as well. Ill-fitting, it required frequent ironing. It would be years before a suitable women's uniform would be achieved.

### Milestones Along the Way

In its 10-year lifespan, from 1951 to 1961, the 543rd Air Force Band (WAF) was served by 235 women musicians, with approximately 50 members at any one time. This band, the WAF Band as it was known, along with the all-male Air Force Band, served as ambassadors of the Air Force simultaneously.

The WAF band marched in both of President Eisenhower's inaugural parades, and they played for President Kennedy's inauguration, among other concert engagements throughout the nation. The band was deactivated in 1961. Some say that it was a victim of its own success.

It was during this same time period--1956--that a WAF section was introduced into the college-level Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program, and by 1959 four universities were running ROTC WAF sections. By 1970, they had achieved a national presence.

Concurrent with the expansion of the ROTC women's cadet program, Congress passed Public Law 90-130 in 1967, lifting grade restrictions and strength limitations on women in the military.

And with the end of Selective Service (the "draft") in 1973, recruiting practices changed. Shortly afterwards--1976--the separate status of WAF was abolished, and women entered pilot training as military personnel for the first time. (The WASPS and WAFS of World War II had come in to service as civilians with pilots' licenses.) Our country's bicentennial year also saw women entering the service academies, which had not been opened to them prior to President Ford's administration.

By 1993, women were receiving fighter pilot training, and Lt. Gen. Susan J. Helms (then Maj. Helms), member of the first class of the U. S. Air Force Academy to graduate women, was also the first American military woman in space as part of the Space Shuttle Endeavor team.

Coming, full circle, the final chapter for the WAFS and WASPS of World War II was achieved in 1977, when President Jimmy Carter awarded them full status as veterans, complete with benefits. A fitting epilogue was added in 2010 with the awarding of the Congressional Gold Medal. Today, there are approximately 300 of the original women air force pilots still living.

### By the Numbers

The milestones cited above are just that--the highlights of women in service to their country. Each day, women in the Air Force distinguish themselves and honor those who have gone before them by doing the jobs that matter to us all--performing in professional, administrative, technical and clerical positions.

Women make up 19 percent of all Air Force military personnel and 30.5 percent of all civilian personnel. Of the female officers, 55 percent of the female officers are line officers, and 45 percent are non-line. Of the 328,423 active duty personnel, 62,316 are women, with 712 female pilots, 259 navigators and 183 air battle managers.

### Women's History Month

Today, Women's History Month awareness for all the armed services is initiated by the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute headquartered at Patrick Air Force Base, Fla.. Among the tools and initiatives for observing this month-long celebration of the role women have played throughout history, the Institute is making available a free download of this year's Women's National History Project poster, "Women's Education--Women's Empowerment."

Empowerment of women has strengthened the services. Starting with the WASPS and WAFS of World War II, through the WAFs of the '50s and '60s, through the acceptance and promotion of women at the service academies, each generation of women and their evolved sense of service to their country, has prepared the future for generations of women seeking unlimited opportunity.

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