

Wingtip to wingtip: women in aviation and the pioneering WASP

by Nancy Parrish

The romantic image of a daring young pilot in an open cockpit plane, wearing helmet, goggles and flowing white scarf, widened the eyes and the horizons of many a young boy and girl almost one hundred years ago.

All over the world, the news of the Wright brothers' success at Kitty Hawk echoed everywhere as an exciting hope for children with the courage to dream. They looked to the skies. They, too, wanted to race the wind and reach for the stars, and they all believed that someday, they could fly.

Only the most courageous fulfilled those dreams and became pilots. Even fewer became pioneers,

WASP on Assignment, Greenville AAB,
Greenville, MS.



Photos: Wings Across America



Jacqueline Cochran

pioneers as they blazed a different kind of trail, this time flying military aircraft for their countries. Russian women pilots ('The Night Witches'), flew combat missions in the Russian air war. Under the command of Pauline Gower, women pilots from England, America, Australia, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, Poland and Chile ferried aircraft for the RAF as part of the British Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA). However, in America, up until late 1942, all military pilots and civilian ferry pilots were exclusively and decidedly male.

Having women fly for the United States Army Air Forces in any capacity was definitely not a morale booster for the exclusive male military pilots 'club', nor was it an easy decision for the Commanding General of the AAF, Hap Arnold. In 1942, he encouraged Jacqueline Cochran to fly a bomber to England to help publicise Lend Lease and to learn about the women who were ferrying planes in England. Cochran had already formulated her own plan.

Jacqueline Cochran, who still holds more distance, altitude and speed records than any pilot, living or dead, male or female, was confident that, if given the same training as

blazing giant trails across the sky, becoming a part of aviation history. Daring young pilots named Lindberg, Mitchell and Doolittle became legends. Nonetheless, throughout the last one hundred years, there have also been pioneering women pilots - blazing their own trail, earning their rightful place by proving over and over again that they could fly wingtip to wingtip with any pilot, in any plane, anywhere!

Harriett Quimby, Ruth Law, Katherine Stinson, Baroness Raymonde de Laroche, Bessie

Coleman, Amy Johnson, Amelia Earhart, Marina Raskova, and Jacqueline Cochran have all made legendary contributions to the last 100 years of flight. These pioneering pilots have been called 'Ladybirds', 'Petticoat Pilots' and even 'Flying Flappers', and yet, they all helped stretch boundaries, set records and succeeded beyond all expectations. They are pilots - not lady pilots - pilots, and they are pioneers.

During World War Two, with male pilots in short supply, a new generation of women pilots became

male aviation cadets, women pilots could serve in every flying capacity in every command in the Army Air Force - flying stateside missions that would relieve male pilots for combat duty. General Arnold was not convinced. "Frankly, I didn't know in 1941 whether a slip of a young girl could fight the controls of a B-17 in heavy weather."

Nevertheless, Cochran persisted, and in September of 1942, the first group of trainees paid their way to Houston, Texas, to enter an experimental Army Air Force Flight Training Programme. The successful programme soon moved to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas where the women (all licensed pilots) received exactly the same training as the male cadets, except the women received more cross country training and less aerobatics. Meanwhile, Nancy Love had recruited 27 licensed women pilots to fly for the Air Transport Command as civilian ferry pilots. In mid 1943, the two groups merged and became WASP, Women Airforce Service Pilots, the first women in history to fly America's military aircraft - truly aviation pioneers.

In all, 25,000 women applied for the training programme, 1,830 were accepted and only 1,074 graduated. WASP were stationed at 120 AAF bases across the United States and, in less than two years, flew more than 60 million miles in every type of aircraft and on every type of mission the AAF had (except combat). Thirty-eight WASP were killed flying for their country - their bodies sent home in cheap pine boxes at the expense of their family or classmates. These heroic pilots were denied any military benefits or honours - no gold star in their parents' window - not even so much as an American flag for their coffins. Even though they had completed the training, learned to march, to salute and were subject to all AAF rules and regulations, the WASP were never 'officially' made a part of the military.

In the early days of the training programme, the fact that women were flying military aircraft was classified 'Top Secret'. "Tell 'em you're a baseball team or tell 'em you're German prisoners of war," a 2nd Lt. told trainees. "Just don't tell 'em you're pilots." The women assumed that the government didn't want the Axis powers to know how hard up America was - using women to fly

their military planes. The WASP were, perhaps, the best kept secret of World War Two. WASP ferrying planes to different air fields across America had trouble getting landing instructions from tower operators. "Lady, get off the air, I'm trying to talk to the pilot," said one frustrated operator. A quick reply came back from the WASP, "I am the pilot!" Several WASP were 'detained at the front gates' by guards on AAF Bases who had never heard of them. One WASP was even arrested for impersonating an officer.

When victory seemed certain and pilots were returning from combat, the WASP were quietly and unceremoniously disbanded. On 7 December, 1944, in a speech to the last graduating class, General Arnold said: "You and more than 900 of your sisters have shown you can fly wingtip to wingtip with your brothers. . . . I salute you and all the WASP. We of the Army Air Force are proud of you. We will never forget our debt to you." Thirteen days later, the WASP were disbanded. They hung up their parachutes and paid their own way back home. Their military records were sealed, stamped either 'classified' or 'secret' and filed away in the Government Archives for 33 years. Consequently, their records were not available to the historians who wrote historical accounts and textbooks of World War Two. The AAF did forget and so did America.

In November 1977, 33 years after the WASP were disbanded, Congress finally voted to give them the Veteran status they had earned. However, the history of this pioneering group of women pilots is still not included in most textbooks and is still unknown to millions around the world. In the next 100 years, that will change.

The exciting history of the WASP, who forever changed the role of women in military aviation, will 'come alive' through digital video and interactive modules online and in the WASP WWII Museum that will be built at Avenger Field - on the grounds where the WASP trained. However, the history and impact of the WASP is best measured, not in books or modules, but by the successes that ripple through the lives of those they have touched, from military to commercial pilots, from maths teachers and scientists to politicians, from mothers and fathers

to Astronaut Eileen Collins who proudly calls the WASP 'my heroes'.

Today, there are less than 500 surviving WASP across the US and, although it has been almost 60 years since many of these women flew, their eyes sparkle and their spirits soar when they talk about flying. A few still fly.

The honour, courage, integrity and sacrifice of the WASP, their positive commitment, patriotism and their belief that they can do anything, is universally contagious. Like a flaming torch, they pass on their secret to the next generation: 'Anything is possible!' If you dream it and you believe it, you can do it. Do your homework, dream your dreams, be true to yourself and someday, with hard work and persistence, you too can fly wingtip to wingtip with any pilot, in any plane, anywhere!

American military women pilots now fly wingtip to wingtip with their brothers over the skies of Afghanistan and Iraq. American women now fly in all branches of the United States military, including the Coast Guard. These young pilots now know what the WASP have always known - 'anything is possible'. They also know that flying is not so much about the past as it is the future. It is about moving toward the next horizon, taking the next step, flying higher, farther, faster; and passing it on to the next generation. The pioneering WASP are an important part of the last 100 years of aviation history. With thanks to them, and those women who flew before them, it is pilots, not lady pilots; pioneers, not lady pioneers - all flying wingtip to wingtip.

Nancy Parrish: Director of the WASP WWII Museum, creator of 'WASP on the WEB' internet website and Director of Baylor University's 'Wings Across America'. Digital content from the website and WASP interviews from Wings Across America will ensure that priceless WASP stories will continue to inspire children for generations to come, both online and as the centrepiece for the proposed WASP WWII Museum at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas.

For more info:
<http://www.avengerfield.org> or
nancy@avengerfield.org