

At the twilight's last gleaming

CORNELIA FORT

Here is one of the most remarkable articles ever published—a personal story by the first woman pilot to die on war duty in American history. Shortly after she sent it to us, Miss Fort, twenty-four, of Nashville, Tennessee, was killed when the bomber she was piloting crashed in Texas. But her words here will live—as a moving account of why one woman joined the WAFS and as a testament to all American women who are helping keep America free



I KNEW I was going to join the Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron before the organization was a reality, before it had a name, before it was anything but a radical idea in the minds of a few men who believed that woman could fly airplanes. But I never knew it so surely as I did in Honolulu on December 7, 1941.

At dawn that morning I drove from Waikiki to the John Rogers Civilian airport right next to Pearl Harbor, where I was a civilian pilot instructor. Shortly after six-thirty I began landing and take-off practice with my regular student. Coming in just before the last landing, I looked casually around and saw a military plane coming directly toward me. I jerked the controls away from my student and jammed the throttle wide open to pull above the oncoming plane. He passed so close under us that our celluloid windows rattled violently and I looked down to see what kind of plane it was.

The painted red balls on the tops of the wings shone brightly in the sun. I looked again with complete and utter disbelief. Honolulu was familiar with the emblem of the Rising Sun on passenger ships but not on airplanes.

I looked quickly at Pearl Harbor and my spine tingled when I saw billowing black smoke. Still I thought hollowly it might be some kind of coincidence or maneuvers, it might be, it must be. For surely, dear God . . .

Then I looked way up and saw the formations of silver bombers riding in. Something detached itself from an airplane and came glistening down. My eyes followed it down, down and even with knowledge pounding in my mind, my heart turned convulsively when the bomb exploded in the middle of the harbor. I knew the air was not the place for my little baby airplane and I set about landing as quickly as ever I could. A few seconds later a shadow passed over me and simultaneously pullets spattered all around me.

Suddenly that little wedge of sky above Hickam Field and Pearl Harbor was the busiest fullest piece of sky I ever saw.

We counted anxiously as our little civilian planes came flying home to roost. Two never came back. They were washed ashore weeks later on the windward side of the island, bullet-riddled. Not a pretty way for the brave little yellow Cubs and their pilots to go down to death.

The rest of December seventh has been described by too many in too much detail for me to reiterate. I remained on the island until three months later when I returned by convoy to the United States. None of the pilots wanted to leave but there was no civilian flying in the islands after the attack. And each of us had some individual score to settle with the Japs who had brought murder and destruction to our islands.

When I returned, the only way I could fly at all was to instruct Civilian Pilot Training programs. Weeks passed. Then, out of the blue, came a telegram from the War Department announcing the organization of the WAFS (Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron) and the order to report within twenty-four hours if interested. I left at once.

Mrs. Nancy Love was appointed Senior Squadron Leader of the WAFS by the Secretary of War. No better choice could have been made. First and most important she is a good pilot, has tremendous enthusiasm and belief in women pilots and did a wonderful job in helping us to be accepted on an equal status with men.

Because there were and are so many disbelievers in women pilots, especially in their place in the army. Officials wanted the best possible qualifications to go with the first experimental group. All of us realized what a spot we were on. We had to deliver the goods or else. Or else there wouldn't ever be another chance for women pilots in any part of the service.

We have no hopes of replacing men pilots. But we can release a man to combat, to faster ships, to overseas work. Delivering a trainer to Texas may be as important as delivering a bomber to Africa if you take the long view. We are beginning to prove that women can be trusted to deliver airplanes safely and in the doing serve the country which is our country too.

I have yet to have a feeling which approaches in satisfaction that of having signed, sealed and delivered an air[place] for the United States Army. The attitude that most nonflyers have about pilots is distressing and often acutely embarrassing. They chatter about the glamour of flying. Well, any pilot can tell you how glamorous it is. We get up in the cold dark in order to get to the airport by daylight.

We wear heavy cumbersome flying clothes and a thirty-pound parachutes. You are either cold or hot. If you are female your lipstick wears off and your hair gets straighter and straighter. You look forward all afternoon to the bath you will have and the steak. Well, we get the bath but seldom the steak. Sometimes we are too tired to eat and fall wearily into bed.

None of us can put into words why we fly. It is something different for each of us. I can't say exactly *why* I fly but I *know* why as I've never known anything in my life.

I knew it when I saw my plane silhouetted against the clouds framed by a circular rainbow. I knew it when I flew up into the extinct volcano Haleakala on the island of Maui and saw the gray-green pineapple fields slope down to the cloud-dappled blueness of the Pacific. But I know it otherwise than in beauty. I know it in dignity and self-sufficiency and in the pride of skill. I know it in the satisfaction of usefulness.

For all the girls in the WAFS, I think the most concrete moment of happiness came at our first review. Suddenly and for the first time we felt a part of something larger. Because of our uniforms which we had earned, we were marching with the men, marching with all the freedom-loving people in the world.

And then while we were standing at attention a bomber took off followed by four fighters. We knew the bomber was headed across the ocean and that the fighters were going to escort it part of the way. As they circled over us I could hardly see them for the tears in my eyes. It was striking symbolism and I think all of us felt it. As long as our planes fly overhead the skies of America are free and that's what all of us everywhere are fighting for. And that we, in a very small way, are being allowed to help keep that sky free is the most beautiful thing I have ever known.

I, for one, am profoundly grateful that my one talent, my only knowledge, flying, happens to be of use to my country when it is needed. That's all the luck I ever hope to have.

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