

# Suzanne Parish IN THE PINK

**T**here are defining moments in people's lives and Suzanne "Suzie" Parish knows hers. She was 19 and an amateur horse trainer teaching her pony to jump. "The horse stumbled and I fell off and fractured my ankle," this now 76-year-old Hickory Corners, Michigan,

resident recalls. "I couldn't ride—not even bareback—for six weeks. I started following my mom around the house."

That is when it happened. The defining moment.

Parish's mother, Dorothy Upjohn Delano, told her to find something to do. "She said, 'Your cousin Dick flies, why don't you get some lessons,'" Parish

**by Melinda Pradarelli**

recalls. Little did her mother know that advice would lead to a lifetime of adventure for Parish.

Since that time in 1942, Parish, an heiress to the Upjohn Pharmaceutical empire, would go on to join the WASP, co-found the Kalamazoo Aviation History Museum, fly her signature pink P-40 Warhawk for more than a decade and become the first woman ever inducted into the EAA Warbird Hall of Fame.

## **It Started Innocently Enough**

At 19 and with her mother's urging, Parish began taking lessons in both an Aeronca Chief and Champ, eventually soloing near her home in Kalamazoo, Michigan. News of the Women's Auxiliary Ferry Service (WAFS) and the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) filtered down to Parish. She knew, though, that she had to be 21 to join the WASP—that was still two years off.

So Parish headed to Phoenix, Arizona, for the summer where her family rented a house outside of town. The war was just beginning and Parish feared she could not get gas rationing coupons to get to the airfield each day and fly.

"So I went to a nearby stable where they had gotten a horse that was too frisky for them," Parish said. "I thought to myself that riding him 14 miles a day might calm him right down."

Parish bought the horse and began



leaving the house at dawn each day, riding the horse through the daisy fields and orchards of Phoenix to a little airport called Sky Harbor. In those days, the airport had one strip and Parish would ride across it and tie up her horse, which she fittingly named Ration, to a triangular wooden tee. (Today, that little one strip airport services more than 2.5 million people each year.) The horse would stay in the shade while Parish spent the day in ground and flying school.

## **WASP Wannabe**

By the time Parish was 20, she had her private pilot certificate. She wired the creator of the WASP, Jacqueline Cochran, and asked if she could join, but was told she was too young. Not to be dissuaded,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE KALAMAZOO AVIATION HISTORY MUSEUM

Parish kept accumulating hours, earning her instrument rating and again telegramming Cochran.

The answer was still a resounding “No!”

This spurred Parish to begin taking cross-country flights. Still only 20, she now had 200 hours and her commercial certificate and instrument rating. After continual correspondence with Cochran, the WASP leader finally told Parish that if she could pass the physical on her birthday, they would hold a spot for her in the January 1944 class.

At the age of 21, with more than 350 hours of flying under her belt, Parish was accepted into the WASP. She went to Sweetwater, Texas, and entered the class of 44-W-6.

“Originally, I think there were more than 5,000 who applied to be WASP but only about 1,000 were given the opportunity and very few ultimately graduated,” Parish said. It was an elite group and a place where Parish immediately felt at home.

“Our mission was to take the place of the men. We did everything short of going overseas. Some of the WASP would ferry the planes from the factories to bases and then men would fly them overseas to fight,” she said. “We had the same training as cadets except for combat training. That took about six months and I loved it. I trained in a PT-17 Stearman in primary [training], the BT-13 in basic



Parish as WASP, Sweetwater, Texas



BILL PAINTER

Mastering the P-40 under the tutelage of Darryl Greenamyer

# Suzanne Parish

and then the North American AT-6 in advanced. There was nothing like going from 65 to 650 horsepower!”

Having logged more than 550 hours, Parish was sent to Texas where she entered the Bryan Army Airforce Instrument Instructor’s School and was trained to fly by gauges. Many men were also sent back from overseas to train at the school during the war and then returned to combat.

“It was the very beginning of the artificial horizon and the RMI [radio magnetic indicator], which we still use today,” Parish said. “I thought it was wonderful. I had gotten an instrument rating in an old Stinson on needle ball and airspeed only. The delight of RMI was that the needle always pointed to the station. I immediately noticed I now knew exactly where the station was and how to keep the plane straight and level without the wings. It gave me a wonderful appreciation for that advancement in aviation.”

After six months at Bryan, the war was winding down. The instructors thought they were giving the women a Christmas present when they told them their duty was done and they could return home. “But we didn’t really want to do that,” Parish said.

## After the War

This former East Coast prep school student returned to Michigan where she immediately wrote to commercial airlines looking for a flying job. It was American Airlines that sent her the most interesting reply.

“They said, ‘With all of your qualifications, we would hire you in a minute if you were a man,’” Parish recalls. “Well, I was really flattered that they thought I was that qualified, but I was also sad. We didn’t have this ladies’ lib thing like they do now.”

Persevering, Parish asked the Upjohn Company in Kalamazoo to buy a plane so she could fly it. Her grandfather, W. E. Upjohn, started the pharmaceutical company in 1886 as a family business. It has

since merged, becoming Pharmacia & Upjohn with more than 30,000 employees in 100 countries.

“They were a conservative group back then and they weren’t ready to fly yet, let

her soon-to-be-spouse Preston P. Parish. The couple was married in 1948. “Pete” had been in the Marine Corps overseas with the first division for two-and-a-half years fighting in Guadalcanal.

The young couple shared a love for flying and, after having five children, were ready to pursue their aviation interests again in 1959. It started when Pete surprised his wife by announcing he had



The Curtiss P-40N Warhawk attended Oshkosh annually for over 20 years.

alone with a young girl,” she said. “They didn’t even have a flying department so I didn’t see a next step. I could have gotten a job as a controller but really I had my heart set on flying.”

That year, Parish’s mother married Howard Dalton and the family moved to New York. Parish took a job in the American Red Cross Motor Corps where, among other things, she delivered eyes to an eye bank. Soon the family returned to Michigan where Parish continued with the Motor Corp, driving out to Fort Custer in Battle Creek where she would pick up amputees and drive them to the Kellogg Estate. Kellogg, who built a cereal empire, would open his estate to the wounded.

For the most part, Parish had stopped flying. “It wasn’t fun going from 650 horsepower back down to 65,” she said. So when Parish’s mother went to Palm Springs, California, for the winter, Parish went along. It was 1947 and Parish met



Ladies Day, Kalamazoo Air Zoo

bought half interest in a Bonanza with the chief pilot at the Upjohn Company.

“When he told me, I couldn’t get to the plane fast enough,” Parish remembers with a laugh.

Parish refreshed all of her ratings and Pete got his private and commercial certificates as well as his instrument rating.

One thing led to the next and soon the couple owned a Stearman, an AT-6 (the model Parish had trained in for the WASP) and a Wildcat.

### The Trademark Pink P-40

With such a love of aviation, the couple soon joined EAA and asked their fellow members what type of plane would best fit Suzanne Parish. The EAA Warbirds suggested the P-40, which would later become her trademark.

"They said it was the most ladylike plane, and I still don't know why to this day," Parish said. "When I got into my first crosswind with it, I wondered what they had done to me. It was much tougher to land than even a P-51. But, of course, I loved it."

Parish found her P-40 in Addison, Texas, and aviation friend Frank Sanders agreed to rebuild it for her. The plane was missing the propeller and spinner, which Sanders told her would be easy to find. "I didn't know until later that the propeller and spinner are the first thing to go in a crash and they weren't plentiful at all," she said. It took Sanders three years to rebuild the P-40 and, after searching high and low for the missing parts, they finally found them in Canada.

and then hired an artist who changed the Warbird's sharp teeth to a smile and added eyelashes 'to make it look more friendly.'"

"I flew that plane everywhere," she said, eventually joining the P-40 Warhawk Pilot's Association. The plane, which Parish brought to Oshkosh every year for more than 20 years, was later donated to the Kalamazoo Air Zoo where it resides today.

"The P-40 has retired," Parish said with a laugh. "The poor thing just couldn't keep up with me anymore."

### Hope Springs Eternal

In 1974, Parish started flying a Citation 500. Her first passenger was comedian Bob Hope. There was a hockey stadium that had just opened in Kalamazoo and Hope said he would come if he could get a ride.

"We picked him up in the Citation and, while helping Hope on with his bags, Pete said, 'I hope you won't mind that your pilot is a woman,' and Hope replied, 'You're kidding.'"

"In Chicago, [Hope] took me off the plane with him and said, 'OK, look what the lady libbers are doing to us now,'" Parish said with a laugh.

A few years later, the Parishes co-founded the Kalamazoo Aviation History Museum, known affectionately as the Kalamazoo Air Zoo.

According to Museum Director Bob Ellis, the Parishes founded the museum in 1977, originally focusing on WWII aircraft. The idea was to collect and restore the aircraft, including five donated by the family, to flying condition and display them at air shows across the country as well as year-round in the Museum. Since then, the Museum's collection has grown to more than 50 famous aircraft from WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the Persian Gulf.

Ellis describes Parish as a curious and determined woman who has "never known the meaning of the word 'no.'" "Sue is a half-pint in size and she's always been very petite and feminine," Ellis said. "So 20 years ago she started flying WWII fighter planes in shows. You'd have the guys who were hero types with their WWII fighters and

they'd fly in and pull up to the crowd to crow and pull back their canopies and blow their chests out four times over. Then Sue would roll up in her plane and take the canopy back and start putting on lipstick and makeup. It just incensed the men and she loved it."

### Flying High Today

Over the next 20 years, Parish would continue to fly and become involved in community theatre and amateur photography. She would also be inducted into the Michigan Aviation Hall of Fame in 1994 and the EAA Warbird Hall of Fame in 1995.

Mary Creason, the former assistant director of the Michigan Aeronautics Bureau, said Parish has done a lot for aviation in the state of Michigan and nationally. "We're all proud of all the activities Sue's been involved in—everything from her time in the WASP to her P-40 that she flew so many years," said Creason (whose sister Mabel entered the WASP a year ahead of Parish and was killed when her airplane caught on fire in 1943).

Today, Parish is a member of the Kalamazoo Civic Players, president of the Board of Trustees of the Kalamazoo Civic Auditorium, an ex officio with the Jackson Space Center and co-founder and president of the Kalamazoo Aviation History Museum.

Parish, who was educated early in life in Kalamazoo, then at the Oldfields prep school in Glencoe, Maryland, and for a short stint at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, still flies a Cessna 425 cross-country. She can also occasionally be seen swooping through the skies in her T-34, which is also painted camouflage pink like her signature P-40.

"When I fly, I just feel so free," Parish said. "When you're concentrating on flying, you're able to forget everything else. It's like playing a game that you know you're going to win. You might have to fight a little along the way, but eventually you'll win." →

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Kalamazoo Air Zoo has the retired P-40

After earning her Airline Transport Pilot certificate (ATP) that year, Parish headed to California where she was determined not to come home without her still-under-construction P-40. After hours of training, Parish and Sanders flew the Warbird home to Michigan.

Parish then found the now famous camouflage pink color, signifying the desert tan of the Libyan Desert, in a flight book. She employed Kal-Aero in Kalamazoo to paint the pursuit plane