



The Origin of the WASPs

By VICTOR K. CHUN

The long-awaited day. Fulfillment of the ambition to enter the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron came at graduation from the Women's Flying Training Detachment, a ceremony shown here at Avenger Field, Sweetwater, Texas, 17 March 1943. (Photo — USAAF #11053 AS.)

As early as 1939, three years before United States entered World War II, Miss Jacqueline Cochran, winner of the 1938 Bendix Transcontinental Air Race, suggested to Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt to enlist the service of American women flyers in time of emergency in order to release men pilots for combat duties. She proposed to form an organization of women flyers in this country and initiate a program for their training. Several months later, Mrs. Nancy H. Love, another prominent aviatrix who learned to fly at 16 and won second place in the 1937 Amelia Earhart Women's Open at the National Air Races, made a similar suggestion to use a small number of exceptionally well qualified women pilots for ferrying duty. However, nothing came out of these suggestions.

Since England, then at war with Germany, had already successfully used women pilots for non-combat flying duties in the Royal Air Force, Miss Cochran flew to England to study their aerial activities. Upon her return she had a meeting with Colonel Robert Olds, Commander of the Air Corps Ferry Command, to consider the possibilities of utilizing women pilots to ferry trainers from factories to Air Corp stations. She convinced Colonel Olds of the advisability but there was a difference of opinion between them regarding the size of this organization. Miss Cochran wanted to organize a large number, around a thousand, since war with Germany seemed imminent, while Colonel Olds wanted a small group of already qualified women who could be incorporated into Ferry Command immediately. A survey was made at that time of the availability; it was found that there were only 50 women flyers with more than 500 flying hours, 83 with more than 200 hours and about 2,000 with less than 200 hours. Miss Cochran and Colonel Olds then recommended to General Arnold to use these 50 to ferry training type aircraft. General Arnold did

not accept the proposal because there were an adequate number of AAF pilots at that time; in fact there was a surplus, compared to the available airplanes. Miss Cochran, undiscouraged, recruited 25 American women flyers in the Spring of 1942, and took them to England to serve with the British Air Transport Auxiliary.

In the latter part of the same year the production of airplanes was increasing considerably. More pilots were needed, and Air Transport Command (ATC), under General Harold L. George, submitted a plan to AAF Headquarters to engage experienced women flyers as civil service employees to ferry planes. Brig. General L. S. Kuter, Deputy Chief of Air Staff, approved the plan and authorized immediate action. On Sept. 10, War Department officially announced that an experimental unit of the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) was being formed under ATC with Mrs. Love as its squadron commander.

To recruit women flyers for WAFS, ATC formulated the following standard: An applicant must be a citizen of United States with a high school education; in age between 21 and 35; must hold a commercial pilot's license; have 500 hours certified flying time, and a CAA rating for 200 hp. The salary was to be \$250 a month with the normal privileges of officers. Applicants were to be given a flight check and those accepted were to be sent to training school for 30 to 40 days.

The pioneer group of WAFS consisted of Mrs. Love, Mrs. Betty Gillies, Cornelia Fort, Aline Rhonie, Helen Mary Clark, Catherine Slocum, Adela Schar, Esther Nelson, Teresa James, Alma Heflin McCormick, and Barbara Poole. They reported at New Castle Army Base, Wilmington, Delaware for training. The four-week schooling was devoted to the study of navigation, meteorology and military law in the morning and flying in the afternoon.

Apparently General Arnold was not aware of General Kuter's authorization to form the WAFS, and soon after WAFS was formed, Miss Cochran was called back to the U.S. to prepare plans for training large numbers of women pilots to take over some of the non-combat duties within



Miss Jacqueline Cochran is shown here between Generals Arnold and Yount at graduating ceremonies at Avenger Field on 11 March 1944. Nearest camera is Miss Madeleine Sullivan, of Long Isl., N.Y., Group Adjutant of the graduating class, 44-W-2. (*27930 AC)

the continent of United States. He wanted the WAFS project to be revised and enlarged as he felt, "It was a bigger proposition than flying for ATC." Miss Cochran, however, recommended leaving the WAFS as it was and start a new training program in a larger scale.

After several conferences between Miss Cochran and ATC, a new and larger training program for women pilots took form with Miss Cochran as its Director. It was agreed that all graduates of this training program were to be turned over to ATC for employment.

Since so few women had the prerequisite for enlistment set by ATC, it reluctantly lowered its requirement from 500 to 200 hours flying time. Even then Miss Cochran could not secure more than 200 women who could meet this qualification. ATC further compromised by reducing the flying time to only 35 hours. The new training program was named Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) and was put under the command of Major General Barton K. Yount. At the meantime the WAFS was still serving under ATC.

The first 25 women trainees of WFTD were experienced flyers whose flying time ranged from 200 to 700 hours. They began their training on November, 1942 in Aviation Enterprises, Ltd. at Howard Hughes Airport, Houston, Texas under the jurisdiction of the Gulf Coast Training Center of the Flying Training Command. Facilities at Houston soon proved to be inadequate and early in 1943 the training was shifted to Avenger Field, near Sweetwater, Texas.

The four month WFTD training course to qualify women pilots to ferry Army trainers were divided into flying instruction and academic training; 115 hours flying instruction: 25 hours in liaison type airplanes, 75 hours in commercial types, and 15 hours in advanced trainers. The 180 hours of academic training consisted of 35 hours navigation, 50 hours weather, 80 hours aircraft and engine, 10 hours communications and 5 hours procedures of ATC.

This course was adequate for trainees with enough previous flying experience but inadequate for those with little flying hours even when the course was later lengthened from four months to six months. With more and more inexperienced women joining the WFTD, training became a problem that plagued the women pilots organization throughout its period of operation.

Besides the ferrying course there were four other advance courses available to women pilots:

1. The C-60 program - to train women pilots to be glider tow pilots. This program was disappointing because women pilots lacked the strength and stamina needed for this exacting and fatiguing sort of flying.

2. Transition training in B-26 airplanes. This program was reasonably successful; of the 57 women pilots reported, 29 graduated.

3. Instrument flying course. This program was a success; of 246 women pilots who received this training, 232 completed.

4. Basic military training for officers. This course was given at the AAF School of Applied Tactics at Orlando, Florida, and was instituted in the Spring of 1944 in anticipation of the militarization of the women pilots into AAF. The decision to deactivate the women pilots program caused the termination of the course on Sept. 1944. Nevertheless, 460 women pilots went through the course.

With minimum prerequisite of only 35 hours of flying time, the procurement of adequate candidates for training was never a problem. There were always more applicants waiting to be accepted. The age limit for acceptance was reduced from 21 to 18.5 years in August, 1943 and most of the women admitted were under 27. The younger women proved to be most satisfactory as shown in the following table. Graduations decreased and severances increased in direct proportion to increase in age:

Age	18-20	21-25	26-30	31-35
Began training	93	649	243	81
Eliminated	20 22%	183 28%	102 42%	44 54%
Resigned	3 3%	63 10%	31 12%	11 14%
Medical discharge	2 2%	11 2%	11 5%	6 7%
Graduated	68 73%	392 60%	99 41%	20 25%

Based on experience gained in the training programs Miss Cochran stated: "In any future women pilots program the upper age limit should be kept down to about 28 years for those to be assigned to regular flying duties."

The first and most well known contribution of women pilots to the war effort was ferrying of airplanes. In the beginning the WAFS, headed by Mrs. Love, ferried only primary trainers and liaison aircraft ; later they ferried heavier trainers such as L-4Bs, PT-17s and PT-19s. Due to their high pre-training flying hours, not a single accident was reported.

In the Spring of 1943 the graduates of WFTD began ferry duty and Mrs. Love, still head of the WAFS, was transferred to Ferrying Division Headquarters at Cincinnati, Ohio. There she became acquainted with the fact that women pilots were confined to ferry only trainers and were grounded during menstrual period. After Mrs. Love appealed to ATC Headquarters, women pilots were no longer limited only to fly trainer and they were to be advanced to the extent of their ability in keeping with the

The first of the WASPs to ferry the B-17 type airplane. Mrs. Betty Gillis (left) and Mrs. Nancy Love. (Photo - 33477 AC)



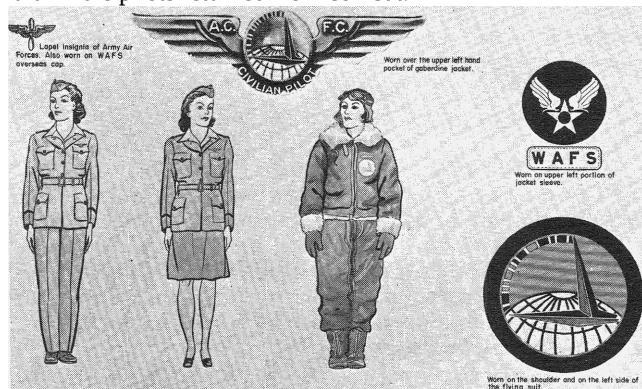
progress of aircraft. Mrs. Love also requested the Air Surgeon to make a study of medical condition of WAFS. His finding was that menstruation in properly selected women was no handicap to flying, so this restriction, too, was removed.

In August 1943 the announcement was made by AAF Headquarters that all women pilots, including WAFS, would be known as Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) with Miss Cochran as Director, who would report directly to Air Staff in AAF Headquarters. This change brought a conflict of authority between ATC and Miss Cochran for while all women pilots were under the direct command of Miss Cochran yet they were under the employment of ATC, a crossing of command which caused considerable confusion. It reached such a state that ATC was ready to relinquish the employment of WASPs rather than endure such disconcerting conditions. To smooth situation, AAF eliminated those measures formulated by Miss Cochran which were objectionable to ATC.

The Ferrying Division of ATC was satisfied with the performance of the early group of WASPs, however, some of the later groups were found to be less satisfactory and there were a number of accidents. When a large number of pursuit planes had to be delivered, the Ferrying Division really had a problem. They had to advance women pilots to ferry duty who could not even ferry the primary trainers with real surety. The Ferrying Division blamed Miss Cochran for the poor training and Miss Cochran counter blamed Ferrying Division for their prejudicial attitude toward women pilots.

In Oct. 1943 several newly assigned WASPs were found unsatisfactory and Ferrying Division initiated action for their discharge. Miss Cochran requested an investigation by the Air Inspector and the finding was that women pilots at certain ferrying groups were being discriminated against in regard to transition training to pursuit planes. The attitude and method in conducting flight checks were obstructive and unfair; check pilots were sometime resentful of the women pilots program and desirous of its elimination. The Commanding Officers of the specific Ferry Groups were reprimanded for unfair action and the WASPs in question were retained. Later, Ferry Division managed to transfer the women to non-ferry duties. Ferry Division subsequently worked well with those that remained who concentrated largely on the ferrying of fighters. In spite of the difficulties, in the 27 months of service with the ATC, WASPs had ferried 77 types of aircraft and did 12,650 ferrying operations over a distance of approximately 9,224,000 miles.

Beside ferrying, the WASPs were assigned to target-towing in anti-aircraft gunnery training at different bases, the largest one being Camp Davis. The Camp had neither the facilities nor enough instructors to conduct tow training and a limited amount of tow target training was given. The women proved that they were capable of tow-target work and were even better adapted to this routine sort of flying than male pilots returned from combat.



Miss Evelyn G. Sharp, formerly of Ord, Neb. and Bakersfield, Cal. one of the 38 fatalities among the WASPs. She crashed on takeoff when her P-38 lost an engine. (Photo - Courtesy Glenn Buffington)

In March 1944 Miss Cochran suggested that WASPs be used as flight instructors, an experiment which began shortly in the Eastern and Western Flying Training Commands. It did not work out. There was a resentment against women flying instructors, but a number were used suitably for engineering flights, testing, administrative pilots, safety pilots and instrument check pilots. In addition, WASPs were used for several types of administrative duties such as engineering maintenance and supply, operations, control tower observer, in the Office of the Air Inspector, and as accident investigations reporters.

The WASPs were civilian pilots and thus not entitled to benefits and insurance provided for military personnel. In case of accident or fatality there were at a great disadvantage. The AAF and WASPs had both sought, by Act of Congress, to change their civilian status to military.

In 1943 AAF was considering incorporating women pilots into the Women's Army Auxiliary Corp (WAAC) because WAAC was soon ready to be militarized into the regular Army. Miss Cochran objected to the arrangement on the grounds that WASPs should not serve under an organization with no knowledge of flying. In July of the same year, when the Women's Army Corp (WAC) was created by act of Congress as an integral part of the Army, ATC urged to merge WASP with WAC. Again Miss Cochran opposed for she wanted WASP to be commissioned directly in the AAF.

Faced with this situation General Arnold directed the Deputy Air Inspector to conduct a personal investigation. Several months later the Inspector recommended that no change be made in the status of women pilots for the time being as the civilian status offered greater flexibility and freedom.

In Sept. 1943 Representative John M. Costello (California) introduced the first of the WASP militarization bills, H.R. 3358, which was subsequently revised and introduced as H.R. 4219 in Feb. 1944. This bill provided (1) that WASP should be an integral part of the AAF; (2) the highest rank in WASP should not be higher than Colonel and there should be only one officer of that rank (presumably Miss Cochran); (3) aviation cadets could be appointed for pilot training and upon completion of the course be commissioned as second lieutenants; (4) all personnel were to receive the same pay and allowances as members of the Army and be entitled to the same rights, privileges, and benefit as were accorded other military personnel of the same rank, grade, and length of service.

In early 1944, with victory in Europe apparently in sight, a large cutback was made in the pilot training program. The CAA War Training Service program was al-

ready terminating a number of the male civilian instructor pilots. Thus, when the WASP militarization bill was introduced, Congress was deluged with letters from those civilian instructor pilots protesting against militarization of women pilots while men pilots were being lay-off. In addition, the Ramspeck Committee on Civil Service that looked into the WASP program reported unfavorably on the proposal and recommended immediate termination of women pilot training. The WASP bill was defeated.

In August 1944 Miss Cochran recommended to General Arnold that either another attempt be made for militarization, or disband the WASP. Her recommendation was heralded in newspapers as an ultimatum. General Arnold realized that it was futile to press for militarization; the need for pilots had changed radically with victory in Europe in the offing, thus on Oct. 3rd General Arnold announced that the WASP program would be deactivated. It was a bitter disappointment to the women pilots and even to the Ferrying Division which claimed that its activities would be handicapped by the loss of the women pilots.

At the time the WASPs were getting over their growing pains and were mounting their best efforts the war was nearing an end and their services were no longer needed. In their operations from 1942 to 1944, their overall accident rate was slightly higher than male pilots but their fatal accident rate was slightly lower (.693 per 1000 hours for women vs. .707 per 100 hours for men in 1942). No trustworthy conclusion could be drawn from this comparison however, because men were doing combat training type flying. The WASPs had averaged 33 flying hours per woman per month and had flown approximately 60 million miles within the continent of United States and Canada. 38 of the WASPs gave their lives during training and operation,

As the program came to an end in 1945 there were 916 WASPs on duty with the AAF assigned to the following Commands:

Headquarters, AAF	1	4th Air Force	37
Training Command	620	Weather Wing	11
Air Transport Command	141	Proving Ground Command	6
1st Air Force	16	Air Technical Service Command	3
2nd Air Force	80	Troop Carrier Command	1

The WASP organization came to an end on 20 Dec. 1944. The failure to militarize women pilots was unfair to the WASPs, who had given good service while they were needed, but on the other hand the War Department could not be burdened with the difficult task of finding assignments for trained women pilots whose skills were no longer required.

In spite of all the difficulties encountered, the WASP program achieved its goal of releasing male pilots for combat duty. During these crucial months in 1943, when the outcome of daylight bombing of Germany hung in the balance, those additional combat pilots undoubtedly contributed toward the eventual air superiority in the sky of Europe.

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WAR IS HELL - SO WHAT ELSE IS NEW? By JAMES H. FARMER

A commentary on the production of *The Thousand Plane Raid*, a motion picture. See "Santa Maria Diary" by J.H. Farmer, *JOURNAL of AAHS*, Fall 1969, Page 178.

The motion picture, *The Thousand Plane Raid*, is as dated in its approach to film making as the subject it attempts to deal with, a celluloid dinosaur of the "B" movie ice age.

The *Raid* is the fictitious story of the first American 1000-plane raid over Europe during WWII, the trials and tribulations of the tactician, a B-17 group commander who first worked up the plan, and of his lackluster bomb group, the 103rd. The story centers around this semi-inspired leader, played haltingly by actor Chris George, and is complete with the usual compliment of one-dimensional war period characterizations: the long-suffering (and of course beautiful) girl friend (Larine Stephines); the tough "give 'em hell" ground sergeant; the whimpering coward; the brave and handsome renegade ace pilot played in a spirited tongue-in-cheek fashion by actor Gary Marshall; plus a General with overly developed paternal instincts. They are all there, personalities as familiar as a pair of well-worn house slippers, dispensing the outdated dialogue and tired cliches so typical of the formula films of the late 1930's and 40's.

The *Raid* is ill-conceived, with an ill-fitting group of characters, interwoven sub plots and unimaginative photography that may have sold war bonds twenty-five years ago, but today seems pointless and trite. The value of the motion picture, little though it may be, is to be found in the unpretentious display, both on the ground and in the air, of the famous Flying Fortress. The B-17 is a joy to behold for a generation yet unexposed to its grace and majesty. There is a low-level flypast that is the high point of the film, a scene not to be surpassed by any human actor. For all of its functional aesthetics it is a shame to have to

report that armchair directors and writers persist in treating the Fortress as little more than a prop before which the actor does his thing.

In some respects, what the Spitfire was to Great Britain, the Flying Fortress was to the United States. It tangibly represented a military theory and, later, a military policy. The strategic bomber formed the backup for this nation's foreign policy for over a generation. It seems appropriate to examine, in public forum, those times and conditions as they really were. They made fertile the concept of strategic bombardment as both an instrument of and a deterrent to war. In this day of changing morals and values, of personal and national reevaluation, truth is at a premium. The present generation wants, year, demands, to be told what it really was like. Why do popular, qualified studies of the 8th Air Force go by the boards only to be replaced on the screen by unimaginative, superficial stories that do neither the Air Force nor the viewing public justice?

Hopefully, the *Raid* is an exception of today and not the rule. There has been a financial and limited renaissance in aviation films with the box office success of *Those Magnificent Men and Their Flying Machines*. The longevity of this trend in pure dollars and cents language is of course wholly dependent upon the success of a handfull of epic films (*Battle of Britain* for one) about to be released. Still, it is hoped that this will sustain enough life for at least one in-depth motion picture study of the 8th Air Force.

QUOTATIONS, MAYBE FAMOUS

"The progress of technology has endowed mankind with virtually unlimited potential wealth and power, but in piling up riches for us, technology has sabotaged our relations with each other. The way of life that technology produces, and requires, creates a psychological climate of exasperation and intransigence which is even making us throw its material product away."

Arnold Toynbee, in *Los Angeles Times*, 14 July 68.