
38-40-41

WASP FATALITIES

WWII?

by H. Glenn Buffington

WHEN JACQUELINE COCHRAN released her summary of the WASP project, she mentioned 38 pilots had died in service—11 during training and 27 after graduation and on various assignments. Most of the writing regarding the WASP since this report still maintains 38 as the number of casualties before deactivation. This is not a completely accurate statement, for at least three names have been excluded, from the select group of 38, on various museum plaques and in the official records.

Was this an oversight because of time pressures, a technicality or an effort to make the final figures appear better than they actually were? In retrospect, we reviewed some of the history.

Time magazine, April 3, 1944 issue, carried a picture of a smiling Jacqueline Cochran holding a copy of a House Resolution which temporarily saved the program of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). Congressmen were thinking about abolishing the WASP, for the Civilian Pilots Training Program and the War Training Service were winding down, releasing at least 900 experienced men flyers who might be used as ferry pilots.

The article also mentioned that if the ladies erred anywhere it was on the side of caution, and caution had paid off in a low fatality rate—only 13 WASPs had lost their lives at that time. However, it was the same day, April 3, 1944, that

WAFS Evelyn Sharp was a fatality in a P-38 crash-landing at New Cumberland Army Air Base, Pennsylvania. A fortnight later, Elizabeth Erickson (44-W-6)—sixth class in 1944—and Mary Howson (44-W-4) were fatalities when their advanced trainers collided in the air five miles southeast of Avenger Field, Sweetwater, Texas.

An Associated Press news release from Sweetwater, July 2, 1944, dispatched: "Offered a 'free trip home' by the army because of the cancellation of the Women's Air Force Service Pilots program, four would-be WASPs who had come to Sweetwater for training, promptly queried: 'What home?' and then issued an appeal to American women to contact congressmen in an effort to get the program reestablished.

"Saying that they represented 53 women from all parts of the nation who started to Texas before telegrams came telling them not to report, the four asserted that many of the group had 'sold their homes, automobiles, places of business and given up good jobs to join the WASPs.'" This was verified by Eleanor I. Wagner, one of the nucleus of 45-W-1.¹

It was October 1, 1944, that General H.H. Arnold, Commanding General of the Army Air Forces, sent a directive to Jacqueline Cochran, Director of the WASP asking her promptly to submit a plan of deactivation of the program to take place by December 20, 1944.

The address by General Henry H. Arnold to the graduating class 44-W-10, December 7, 1944 . . . "In 1944, more than two years since the WASP first started flying with the Air Forces, we can come to only one conclusion—the entire operation has been a success. It is on the record that women can fly as well as men. In training, in safety, in operation, your showing is comparable to the overall record of the AAF flying within the continental United States. That is what you were called upon to do—continental flying. If the need had developed for women to fly our aircraft overseas, I feel certain that the WASP would have performed that job equally well.

"The WASP have completed their mission. Their job has been successful. But as is usual in war, the cost has been heavy. Thirty-seven WASP have died while helping their country move toward the moment of final victory. The Air Force will long remember their service and their final sacrifice.

"So, on this last graduation day, I salute you and all WASP. We of the AAF are proud of you; we will never forget our debt to you."

Jacqueline Cochran's final report to General Arnold read:

"More than 25,000 women applied for women pilot training. Eighteen hundred and thirty (1,830) were accepted. 30.7% were eliminated during training for flying deficiency and an-

other 2.2% for other reasons, with consequent lower elimination rate than among male cadet pilots. 8% of those accepted resigned and 1,074 graduated, or 58.7% of the total. Of the 1,074 who graduated, 900 remained at time of inactivation, or 83.6% of the graduates, to which should be added 16 of the original WAFS employed who were still with the program at time of inactivation.

"The women pilots, subsequent to graduation from the training program, flew approximately 60 million miles for the Army Air Forces: the fatalities were 38, or one to about 16,000 hours of flying. Both the accident rate and the fatality rate compared favorably with the rates for male pilots in similar work."

Dora Dougherty Strother (43-W-3) wrote of the WASP program:

"At first, the female cadets were housed at Bluebonnet Hotel in the town of Sweetwater. Later, they resided at Avenger Field in new barracks that provided for six women to a room, with a foot locker and standing locker for each. There was a small latrine and shower for every two rooms.

"Training for the WASP paralleled but did not duplicate that given male Army Air Forces cadets. Because the women were expected to go into ferrying, emphasis was placed on cross-country flying. Gunnery and formation flying were omitted. Training time increased as the initial experience of the women pilots entering the course decreased. The first class had received 115 hours of flying over five months. By the close of the program the women were receiving seven months' training with a total of 210 flight hours."

To digress, it always bothered the writer to thumb through the old scrapbook and read again the account of the Omaha, Nebraska December 7, 1944 accident, in which three more WASPs were fatalities. Therefore, some further inquiries were made regarding the loss of lives. The three pilots were Virginia Hope, Margaret Marian Isbill and Verna M. Turner, all from the 43-W-7 class.

Byrd Howell Granger, 43-W-1, and WASP Historian, advised:

"Turner was then a washed-out

one flew about 400 miles cupants.

W of 10 abandoned the officials said, near Mar-nearly five hours before a forest ranger reported a plane crash into a wooded afternoon.

Falls, S. D., Maj. H. A. public relations officer by airfield, said he spent oon in Marlon vicinity members of the crew ned goods, including 10 l ammunition.

n said the pilot—identi- Sioux City base as Lt. rk, Glen Ridge, N. Y.— th the plane after, the crew jumped, but the altitude and the pilot o.

reported they bailed t injury, when they were "feather" the propeller engine. The ship began and there was a threat base announced.

it a crewless plane was igh the Mid-West caused

iles an Hour of Army P-51

OD, Calif., Dec. 1.— 51 Mustang fighter can speed of 450 miles an h American Aviation, t has been authorized r Department to ane P-51 is reportedly the t test propeller-driven



L. H. O'NEILL

about a month ago to join her husband at Sioux City, S. D.

O'Neill, 27, is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Lester H. O'Neill, 4403 54th Ave. S. W. His wife, who has been living with her mother at 3401 15th Ave. S., left here

3 Wasps, 14 Other Pilots, Die in Plane

OMAHA, Dec. 8.—(AP)—Seventeen persons, including 14 men and three women ferry pilots, were killed here yesterday when a two-engined Army transport plane crashed and burned at the Omaha Municipal Airport.

The plane was taking off for Tinker Field, Okla., when it crashed.

The crash was the greatest tragedy in the history of the Omaha Airport and the loss of life was the first there since 1932.

The death list included Margaret Marian Isbill, McGregor, Tex., and Berna Mary Turner and Virginia M. Hope, whose addresses were not immediately learned, all of whom were Wasps.

Largest Airfield in N. America Opened

EDMONTON, Alta. Dec. 7.—

Firm Describes Ai

By R. B. Berm

The B-29 Super adapted to civilia a gigantic doubl plane, capable of through the su sphere at 340 n

Full page of p on new Boeing cruiser, Page 22.

hour, with from 7 passengers!

That is the Boeing company's answer to aviation needs, made yesterday for the f by C. L. Egtvedt, of the company.

He disclosed that a prototype of the hu port. has already b and is now undergo but both its constru its test flights have rounded with the de crecy as, for the pr models of the plane will be for the army

4 Powerful Engine: Drive Huge Transp.

The most startling of the announcement



Micky Axton on duty at Pecos, Texas AAB

trainee, no longer part of the WFTD [Women's Flying Training Detachment]. Isbill and Hope had both resigned—no longer part of the WASP. The plane in which they crashed was a civilian contractor's plane, not an AC plane. On December 7th, General

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Arnold was correct statistically. One more WASP was lost thereafter." This was Mary Louise Webster (44-W-8) who crashed with two other male pilots December 9th, in a weather-related accident.

Micky Tuttle Axton (43-W-7) is a staunch supporter of the WASP, Ninety-Nines and the Confederate Air Force. She and her husband, Wayne, still hail from Wichita, Kansas, but depending on the season, they can be found at Two Harbors, Minnesota, and Rockport, Texas.

She wrote: "Virginia Hope and Margaret Marian Isbill (who were killed in the Army transport crash at Omaha Dec. 7, 1944) were both assigned to the Army Air Force Weather Wing at Asheville, North Carolina, after we all graduated in November 1943. I don't



Isabel Tynon, Peru, Nebraska

know where they went from there, but they were WASP on duty until December 1944. They certainly were war casualties and I think it is a shame that they aren't listed with the other WASP who were killed. I just felt terrible when I read about it—they were all from my class too—girls I knew so well.”⁵

WASP bay-mates were generally assigned alphabetically, so we checked with Isabel Tynon Martell (43-W-7) regarding Verna Turner. Isabel is now President of Tango Air, Inc., Molalla, Oregon, and she wrote: “Yes, I did know Verna Turner and she was my bay-mate. She was an exceptionally sweet person who wanted to make it through training so badly that I think she tried so hard she tied herself in knots. She used to visit a chiropractor in Sweetwater to relieve her stress. I am sure you know that she washed out in Primary. I was shocked!

“She came to Sweetwater from Washington, D.C., where she had been working. I do not know her hometown, maybe somewhere in Pennsylvania. She had been a professional parachute jumper, and I admired her very much. She was killed on a civilian ferry trip during WWII.”⁶

Resignations were understandable for many reasons—family responsibilities, other endeavors, personal reasons, airport environment (during training,

noise around the clock), loss of a close friend, hazardous duty, such as target towing and the talk of militarization.

It is hard to reason why Verna Turner was still associated with the WASP as the 43-W-7 class had graduated November 13, 1943. No doubt she was a determined and dedicated person who did not want to lose contact with all her WASP cronies. Her “washed-out trainee” status may have been the result of a personality clash with either instructor or check pilot.

Virginia Hope and Marian Isbill were numbered among the 1,074 WASP graduates, and a fatality is a fatality whether in a military or civilian aircraft; these girls were WWII casualties.

Jacqueline Cochran was known to not rest on her laurels, and as the WASP program came to a close, she wasted no time. She may have delegated the responsibility for the final report and then failed to check the statistics. A December 11, 1944 news release by the Associated Press announced she had been elected to the board of directors of Northeast Airlines, Inc., and then with General Arnold's blessing, she became his “consultant,” accepted a “correspondent” assignment for *Liberty* magazine to cover the Japanese surrender. She then proceeded on around the world to attend the Nuremberg trials.

In Maryann Bucknum Brinley's *Jackie Cochran* book, a real misnomer was made referring to the wind-down of the WASP. “The end coming five days before Christmas took some of the sting out. Every girl got a ride home for the holiday.”⁷ However, for a few of the WASP, their remains were being sent home to their families during the pre-Yule season.

On a more upbeat nature, 136 WASP served in the Armed Forces Reserve during WWII, Korea and/or Vietnam, predominantly in the USAF (including 1-RAF, 1-USA, 2-USMC and 4-USN). They served on a non-flying basis. A few others took overseas assignments with the State Department, Red Cross and various other organizations.

On March 8, 1979, it was announced that the service of the WASP had been determined by the Secretary of Defense to be active military service for the purpose of all laws administered by the Veterans Administration. On May 21, 1979, the first honorable discharge from the Air Force was issued to a WASP. Thus, recognition of WASP service was finally established after more than 34 years.⁸ □

Pictures from 43-W-7 class book. Thanks to Micky Axton, Wichita, Kansas.

Virginia Hope, Winnebago, Minnesota



Marian Isbill, McGregor, Texas



SEATTLEITE INJURED AS PLANE FALLS

By Associated Press.

LOS ANGELES, Dec. 1.—Seven were killed, 15 were injured and one passenger was uninjured when a Transcontinental & Western Airlines passenger plane crashed early today in a dense fog.

The airliner was only a few hundred feet above the ground and six miles from Lockheed Air Terminal in Burbank when it was reported on the radio beam.

One of those killed was City Manager Walter Cooper of San Diego, Calif. Mayor Harley Knox of the same city was injured.

Among the slightly injured was Arthur W. Carroll, 22 years old, merchant seaman, 2511 15th Ave. W., Seattle. He was on his way to New York to be married to Miss Kathleen Lee.



AIR LINES GIVEN 20 ARMY PLANES

WASHINGTON, Dec. 8.—(AP)—The nation's air lines, pinched for planes since the Army dipped deeply into their fleets, may not have to wait for the war's end to get all they want.

W. L. Clayton, surplus war property administrator, announced today that he had allocated 20 two-engined DC-3 transports to ten air lines, and that additional planes shortly would be available.

This boosted to 317 the number of planes available to the domestic air lines, and sent their fleets toward prewar levels.

Before the war the domestic lines owned a total of about 350 planes, but many of them were small, whereas most of the present planes are 21-passenger DC-3's.

In May, 1942, after the lines turned some planes over to the Army on a voluntary basis, the Army took over 158 aircraft, reducing the domestic fleet to 166. Since then planes have come back in dribbles from the Air Transport Command.

American Airlines was allocated five of the 20 planes. Other domestic lines receiving allotments were United Air Lines, three; Eastern Air Lines, two; Northwest Airlines, 2; Transcontinental & Western, two; Pennsylvania Central Airlines, one; Braniff Airways, one; Western Air Lines, one.

Pan American Airways was allocated two planes, and Pan American Grace Airways, one.

ELLENSBURG GIRL IN WASPS KILLED

Miss Mary Louise Webster, former Seattle student and daughter of Mr. and Mrs. W. F. Webster



MARY LOUISE WEBSTER

of Ellensburg, was one of three persons killed in the crash of an Army training plane late Saturday near Claremore, Okla., according to an Associated Press dispatch from Frederick Army Air Station there.

Miss Webster, a Woman's Army Service pilot, was assigned to the Oklahoma base for advanced training in B-24 Liberator bombers, after her graduation with the Wasps at Sweetwater, Tex., in October. Bad weather was blamed for the crash by a board of Army officers of the 13th Ferrying Service Station at Tulsa.

The young pilot was a graduate of the Holy Names Academy and the Seattle Business College. She also had attended the Central Business College at Ellensburg, and had worked a year as a private secretary for A. M. Castle & Co., steel distributors. Miss Webster had a 30-day furlough with her parents before her advanced training assignment.

S. F. Flyer Killed in State

EPHRATA, Dec. 11.—(AP)—Second Lieut. Albert J. Hogan of San Francisco was killed Saturday when his P-38 fighter plane crashed four miles north of Wilson Creek, Wash. He was on a combat-training mission, Col. G. P. Digsway, commanding officer of the Ephrata Army Air Base, announced.

Jacqueline Cochran on Board

BOSTON, Dec. 11.—(AP)—Jacqueline Cochran, noted aviatrix, has been elected to the board of directors of Northeast Airlines, Inc., reportedly the first woman director of an air passenger transportation company, it was announced yesterday.

Negro Unqualified To Fly Pursuits, Says Victim's Father

ANNISTON, Ala., Dec. 16.—(AP)

—An Anniston business executive whose son was killed in a recent air collision involving an army pursuit plane piloted by a Negro today protested the "sudden elevation of the Negro to duties he is not yet qualified to perform" in a letter to the Anniston Star and the war department.

Earl C. Knowlton, head of the Anniston water works, said his only son, Lt. Earl C. Knowlton Jr., pilot of a B-24, and 11 others were killed, in addition to the Negro pilot of the pursuit plane, in a recent accident near Charleston, S. C.

"With rare exceptions the Negro's mind is not prepared to make the split-second decisions which mean life or death in the operation of so swift and so com-

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IN MEMORIAM

To the forty-one WASP/WAFS who gave their lives for their country during WWII and prior to deactivation of the WASP Program, December 20, 1944.

43-4-T	Champlin, Jane	43-2	Nichols, Dorothy
44-2	Clarke, Susan P.	44-3	Norbeck, Jeanne L.
44-9-T	Davis, Margie L.	43-4-T	Oldenburg, Margaret C.
44-1	Dussaq, Katherine	43-3	Rawlinson, Mabel
44-6-T	Edwards, Marjorie D.	44-9-T	Roberts, Gleanna
44-6-T	Erickson, Elizabeth	44-2	Robinson, Marie Michell
WAFS	Fort, Cornelia	44-3	Scott, Betty
43-3	Grimes, Frances F.	WAFS	Scott, Dorothy
43-5	Hartson, Mary	43-5-T	Seip, Margaret J.
43-7	Hope, Virginia M.	43-5-T	Severson, Helen Jo
44-4-T	Howson, Mary H.	43-4	Sharon, Ethel Marie
43-7	Isbill, Margaret Marian	WAFS	Sharp, Evelyn
44-1	Keene, Edith	43-7	Silver, Gertrude Tompkins
44-8-T	Lawrence, Kathryn B.	44-2-T	Stine, Betty P.
43-4	Lee, Hazel Ying	43-8	Toeves, Marion
43-2	Loop, Paula	43-4	Trebing, Mary E.
43-5	Lovejoy, Alice	43-7	Turner, Verna M.
44-3	McDonald, Lea Ola	44-8	Webster, Mary L.
44-4	Martin, Peggy	43-6	Welz, Bonnie Jean
43-2	Moffat, Virginia	43-4	Wood, Betty L. Taylor
44-5	Moses, Beverly		

-T Trainee

Compiled by H. Glenn Buffington, Assoc. WASP #4006, February 11, 1985.

REFERENCES AND ADDENDUM

1. Various conversations with Eleanor Wagner at Bermuda Dunes, California, and the mini-WASP reunion at Indio, California, December 1987.
2. *The Stars at Noon*, Jacqueline Cochran autobiography, Atlantic-Little, Brown & Co., 1954.
3. Dora Strother's introduction in *For God, Country and the Thrill of It*, by Anne Noggle (44-W-1), Texas A&M University Press, 1990.
4. Byrd Howell Granger letter, February 21, 1985. Granger's WASP History Book, *Final Approach*, is scheduled for release February 1991, Falconer Publishing Co., Scottsdale, Arizona.
5. Micky Axton letter, April 18, 1989.
6. Isabel Martell letter, May 25, 1990.
7. *Jackie Cochran* autobiography by Maryann Bucknum Brinley, Bantam Books, 1987.
8. WASP literature.

NOTE: Regarding the Omaha news clipping, the 1932 loss of life is in error. Ruth Barron Nason had a fatal accident there July 3, 1936, on approach to the airport in her Warner-powered Monocoup.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenn Buffington, Life Member No. 26, is a native of North Dakota and was schooled in Iowa and Missouri. He was associated with the aero industry for 38 years, now retired, lives in Arkansas. He has written for the *AAHS Journal*, the *99 News*, *IWASM* and *Vintage Airplane*, among others. He can be reached at 2166 Southfield Road, El Dorado, Arkansas 71730.