

What's All the Fuss About?

My WAFS/WASP Flying Experience

by Kathryn (Bernheim) Fine as told to Sam Parker in May 1990

TIME SURE GOES BY QUICKLY WHEN you're having fun. It's been 48 years since I flew a P-47 "Jug." I used to love to fly that sweetheart of a plane, and I'm sure I'll talk about when I flew them forever.

Let me go back to the beginning. Before I took flying lessons in the early 1930s, a streak of bad luck had hit me with a vengeance. Within a short span of years my mother, father, first husband Maurice Bernheim, and my grandmother all had died. I was really down in the dumps because of these events when, unexpectedly, something positive happened that changed my life forever.

When I was a teenager I had had a few pleasant aviation adventures. I had often talked about them, and my brother-in-law remembered. Trying to help me recover back to my old cheerful self, my brother-in-law encouraged me in the late summer of 1934 to take flying lessons at Roosevelt Field, L.I. New York. His advice turned out to be some of the best advice I've ever received.

At the flying field, I was introduced to Sig Uyldert who soon proved that he knew a lot about airplanes. He is still a good pal. It was not long after I began my flying lessons with Sig instructing that I found myself totally absorbed in airplanes. I practiced flying at every opportunity and practically lived at the airfield. Sig was an excellent instructor and he made sure that I learned to fly safely and knew how to maintain the airplanes I flew. After a lot of hard work, I finally soloed and obtained my pilot's license in late 1934. At that point in my flying career I was sorry for not taking advantage of an opportunity to learn to fly back in 1932 just after my grandmother had died, leaving me a thousand dollars. I bought a new yellow Buick automobile with most of the money, unaware of what a great thrill it was to pilot an airplane.

In 1938 Sig invited me to join him as a partner in his flying business. I agreed and we rented an office and storage space



WAFS Kathryn L. Bernheim, spring 1943.
(Sis Fine Collection)

at Roosevelt Field in Hangar 9. We had three aircraft: a Travel Air 16K (NC11704), a Piper J-2 (NC17956), and a Piper J3C-50 (NC24679). This period of my life was great. It was full of excitement and adventure. Sig was wonderful to me and once even asked me to marry him, although I didn't accept. Roosevelt Field just before the war was truly special to me; something exciting was happening almost every day. Our flying business was going well until the day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. Within weeks of the attack all private flights along the coast of the U.S. were limited to within two miles of the airport. Naturally, these flying restrictions killed out business.

Early in January 1942 an opportunity to pilot military airplanes in England was offered to me by Jackie Cochran. Due to a shortage of male pilots, women were being hired as civilians by the British government to pilot military airplanes on noncombat missions. The ATA was a group of women pilots organized in

England by Pauline Gower. Jackie was attempting to recruit experienced American women pilots to volunteer for the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA). I knew Jackie casually because she would frequently fly in and out of Roosevelt Field before the war. I was interested and anxious to get into the action. So I contacted Mary Nicholson, Jackie's secretary, and made arrangements to take the compulsory flight test to be given at the Dorval Airport, Montreal, Canada.

I went there in January of 1942 at my own expense, but I might as well have stayed home. The test plane was a *Harvard* (North American AT-6) which I had never flown. The check pilot, a regular RAF officer, acted like a real pompous jerk. He made no secret of his belief that women were lousy pilots. Before the day ended he made sure he had proven his point by flunking all six American women candidates who were there to take the test. I returned home very disappointed. Even today, I still believe I could have passed the test had I been given the proper preflight instruction on the *Harvard*. Much later I found out that some of the women pilots, both American and foreign, did pass the flight test at Dorval, and went on to England to work for the ATA. Helen Richey was one of them, but after a short time returned to the U.S. and got a job flying with the WASP. Helen was in our group flying P-47s out of Farmingdale in the summer/fall of 1944.

In the spring of 1942, I got a job near Pawling, New York, as a flight instructor. In October 1942, one of the gals I had been with in Dorval called and said the Air Corps was recruiting women pilots for the Womens Auxiliary Flying Squadron (WAFS). So I dashed down to the New Castle Air Base in New Castle, Delaware, where the interviews to join were being held. I met with Nancy Love and Betty Gillies who told me that only 25 gals (not including Nancy Love) would be accepted into the WAFS. They also

said they already had 24 pilots and were waiting for a telegram to arrive from the 25th girl. They did, however, let me stay overnight in the girls' barracks (BDQ) to await the outcome. Wow, what a thrill! I already knew a few of the gals from my Roosevelt Field days so I felt right at home. Unfortunately, my bubble burst the next A.M. when Betty Gillies called me to Headquarters and said that the telegram had arrived. The last girl accepted the offer to join the WAFS. Sadly, I returned to New York and my old flight instructor's job.

Not long after this, December 1942, the same gal that tipped me off the first time called again and said the WAFS had room for two more girls. I promptly said goodbye to my boss at Pawling and scooted back to New Castle. This time I was accepted. I was now a member of the Womens Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS). Who needed wings? For a few days thereafter I was on Cloud Nine. Actually, I had a 90-day contract to prove I was a good pilot. Fortunately, with a lot of hard work I was able to prove myself and become a full-fledged member of the WAFS.

For me and another new WAFS member, Helen McGilvery, who was from Stonybrook, Long Island, New York, training began immediately. At first our training consisted mainly of learning to do things the Army way. This brought to mind the old refrain, "There's a right way, the wrong way, and the Army way." About six weeks after joining the WAFS, I completed my ground school and transition flight training. By March of 1943 I was making ferrying flights flying the Fairchild PT-19s and PT-26s out of Hagerstown, Maryland, and Piper L-4s out of Lock Haven, Pennsylvania. The first actual airplane ferrying flight by WAFS was made October 10, 1942. On that day Piper L-4s were flown from the Piper factory in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, to Mitchel Field, New York.

All ferry pilots, male and female alike,

Sis Bernheim and her Travel Air 16K, c/n 2008, registration number NC11704, built in 1931 and powered by a Kinner 125-hp engine. Circa 1939.
(Sis Fine Photo)

New Castle Army Air Base. (L-R): Sis Bernheim (WAFS), Nancy Batson (WAFS), Jane Straughan (43-W-1), spring 1943. (Sis Fine Collection)

WAFS at the Bell factory, March 1943. (L-R): Dorothy Fulton, Kathryn Bernheim, Helen McGilvery, Nancy Batson, Gertrude Meserve.
(Sis Fine Collection)





Jackie Cochran, circa 1944. (NASM Photo)

Boeing B-17F, 42-30624, "Queen Bee," Cincinnati, Ohio, to Prestwick, Scotland. Flight discontinued at Goose Bay, September 1943. (L-R): Betty Gillies, Nancy Love, TSgt. L.S. Hall (A.E.). Not shown but in crew: D.A. Stover (TSgt.), R.O. Fraser (1st Lt.), navigator, S. Weintraub (TSgt.) (A.E.). (NASM Photo)

WASP at Pursuit Transition School, Brownsville, Texas, July 1944. Margaret L. Castle, 1st row, 3rd from left, M.J. Meyers, 1st row, 4th from left, Sis Bernheim, 1st row, fifth from left, Jean Landis, 1st row, 3rd from right, Virginia L. Jowell, 1st row, 4th from right. (Sis Fine Collection)

had to follow strict flight rules when flying ferrying missions. These rules included: maintain a minimum separation of 800 feet between each airplane; no flying at night; no flying above 12,000 feet; and no more than 84 hours of flight time per month. A group of WAFS would usually be flown by transport plane to an airplane factory, and from there we would ferry the planes to U.S. Army Air bases in most of the Continental states. The WAFS also made quite a few ferrying flights into Canada to deliver trainers. Mostly PT-26s. This model looked almost identical to the PT-19, except it had a full canopy.

The ferrying work the WAFS did was desperately needed and the group eventually expanded from the original 25 members at New Castle to hundreds of additional pilots. To prepare for this expansion, the original 25 WAFS, stationed at New Castle Army Air Field (NCAAF), were split into four groups in early January 1943. Each gal was assigned to a group that placed her as close to her hometown as possible. Since I was from New York, I stayed at the New Castle Army Air Base, home of the 2nd Ferrying Group. Nancy Love was our group CO. The 5th Ferrying Group went to Dallas, Texas. The 3rd Ferrying Group went to Romulus, Michigan, and the 6th Ferrying Group to Long Beach, California. In March 1943, Nancy Love transferred out of the 2nd Ferrying Group to work at the Ferrying Headquarters located in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Initially, all WAFS were hired as civilians to fly trainer-type planes only. These planes were Army Class 1 with a single engine (up to 650 hp); however, as the demand for ferrying pilots increased, the Ferrying Division Air Transport Command changed this policy. The changes allowed the WAFS to pilot any type of Army aircraft they were qualified to fly. I

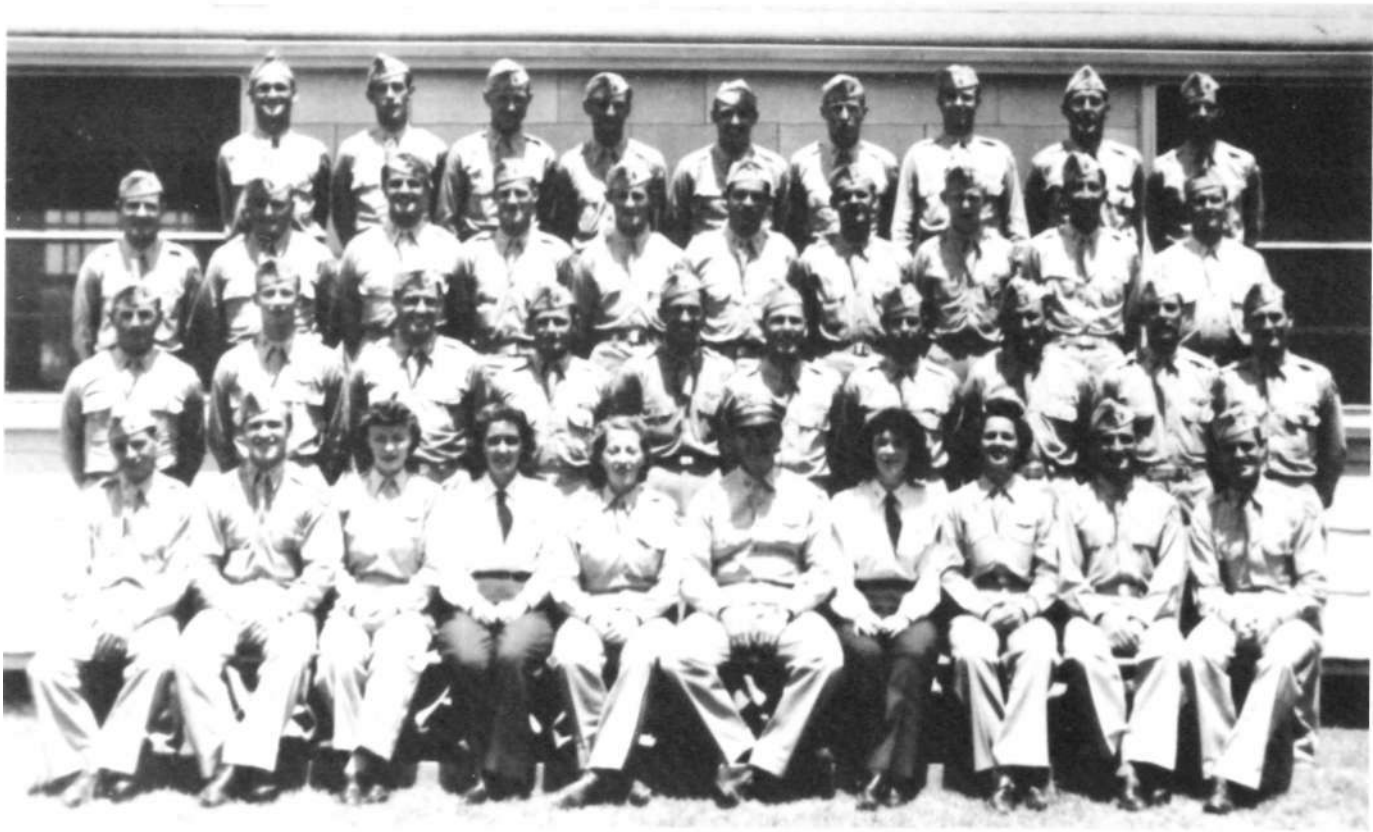
nati, Ohio. Betty Gillies, from Syosset, New York, became the new CO for the WAFS 2nd Ferrying Group and Helen Mary Clark from Englewood, New Jersey, was named Deputy CO.

had mastered the Class 1 trainers and soon after the policy changed I began flying Class 2 planes. By the spring of 1944 I was ferrying Class 3 planes (Class 1 and 2, plus light twin-engine transports and cargo types) in the summer of 1944. I received a 3P classification. The 26th and last girl to join the original group of WAFS was Lenore McElroy. She was assigned directly to the Ferrying Group at Romulus, Michigan, in early January 1943.

After January 25, 1943, all new members of the WAFS regardless of their previous training or flying skills had to graduate from the Women's Air Service Pilots Flight School located at the Municipal Airport in Houston, Texas. Jackie Cochran was the head of the training program there. The first class in Houston began on November 1, 1942, and graduated on April 28, 1943. After graduation these girls became WAFS and flew mostly ferrying missions.

Oh, I almost forgot to mention, on





August 5, 1943, the WAFS merged into the Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASP). In my opinion, this was the worst possible move. Anyhow, in June 1944 I was given an opportunity to attend four weeks of training at the Pursuit Transition School located in Brownsville, Texas. My training class consisted of 34 regular officers from the Army Air Forces and five WASP. The other four WASP attending were Jean Landis, Virgie Lee Jowell, Margaret Castle, and Jo Myers. Our class graduated in July 1944 and I received a 3P Army Air Forces Pilot qualification. My first orders after graduation were to pick up a P-51 *Mustang* from Inglewood, California, and deliver it to Newark, New Jersey. Thereafter, I got ferrying assignments to pilot P-40s, P-39s, P-63s and my special favorite, the P-47 "Jug".

I enjoyed flying most of the planes, but the two that I hated were the Bell P-39 *Air Cobra* and the Bell P-63 *King Cobra*. Standard preflight procedure required the pilot to always check the engine magnetos just before takeoff. To do this, the wheels would be locked and the engine revved up. Every time I attempted this safety check on the *Cobras* the engine temperature gauge would

indicate the damn engine was overheating. So to avoid this, I had to check the mags on the takeoff run. This really wasn't a good idea.

I also remember the P-63s required constant fuel management to maintain flight trim. Another worry, another headache. As luck would have it, I was next assigned to an air base in Seattle, Washington, after ferrying a new Bell P-63 out to Great Falls, Montana. That assignment required me to pilot worn-out P-39s being returned to the United States from the Russians. In my opinion, the P-39s were no good when new; I sure as hell didn't like flying the worn-out *Cobras* one little bit. I pleaded with the CO in Seattle to please send me back to my base as I had left NCAAB on a short hop to Newark in a P-47 and wound up in Great Falls by way of a P-63 out of Niagara, New York. I had been away over three weeks with only one uniform. I was gone so long nobody would remember me. The CO in Seattle felt sorry for me and gave me a flight back as copilot on a B-17. Wow, what a great airplane; almost as much fun to fly as a "Jug".

Ferrying fighters was mostly hard work, but I remember some funny moments. When flying in hot weather I

would insert the relief tube up my slacks to keep cool. The tube was designed for men, so it was of no use to me otherwise. I also found that a shot of pure oxygen when flying would often immediately cure a morning-after hangover. Although a minor problem, there was no room to store a B-4 bag in a fighter. To overcome this the ground crew would sometimes help me store a few personal items in the plane's empty ammunition boxes located on the wings. Another laugh was the Ferry Division regulation that required WASP ferrying aircraft equipped with secret radio equipment ("Is it friend or foe?") to wear a .45-caliber pistol side-arm. I had a total of 20 minutes' instruction on how to use that weapon. I can't speak for the other WASP, but I was afraid to keep mine loaded. So I didn't.

Finally, back at New Castle after my return from Seattle, I was assigned to ferry P-47s from the Republic factory located at Farmingdale, Long Island, New York. There were about 40 WASP stationed there and most of them lived at the Huntington Hotel, about 10 miles west of the factory. A bus would take these WASP back and forth from the hotel to Republic each day. When I ar-



rived at Farmingdale in September 1944, the WASP were delivering close to 100 percent of the P-47s built there. I still had my house on Long Island, so four or five of us lived there instead of the Huntington. We would get up early, drive to Republic, work flying all day and return

Standing (L-R): Sis Bernheim (WAFS), Teresa James (WAFS), Celia Hunter (43-W-5). Kneeling (L-R): Emily Hiester (43-W-2), Gertrude Meserve (WAFS), summer 1944. (Sis Fine Collection)

New Castle AAB WASP at Evansville, Indiana Republic factory, 1944. Front row (L-R): Major Walker, Nancy Batson, Jane Straughan, Mary Johnson, Emily Hiester, Sis Bernheim, Virginia Jowell, Betty Scantland. Sitting on wing (L-R): Florence Lawler, Rita Moynahan, Ester Poole, Helen McGilvery. Standing on wing (L-R): Anna Flynn, Janet Zuchowski, Mitchell Long, Virginia Whisonant. (Sis Fine Collection)

home at dark. Nancy Batson's mom came up from Alabama and took care of the house chores for a while. It was lots of fun for all of us.

From Farmingdale I often flew P-47s down to the Port of Embarkation in Newark, New Jersey. These trips were a lot of fun for me because I was flying over my old neighborhood. On more than one occasion, I pretended I was on a bombing run to knock out the Statue of Liberty. It seems crazy now, but it wasn't back then. It was fun and exciting. On some of my ferrying flights I flew P-47s out to Evansville, Indiana, which was the site of another Republic P-47 factory and modification center. From there most of the "Jugs" were flown out to the West Coast. In Evansville, we WASP all lived

in a little house that I recall had roses all over the ceilings. Most times there weren't enough rooms for all of us; so if we got home late the beds were full. When this happened, you would have to sleep on the floor or sit up all night.

Until October 1944, I was having the time of my life. That was when I received notice that the WASP would be disbanded on December 19, 1944. For me this was bad news. Sadly, my exciting job flying as a pilot for the WASP was now going to end. For over two years I'd been having a ball. My life was full of adventure and almost every day was a joy to live. After the announcement some of the WASP were very disappointed and decided to resign. Others, like myself, didn't want to believe it would end. We stayed on until the last day. On December 15, a Saturday, the officers stationed at the New Castle Army Air Field passed in review to honor the WASP for our service in the cause of victory. My last ferry flight was December 17, 1944. A few short days thereafter was the end.

In May 1945 I returned to the Republic factory in Farmingdale and got a job giving flight instructions to members of the Republic Aviation Company Flying Club. After World War II, I also worked for a while as a flight instructor for the Lyon Flight School which was located at Zahn Airport in Amityville, Long Island, New York. In 1947, I married for the second time. His name was Robert Fine and had served in WWII as a Marine. I continued to fly, but in 1952, once again, without a husband and concerned about the future of my two children, I quit flying for good. Today, when I look back on my WAFS/WASP experience, I say, "What's all the fuss about? It was fun. I loved it."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A member of the AAHS since 1970, Sam Parker has a lifelong interest in aviation. Until 21 years old his family home was within a mile of the Philadelphia Municipal Airport. Since the airport was so close he would always be found hanging around there fascinated by the people and planes.

Today he has a huge collection of aviation photos and insignia data which he enjoys sharing with other aviation enthusiasts. Soon to retire from formal work, he recently started a small business that offers an aviation research service and hand-painted leather patches of U.S. Air Force insignia. (Parker Aviation Data Bank Photo)

