



—By Sarah Brunelle

On December 7, 1941, 22-year-old Cornelia Fort was giving a flying lesson over Honolulu, Hawaii. The lesson was a normal one until an unfamiliar plane tried to collide with Fort's. After narrowly escaping the impact, Fort noticed smoke rising from nearby Pearl Harbor. Even with this bird's eye view of America's entrance into World War II, Fort had no way of knowing how much the events of that day would affect her life.

In a time when few women had ever flown in an airplane, Fort, and other women pilots, were unusual. The United States' involvement in World War II, however, was about to give these women an opportunity to serve their country as no females before them had. During the next two years, nearly 2,000 women would travel to Texas to become Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP.

With war looming in Europe, President Franklin Roosevelt began evaluating the United States' air power in 1938. Finding it lacking, Roosevelt ordered an immediate increase in America's air capabilities. In 1939, Jacqueline Cochran, an accomplished pilot originally from Florida, wrote a letter to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, suggesting that, in the event of war, female aviators could be used for non-combat roles in order to free male pilots to fly combat missions. At the time, the need was not great enough to warrant using women, and nothing came of Cochran's idea.

In 1940, another distinguished pilot, Nancy Harkness Love, wrote to Colonel Robert Olds of the Ferrying Command, suggesting that women could ferry aircraft and fly commercial flights in order to free male pilots for military service. Again, the idea of was rejected because there was simply not enough need.

By early 1942, however, heavy pilot losses were taking their toll. New combat aviators were in demand, but they were in short supply. Pilots were also

needed for non-combat jobs such as flight instruction and ferrying planes. The timing was right, and the idea planted by Cochran and Love was about to take root in the West Texas desert.

Telegrams were sent to female pilots all across the United States, asking them to come to the aid of their country. The women were required to have a pilot's license, at least 200 hours of flying time, and to be between the ages of 22 and 35. More than 25,000 women applied, but only 1,857 were accepted during the two-year life of the flying program. These women became the WASP.

In November of 1942, the first class of WASP arrived at the Houston Municipal Airport to begin their training. They only stayed in Houston for a short time, however, as the airfield there could not accommodate them. The women lived in local motels, slept two to-a-bed, and had no medical care. In February of 1943, the WASP moved to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas.

In some respects the conditions that the women faced in Sweetwater were more difficult than those in Houston. Many of the women arrived on cattle cars to find themselves in a dusty, barren land filled with mesquite, cacti, and rattlesnakes. However, the people of Sweetwater and the more than 700 civilians who worked at Avenger Field welcomed the WASP with open arms.

Sweetwater might have seemed like an unusual choice for a flight training center, but the town offered the WASP a few distinct advantages. First of all, it was a remote location. The WASP program was seen as experimental by the Army, so too much publicity was not desirable. Secondly, Avenger Field was already a working flight training base. The Army was using Avenger to train British and Canadian pilots, so the infrastructure that was necessary for flying was already in place.

WASP were trained in exactly the same manner as their male counterparts. The women learned military protocol, marched, saluted their superiors, and were subject to all Army rules and regulations. In ground school the women learned math, physics, navigation, principles of flight, first aid, and meteorology. Flight training began in open-cockpit, bi-wing planes like the PT-17 or PT-19 and continued with larger and more powerful planes such as the AT-11 bombing trainer.

Once out of training, the WASP went on to bases all across the United States and flew every type of mission with the exception of combat. They tested and ferried planes, flew search missions, delivered cargo, performed flight checks, and served as instrument instructors.

Throughout the course of the war, the WASP flew every type of airplane used by the Army, a total of 78 different aircraft. This included the B-29, introduced in 1940, a plane that many male pilots refused to fly because it was relatively untested. Lieutenant Colonel Paul W. Tibbits, who was in charge of training the army's pilots on the B-29 decided to use the WASP in this particular model in order to get the men over their fear of the plane, which was plagued by problems such as engine fires. Tibbits enlisted two WASP, Dora Dougherty and Dorothea Moorman, to fly the B-29. After being trained, but without being warned about the possibility of engine fires, Dougherty and Moorman flew exhibition flights for male pilots, helping many overcome their fears.

Training in the B-29 was only one of the dangerous missions flown by the WASP; staying out of combat did not mean staying out of harm's way. WASP such as Deanie Bishop, originally from Florida, flew planes like the B-26 Martin Marauder, or Widow Maker, with an attached target. Pilots in training would shoot at the targets with color-coded bullets so that instructors could determine the accuracy of the trainees. Despite the danger involved with such an exercise, no WASP died while target towing.

All missions carried some danger though, and not all WASP survived the war. In total, 38 WASP lost their lives during wartime service. Some, such as Hazel Ying Lee, the first Chinese American woman to serve in the United States Army, and Cornelia Fort, the pilot who witnessed the attack on Pearl Harbor from the air, lost their lives in mid-air collisions. Evelyn Sharp was killed when an engine on her P-38 failed during takeoff.

Sadly, since the WASP were not recognized as military personnel, they received no burial or survival benefits and no recognition from the Army. When one WASP died shortly before her training ended, her family received a telegram that said only "Your daughter was killed this morning. Where do you want us to send the body?" Other WASP set up a fund so that the fallen trainee and other WASP who died in the line of duty could be re-turned to their families and buried with honor.

In early 1944 there began to be rumors that the Women Airforce Service Pilots would be militarized. This would mean benefits, better pay, and recognition. WASP who had completed their training were encouraged to enter officer training, in anticipation of their inclusion in the military. In June, however, a bill to militarize the WASP came before the United States House of Representatives and was defeated. The House even went so far as to recommend the discontinuation of the WASP program.

In August of 1944 the House began hearing testimony regarding the WASP. Much of it was from male pilots returning from Europe who were now facing the possibility of serving on the ground in the continuing Asian theater. Many of these men feared that the WASP would take their places as pilots, forcing them into more dangerous infantry positions.

Meanwhile, all WASP had been ordered to maintain silence about their program. With no way to defend themselves before the House, the WASP could do nothing while their future was decided for them. On December 7, 1944, the final class of WASP graduated in Sweetwater, Texas. General Hap Arnold, known as the father of the WASP, spoke at the ceremony, telling the women that they had proven they could "fly wingtip to wingtip with their brothers." At 12:01 a.m. on December 20, 1944, the WASP program was officially disbanded. The women were sent home, at their own expense, and their accomplishments were consigned to history.

For 33 years after it had been disbanded, the WASP program was kept classified by the United States government. The 38 WASP who died serving their countries were not given military honors, and the surviving WASP did not receive veteran status. In fact, most people in America were completely unaware of the contributions and sacrifices of this courageous group of female pilots. Finally, in 1977, Public Law 95-202 gave the WASP veteran status. The

records concerning the WASP program were made public, and the women's bravery and contributions were recognized openly by the United States government.

Texas, as the state where every WASP earned her wings, is known as the "home of the WASP." Now, 60 years following the time these women aviators spent at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Nancy Parrish and her mother, WASP Deanie Bishop Parrish, have established The National WASP World War II museum. The facility will honor the WASP and share their stories with the country that they served. The museum is currently housed in a hanger on loan from the City of Sweetwater.

There is no way to measure the WASP's contribution to World War II. Would the United States have won World War II without them? Probably. But victory is not the WASP's most enduring legacy. They should instead be remembered for their courage, determination, and generosity. Each one of these women realized she had a skill that could be used to help her country, and each WASP sacrificed whatever was necessary without asking—and received little in return. For this, they are heroes in the truest sense of the word.

Sarah Brunelle, of Houston, received her bachelor of arts degree in history from St. Edward's University, in Austin.

To learn more about the National WASP WWII Museum and about the WASP, you can visit www.waspwwii.org. The web site has primary documents and recent articles written about the WASP, pictures from WASP training, and quotes from and about the WASP. The museum is also seeking members, donors, and other supporters.

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