

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WASP

During the early months of WWII America's Army Air Force lost so many pilots until there was a severe shortage of combat pilots. The stateside pilots were unavailable because they were needed to carry out the scores of essential flying jobs in the states, such as ferrying new aircraft from aircraft factories to ports of embarkation and transporting personnel and cargo. General Hap Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Forces, was desperate for more pilots.

Jacqueline Cochran, America's leading female pilot, eventually convinced General Arnold that women pilots, if given the same training as the Army's aviation cadets were receiving, would be equally capable of flying military aircraft. They could then take over some of the stateside flying assignments and relieve the male pilots for combat duty. On September 15, 1942 Ms Cochran's proposed military flying training program was officially approved. 25,000 young women applied for the program. 1,830 were accepted.

The first class of '42 began training, under the command of Army Air Force officers, at the Municipal Airport in Houston, Texas on Nov. 16, 1942. Three months later, the training was moved to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. A total of 1074 trainees took the same oath all military officers take, completed seven months of military flight training, graduated, and together with 28 civilian women pilots of the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, were named 'WASP, WOMEN AIRFORCE SERVICE PILOTS' by General Arnold. These WASP were the first women in history to fly America's military aircraft.

The WASP were stationed at 120 Army Air Bases all over America. They flew more than 60 million miles for their country in every type aircraft and on every type mission any AAF pilot flew, except combat. Assignments included: towing targets for air-to-air gunnery practice and ground-to-air anti-aircraft practice, engineering test pilots, ferrying, instrument instructors, transporting personnel and cargo, simulated strafing, training navigators and bombardiers, smoke laying, night tracking missions, flying drones, slow



timing engines and flying the B-26 Martin Marauder and the B-29 Super Fortress to prove to the male pilots they were safe to fly.

In 1944 General Arnold personally testified before the Congress and requested the Congress militarize the women pilots, as was promised when they entered training. The bill was defeated.

38 WASP lost their lives while serving their country. They were treated differently than the male pilots who were killed in similar accidents—some in the same accidents. The WASP' bodies were sent home in cheap pine boxes, they were buried at the expense of their families or classmates, there were no gold stars allowed in their parents' windows, and there was no American flag allowed to cover their coffins.

On 7 December 1944, in a speech to the last graduating class, General Arnold said, "You and more than 900 of your sisters have shown that you can fly wingtip to wingtip with your brothers. I salute you. We of the Army Air Force are proud of you. We will never forget our debt to you."

Thirteen days later, with victory almost certain, the WASP were quietly and unceremoniously disbanded. There were no benefits and no honors. They simply hung up their parachutes and paid their own way back home. Their military records were sealed, stamped 'CLASSIFIED' and filed away in the government archives, where they remained, unopened, for 33 years. Despite General Arnold's pledge that the Army Air Force would never forget them, it did—and so did America.



It was not until 1977, following months of lobbying by WASP and Congressional supporters, that Congress finally passed a bill that would give the WASP the veteran status they had earned. Seven years later, their medals came in the mail. The WASP history is still not included in most textbooks and is still virtually unknown to most Americans.

WINGS ACROSS AMERICA

Wings Across America is a cutting-edge, digital, multi-media, non-profit project whose mission is to educate, motivate and inspire this generation and generations to come with the history of the WASP.

Wings Across America was created in 1998 at Baylor University as the vision of Nancy Parrish, daughter of a WASP. She and Associate Director, WASP Deanie Parrish, have volunteered full time to turn her vision into reality. Their determined, persevering efforts have produced innumerable projects and opportunities for America to learn about the little known WASP history:

- 'WASP On The Web': This award-winning, interactive Web site contains the largest collection of digital information about the WASP in the world, with over 2,000 pages of WASP records, videos, pictures, articles, games, and marching songs—plus paper dolls and coloring pages for young children.
- Wings Across America's Digital Video Archive contains over 300 hours of recorded digital video interviews with over 100 WASP, filmed in the privacy of their own homes all across America. This unique collection is the cornerstone for educational projects to come.
- Creation of the National WASP WWII Museum at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, where most of the WASP trained.
- Creation of the national "Adopt a WASP' Joint National Project of Air Force ROTC Arnold Air Squadrons and Silver Wings Detachments at colleges and universities all across America.
- Securing the induction of WASP into the Texas Aviation Hall of Fame.
- Leading the successful grassroots campaign for the Congress of the United States to award the WASP the Congressional Gold Medal.
- Creation and publication of the most comprehensive illustrated history of the WASP entitled "WASP IN THEIR OWN WORDS."
- Creation of the "Flygirls WASP Exhibit," on permanent display at the AIRZOO in Kalamazoo, Michigan.
- Creation of the "Flygirls of WWII Traveling WASP Exhibit."
- "1 Flygirl's Scrapbook," the FIRST WASP app, available soon in the Apple store.