

Women in Aviation - Sustaining the home front

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American women's lives and roles were changed in various ways during World War II. With most men away defending the country, there were fewer stateside in the civilian workforce, giving way to women stepping in and performing jobs that men traditionally held.

On the homefront, women demonstrated that they could work as hard as men, proving that they were a valuable asset in the sustainment of the homefront, while men were away fighting overseas.

Of these women, none were more valuable than the women who helped support the war by flying aircraft. These "Women in Aviation" became known as WAFS, the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron.

These women pilots were called up to step in after the Army Air Force began experiencing a shortage of male pilots due to heavy losses in combat. Their mission was to ferry U.S. Army Air Force trainers and light aircraft from factories to coastal airports to be flown overseas.

The Women's Flying Training Detachment was established at the Houston Municipal Airport, with pioneer American aviator, Jacqueline Cochran as its director, on Sept. 14, 1942.

The squadron began with about 28 commercially licensed women pilots. Requirements to join squadron were the 500 hours of flying time and a 200-horsepower rating. On average, most of the women joining the squadron had about 1,100 hours of flying experience under their belts.

The WAFS performed the mission so well, that they were



Courtesy Photo U.S. Air Force

Woman Air Force Service Pilot trainees with an instructor at Avenger Field, Sweetwater Texas. The Civilian Pilot Training Program created opportunities for women to fly.

allowed to begin transporting fighter, bomber and transport aircraft, normally thought to be too complicated for women to fly, repudiating Chief of the U.S. Army Air Corps, Lt. Gen. Henry H. Arnold's earlier comments, "that the idea of using women pilots was 'utterly unfeasible,' and that women were too 'high strung.'"

In May of 1943, Arnold authorized Cochran to oversee the development of a women's pilot uniform.

August 1943, all women pilots flying for the USAAF were consolidated into the Women Airforce Service Pilots pro-

gram, with Jacqueline Cochran becoming the USAAF Director for Women Pilots. Nancy Harkness Love, another woman pilot pioneer, was named, as executive on the

Air Transport Command Ferrying Division staff.

More than 25,000 women applied for pilot training under the WASP program. Of these, 1,830 were accepted,

1,074 graduated and 900 remained in the program.

WASP held many positions in the AAF. They became flight training instructors and glider tow pilots, engineering test flying, ferrying aircraft and performing other flying positions.

Arnold, speaking before the last WASP graduating class at Sweetwater, Texas, Dec. 7, 1944, said, "You ... have shown that you can fly wingtip to wingtip with your brothers. If ever there was doubt in anyone's mind that women could become skilled pilots, the WASPs dispelled that doubt. I want to stress how valuable the whole WASP program has been for the country."

The WASP became an important part of American history as a result of the movement of women into the war workforce, freeing up men for combat and other duties. They were instrumental in the integration of women pilots into the Armed Services.

However, within little over a year, due to political pressures and with an increase in male pilots, the WASPs were

See WASP AB27

WASP from AB23

disbanded Dec. 20, 1944.

General Arnold's summed it up this way, "When we needed you, you came through and have served most commendably under very difficult circumstances, but now the war situation has changed and the time has come when your volunteer services are no longer needed. The situation is that if you continue in service, you will be replacing instead of releasing our

young men. I know the WASP wouldn't want that. I want you to know that I appreciate your war service and the AAF will miss you..."

Although WASPs had the privileges of military officers, they were never formally adopted into the USAAF, and were considered civil service employees without injury or death benefits.

Despite the WASP dedication and notable contributions to the U.S. military, a bill that was introduced in 1944 before Congress to militarize the WASPs was met with strong opposition.

Sept. 20, 1977, a select House subcommittee on veteran affairs heard testimony on Bill 3277, which recognized WASP service as active duty in the armed forces and would entitle them to veterans' benefits.

It was strongly supported by both houses of Congress and Senator Barry Goldwater, but was opposed by the American Legion who believed that the inclusion of WASP into active duty "would denigrate the term 'veteran' so that it will never again have the value that



Courtesy Photo U.S. Air Force

Gen. Hap Arnold and Barbara Erickson at Avenger Field, Sweetwater, Texas, Erickson was the only Woman Air Force Service Pilot awarded the Air Medal for courageous service during World War II.

presently attaches to it." It was not until a compromise was reached, that if the U.S. Air Force would certify that the WASP had been de facto military personnel during the war. The WASP amendment would not be stripped.

The Air Force did so, they made their determination using the discharge papers of WASP Helen Porter, 1944, which read, "This is to certify that Helen Porter honorably served in active Federal Service of the Army of the United States," this was the same wording used in 1944 for all honorable discharges in the Army.

On November 1977, President Jimmy Carter signed the bill into law granting World War II veterans' status for former WASPs.

July 1, 2009, President Barack Obama signs bill S.614 to award a Congressional Gold Medal to the Women Airforce Service Pilots. He said, "Every American should be grateful for their service, and I am honored to sign this bill to finally give them some of the hard-earned recognition they deserve."