

ABSTRACT

Without Glory: The Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II

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The history of the Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASP) is largely unknown to both the public and academia. Little material about the WASP has been published in the sixty-three years since the WASP were disbanded because of the controversy raised by the male pilots, media, and Congress in 1944. Unlike the other female auxiliary groups in World War II, the WASP did not receive militarization until 1977 because of gender discrimination. A few of the WASP had the foresight to write their personal histories, but most did not view their wartime experience as extraordinary. Wings Across America, an organization with the purpose of documenting and digitizing the histories of the WASP, has interviewed over one hundred women for the purpose of educating future generations. The interviews from Wings Across America used in this thesis are being used for the first time in a scholarly work.

Without Glory:
The Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II

by

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A Thesis

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CHAPTER ONE

Weapons Waiting to be Used

Beginning with the American Revolution, 1775-1783, women have served in the military in all American wars. As the roles of American women have changed over the years, their roles in the military have also changed for the better. Advances in the status of women in American society are linked with the changes of women's roles during wartimes. The progress has blurred the boundaries between the roles performed by men and women. Setbacks in women's position in society are connected with post-war reversals as men return to their pre-war work.¹

Estimates of those who served in the American Revolution in the semiofficial auxiliary "Women in the Army" are around twenty thousand. The women were under military discipline, received half the rations of their male counterparts, and earned half the pay of male soldiers. The servicewomen were required to make and repair the men's uniforms and act as cooks and nurses for them, but their most important role was to carry water to the artillery because the cannons needed to be cleaned with water after every shot in order to cool the barrels to prevent sparks.²

During the Civil War fought between the United States Federal Government and the Confederate States of America, women on both sides wore men's clothing to be

¹Penny Summerfield, "Gender and War in the Twentieth Century" in *The American Experience in World War II, vol. 10 The American People at War: Minorities and Women in the Second World War*, ed. Walter Hixson (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

²D'Ann Campbell, "Servicewomen and the American Military Experience" in *A Woman's War Too: U.S. Women in the Military*, ed. Paula Nassen Poulos (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1996), 16.

allowed to fight. Others served as saboteurs, spies, and sutlers selling supplies while women who served in either the Federal or Confederate military indirectly served as hospital administrators or nurses. The majority of women, particularly in the South, tried to do their husbands' job as well as their own while their husbands were away fighting.³

In the Spanish-American War the U.S. realized there was a need for a permanent, professional nurse corps, and women were made a part of the army and navy.⁴ Five thousand servicewomen served as nurses on the western front during World War I largely to treat gas victims who required round-the-clock care. The navy accepted 11,500 women to work as typists, clerks, and yeomen (F) for the navy and Marine Corps. General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, commander of American forces in World War I, took approximately three hundred and fifty American women to France to serve as bilingual communication specialists. The servicewomen wore military uniforms and were under military discipline, but they were not granted legal military status until almost fifty years after the war.⁵

During World War II (WWII) American General George Marshall, Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady of the U.S., and Margaret Chase Smith, the first female to be elected to both the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, successfully supported the creation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in May 1942.⁶ By July of the same year the navy bypassed the auxiliary stage and created the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES). The members of the WAVES were given

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 16-18.

⁶Adela Riek Scharr, *Sisters in the Sky, Vol. II*, (Tucson: The Patrice Press, 1988), 138.

equal status with their male counterparts in the navy. In February 1943 the Coast Guard created the Marine Corps Women's Reserve (MCWR). On 1 July 1943 Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the thirty-second president of the U.S., signed new legislation that dropped the auxiliary status of the women serving in the army and began the three-month transition from the WAAC to the Women's Army Corps (WAC).⁷

After the Japanese attacked the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the American Air Transport Command (ATC) transferred the majority of male pilots to combat positions. At the start of America's involvement there were only 1,100 airplanes fit for combat, and even with the Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) Program that taught civilians how to fly airplanes, there were fewer pilots trained for combat than planes available. The air force was new to the army and not regarded highly at this time.⁸ The U.S. quickly began to increase the number of planes built each month, but this left newly assembled military aircraft sitting useless on runways without pilots to ferry them to military bases and transport ships. To ease the pressure caused by the shortage of pilots, the government created the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), the subject of this research.

Jacqueline Cochran, a pioneer female aviatrix, wrote a letter to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to encourage the use of female pilots in the armed forces. Cochran had grown up in extreme poverty, but in 1929 she had begun working as a beautician in a society salon in New York City. She met Floyd Odlum, the wealthy husband of one of her clients and soon Odlum divorced his wife to marry Cochran in 1936. Cochran was able

⁷Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, "The Wartime History of the Waves, Spars, Women Marines, Army and Navy Nurses, and Wasps" in *A Woman's War Too*, 50-56.

⁸Mariane Verges, *On Silver Wings: The Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II, 1942-1944* (New York City: Ballantine Books, 1991), 26.

to quit her job as a beautician and begin her own business selling cosmetics. Because she had to travel often for her business, Odlum suggested that Cochran earn a pilot's license.⁹

Cochran began flying competitively and quickly became a strong opponent in every competition she entered. The couple knew a war would soon begin, and Cochran wanted to organize a group of female pilots and act as their director. Her husband donated \$100,000 to President Roosevelt's reelection so the Odlums were welcome at the White House. Through her connections Cochran was able to gain attention from the War Department and Commanding General of the Army Air Forces Henry "Hap" Arnold.¹⁰

General Arnold was hesitant to approve the use of women pilots because he believed that they would be a potential embarrassment to the army air force and a possible political problem during wartime. Arnold suggested that Cochran use her piloting skills serving the British war effort where women were already non-combatant pilots. Cochran agreed to go to Britain but she convinced Arnold to promise her that if any group of women pilots were organized in the U.S., she would serve as the director.¹¹

In May of 1940 Nancy Harkness Love, another influential American female pilot, wrote to Lieutenant Colonel Bob Olds of the Plans Division of the Chief of Army Air Corps who was preparing contingency plans to meet pilot shortages. She had a plan to

⁹Rita Victoria Gomez, "'Angels Calling From the Sky': The Women Pilots of WWII" in *A Woman's War Too*, 106.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

use female pilots to ferry planes in the Air Transport Command,¹² but Olds initially turned her down as it was not thought female pilots were necessary.¹³

Love was born into a wealthy Michigan family on 14 February 1914 and earned her pilot's license at the age of sixteen. She attended Vassar College before quitting school to pursue her passion to fly full time. In 1936 she married Robert Love, an Air Corps Reserve major, and together they started Inter City Aviation located in Boston, Massachusetts. In addition to being a pilot for her company, Love flew for the Bureau of Air Commerce as a test pilot. She was also instrumental in arranging for water towers to be marked with town names as navigational tools for pilots.¹⁴

By 1942 her husband was appointed deputy chief of staff at the Ferry Command. Love moved with him to Washington, D.C., but was quickly hired by the Air Transport Command Ferrying Division Operations in Maryland. She commuted to work daily in her private plane which caught the attention of Colonel William Tunner, the head of the domestic wing of the Ferrying Division. Colonel Tunner heard Love's idea of using female pilots and thought it could work. Within a few months, Love was appointed commander of the newly created Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron (WAFS).¹⁵

In 1942 Love sent telegrams to eighty-three America's best female pilots in an attempt to recruit them for the WAFS. In order to be eligible for the program, the women had to be between twenty-one and thirty-five years of age, hold a commercial pilot's

¹²Ibid., 98.

¹³Texas Woman's University, "WAFS" December 15, 2005
<<http://www.twu.edu/wasp/wafspage.htm>> 1 May 2006.

¹⁴Wings Across America, "Nancy Harkness Love" 2005
<http://www.wingsacrossamerica.us/wasp/bio_love.htm> 3 April 2007.

¹⁵Ibid.

license, have a 200-horsepower engine rating, logged a minimum of 500 hours in the air, and have recent cross-country flying experience. These qualifications were stricter than those of their male counterparts, but out of the eighty-three women contacted, twenty-five women met the qualifications and were willing to serve their country. These twenty-five women dubbed themselves “The Originals” and ferried light aircraft and primary trainers like the Stearman and PT-19 Fairchild. Soon they were given larger aircrafts to ferry such as the P-38 and P-51.¹⁶

In December 1941 Cochran returned to the United States to discover that Love had already organized a group of female pilots. Annoyed, Cochran scheduled an appointment with General Arnold and reminded him of his promise to make her the director. In September 1942 General Arnold officially approved the Women’s Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) with Cochran as director. The WFTD members lacked a few of the required hours that Love’s group demanded, but with Cochran’s group more women would enter training to increase and perfect the flying skills they already had. Fortunately for Cochran and her students, there was an increasing demand for them as more and more male pilots were killed in combat. General Arnold drastically changed his position on women pilots. With the growing wartime demands for pilots, he decided that WAFS and WFTD could perform all non-combat duties in the continental United States. The WAFS and the WFTD merged in July 1943 creating the cleverly named Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). Cochran was appointed director of the WASP,

¹⁶Texas Woman’s University, “WAFS.”

and Love was named WASP executive with the Air Transport Command's Ferrying Division.¹⁷

The purpose of the WAFS had been to ferry planes, and the training they had received was to fly specific military planes and to use army air force regulations on taking off, landing, taxiing, delivering planes, and filling out forms upon delivery. Cochran, unlike Love, had wanted a flight school set up to train WFTD pilots and planned that eventually the women would take over all the non-combat flying positions. Not only would they ferry planes, but they would also test new and refurbished planes, tow targets for gunnery practice, fly military personnel, train male pilots, and pilot bombers to train bombardiers, gunners, and navigators.¹⁸

Cochran's WASP program included six months of ground school and flight training. The first three classes of female pilots trained at the Municipal Airport in Houston, Texas, but the bad weather and crowded skies led Cochran to move the WASP program to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, that had previously been a training school for male-pilots.¹⁹ While in training the women were not permitted to date or dine with male instructors, enlisted men, or civilian workers. They were only allowed to go out with cadets or officers which led the women to nickname Avenger Field "Cochran's Convent." During 1943 and 1944, it was normal to have up to five hundred WASP in

¹⁷Gleason, 107.

¹⁸Molly Merryman, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 6-13.

¹⁹Texas Woman's University, "WASP" December 15, 2005
<<http://www.twu.edu/wasp/history.htm>> 1 May 2006.

training with only about one hundred graduating per class. A new class started on average every four to six weeks and trained for five months before earning their wings.²⁰

Earlier in the war, President Roosevelt realized the importance air power would play if the United States wanted to achieve success. He ordered 50,000 planes to be built each year, and by 1944, with aircraft factories operating twenty-four hours a day, a new airplane came off the assembly line every six seconds.²¹ The first classes of the WASP training program ferried planes from factories to the points of embarkation for the Air Transport Command. Once the ATC announced it did not need more pilots, Cochran said the WASP would take any job they could do that would relieve the male pilots for combat duty. The women would not take piloting positions from the men, but allow them to be freed from duties at home to be sent where they were most needed overseas as combat pilots.²²

Thirty-three thousand women applied to the newly created WASP program, but out of the 1,830 women who were accepted, only 1,047 graduated. In order to be considered for the program the women needed to have a pilot's license and thirty-five hours experience flying civilian planes, unlike the men who were not required to have any flying experience. During training the women were required to pass four objectives:

- 1) Academic instruction in technical objects, proficiency which is required in ferrying training type aircraft; 2) Instruction in the fundamental principles required to pilot training type aircraft; 3) Training in accepted

²⁰Scharr, 37-38.

²¹Marjorie H. Roberts, *Wingtip to Wingtip: 8 WASPs, Women's Airforce Service Pilots of World War II* (U.S.A.: Aviatrix Publishing Inc., 2000), vi-vii.

²²Texas Woman's University, "WASP."

procedures of the Air Transport Command; and 4) Physical training to maintain and improve physical and mental alertness.²³

The academic instruction of the WASP training consisted of navigation, weather, aircraft, engines, communications, and Air Transport Command procedures. Eventually the program added mathematics and physics in January 1943. Then in October 1943 officers further enlarged academic training to include the study of maps, charts, aerial photography, principles of flight, engines and propellers, code practice, instruments, forms and procedures, and pilots' information file. The training of the WASP was in every aspect similar to the training of American male pilots.²⁴

The WASP were hired under Civil Service, not military, classification. Militarization required an act of Congress which took longer than the air force was able to wait, so General Arnold and Cochran planned that the women officially would be made part of the military at a later date. In 1944 when the bill to militarize the WASP went before Congress, there no longer seemed to be a need for more pilots.²⁵

In addition, the government founded the WASP as a top secret project and the program was not initially publicized. The army air force had decided the WASP would not be considered for militarization or publicized until "enough experience had been obtained to determine the usefulness of the women pilots."²⁶ The army air force considered the program an experiment and did not want the public to know of it until the WASP had proved they were a positive asset to the military. The secretiveness led to

²³"Central Flying Training Command," *History of the WASP Program*, 23, quoted in Merryman, 18.

²⁴Merryman, 4-19.

²⁵Texas Woman's University, "WASP."

²⁶Jacqueline Cochran, "Final Report, Women Pilot Program," February 1945, 45, quoted in Molly Merryman, 4.

problems, because the women served as civilian pilots, and they did not receive insurance, military benefits, or veteran benefits. Thirty-eight WASP were killed in active service and training, but their families were not given an American flag to lay on the coffin or a military burial. When a WASP was killed, a collection was taken up by the other WASP to send her effects home to her family.²⁷

For a long time the army air force remained skeptical about the women's ability to fly military aircraft. The army used menstruation's effect on women's ability and dependability as a reason females should not pilot aircraft. In the 1940s male pilots commonly believed that women were unable to perform their flying duties for six to eight days out of every month. They thought that women were more likely to have accidents in the few days before and after their menses. In 1940, the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) acquired the gynecological records of all women submitting applications for their flying licenses and warned women of the possibility of fainting if they flew during the three days before and during, and the three days after their menses. The CAA also believed that pregnancy required immediate disqualification from flying for the air force due to the increased risk of excessive vomiting and fainting that could lead to a fatal accident.²⁸

The Ferrying Division of the air force aligned its guidelines closer to the rules of the CAA on 29 March 1943. Letters were mailed to all group commanders requiring women pilots to be grounded one day prior to, during, and two days after menstruation with the result that female pilots lost days of flying time each month. WASP argued that

²⁷Merryman, 4-10.

²⁸Gleason, 106-105.

the policy was not based on any factual evidence, and the air surgeon decided that each WASP could decide for herself if she was able to fly or if she ought to be grounded. Instead, the AAF ruled that any woman who flew during her menses would not be disciplined for any schedules she did not meet and continued strictly to enforce on the grounding of pregnant women with the explanation that there was a greater risk of excessive vomiting or spontaneous miscarriage. The fact was that the policy could not be enforced by the military without the full participation of the WASP themselves. The women who chose to be grounded usually used the time to meet their ground school and paperwork requirements or to see to any equipment needs. The anticipated number of days missed by the WASP never happened. Male pilots, in general, lost more flying time for various reasons than did the women. Menstruation was never found to be related to any of the nonfatal or the twenty-eight fatal accidents.²⁹

The women pilots faced other challenges the male pilots did not face such as the heavy weight of the parachutes, having faces that were smaller than those of male pilots so their oxygen masks did not fit their faces adequately, and dealing with the problems of urination while in the air. Another problem faced was the public's ignorance that the WASP existed which led to WASP being mistaken for Girl Scouts or ferry boat pilots.³⁰

Throughout the WASP two-year existence, the expectation was that they would eventually be militarized, but the program remained civilian despite attempts by members of the AAF to have the WASP program militarized. Both Cochran and key military officials believed the WASP would serve the nation better as a militarized group. Before

²⁹Ibid., 104-105.

³⁰Ibid., 105-106.

entering the WASP program, recruits had been told they would eventually be militarized, and trainees and active WASP were trained and evaluated as if they already were militarized. The WASP were also subject to military review, instructed in drill and military courtesy, followed the rules and customs of the military, and wore military uniforms. Unlike the military they did not receive the benefits, money, or security and they could leave the program at any time. The War Department, AAF, and secretary of state all requested the militarization of the WASP. So strongly was it believed that they would be militarized, that eighty-five WASP were sent to officer training school. The women's divisions of the Coast Guard, Marines, and navy were militarized as were the Women's Army Corps. The WASP were the only female branch that Congress rejected for military status.³¹

The only difference between the WASP and male ferry pilots was their gender. What kept the WASP from receiving military status in 1942-1944 was that they were seen as an experimental group of female pilots, and the WASP had little media coverage because few reporters knew of their existence. Both the experimental status and media prohibition were due to the sexist belief that the WASP were doomed to fail solely because they were women. Because they were such a closely guarded secret, the media, public, and Congress were unaware of the highly important missions being performed by the WASP.³²

Cochran, Love, and the WASP achievements were to be short lived. At the beginning of WWII the media praised and encouraged American women to perform the

³¹Merryman, 19-28.

³²Ibid., 28-29.

traditionally male jobs that were becoming increasingly available. By 1944 public opinion changed to encourage women to go home to care for their returning husbands and sons. In the autumn of 1944 the loss of combat pilots on all fronts was at its lowest and more pilots were returning to the U.S., reducing the need for the WASP.³³ When male pilots returned, the army wanted to use them in the “walking Army,”³⁴ those who would be on the ground for the planned attack against Japan. The male pilots did not want this assignment, so a lobbying group was formed to attack the WASP by claiming the women received preferential treatment which in turn took the focus off the men’s true intentions of not wanting to serve in the combat army. The male pilots were vocal in their complaints against the WASP which the media listened to and published, and both proved to be of great detriment to the militarization of the program. The media, public, and Congress readily believed males when they argued that they were superior pilots solely because of their gender.³⁵

The War Department’s policy of public relations continued to remain one of avoidance for the WASP after their debate for militarization was publicized because of the Congressional debate. Neither the army air force nor the War Department refuted the claims made by the male pilots. Women who had been encouraged to join the war effort were now ostracized and vilified by the media and male pilots for supposedly preventing the men returning from the war overseas from being able to participate in the continuing war effort. Members of Congress, the media, and male pilots falsely depicted the WASP

³³Gleason, 107.

³⁴Merryman, 44.

³⁵Ibid., 42-45.

as lacking the necessary skills, a waste of taxpayers' money, and damaging to the war effort. The lobby assembled by the male pilots initiated a letter-writing campaign to Congress that was supported by powerful male aviation associations and veteran groups.³⁶

After deactivation it appeared that the WASP were destined to be forgotten, and many of the WASP went home to families and civilian jobs while a few continued to work for the military. In the 1960s the WASP began to hold reunions, and at the reunions the conversations often turned to militarization. Unsuccessful attempts were made by former WASP in 1972 and 1975 to have a militarization bill passed by Congress, and then in 1976 the air force announced that women would be allowed to serve as pilots. These women were given media attention as it was claimed that they would be the first women to pilot military planes. When the WASP disbanded there had been no interest in telling their stories, but over thirty years later the media was interested in the reminiscences of women who filled nontraditional female roles. Attention was particularly focused on women who were thought to be the first in their respective fields.

The WASP were upset by the media proclaiming that the women of 1976 were the first female pilots, and this time the media listened to the WASP. The WASP were then able to use this positive publicity to their advantage. The forgotten WASP became headline news, and the media and public were shocked that these female pilots of World War II did not have veteran status. Finally, in 1977 with the media and public behind them, the WASP gained their rightful veteran status.³⁷

³⁶Merryman, 42-45.

³⁷Ibid., 131-56.

The histories of American wars are told in accounts that glorify the achievements of men, and war stories describe war as an obligation to keep their women and children at home safe. In truth the women and men who stayed behind in World War II were in dangerous situations as well. They risked being shot down while towing targets, crashing while testing newly built and never before flown airplanes, and flying damaged airplanes to ensure that they were safe for the men to fly overseas. Heroic myths created by men about men are often constructed around the idea of the man as hero and woman as helpless, needing the protection of a man. Wars disrupt traditional gender boundaries and the definition of male and female roles. During World War II women entered public spheres that had been previously dominated by men, and their determination to succeed in the masculine world is clear in their participation in the war effort.³⁸

Women's interpretation of their efforts in World War II differs from that of men. Women describe the effects of the war on their lives in a less than positive light, contradicting male accounts. Changes of gender roles in World War II portrayed by females illustrate that the experience was not as liberating as previously claimed by some historians. WASP accounts of the war, primarily oral histories, are unique, vital, and personal narratives that enhance the historical record.³⁹

Oral histories do not always offer precise accounts, but they do provide valuable insights into the experiences described in the histories of World War II. In the following pages the oral histories of the WASP allow the women to tell their own stories in their own words. Oral histories bring private experiences to light that had previously been

³⁸Philomena Goodman, *Women, Sexuality, and War*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1-2.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 2-4.

overlooked by the typical male focused histories of WWII. The life stories of the WASP represent examples of how some women dealt with the challenges the war put before them and allow the reader to gain insights into certain aspects of social life and female relations.⁴⁰

Some scholars have suggested that oral histories are based on memories and that memory as a resource is unreliable. Memories of WASP's WWII are filtered through their experiences after the war and accounts given by others. Their accounts were given approximately fifty-six years after their deactivation, and some issues are remembered and selected as more important and others are evaded. All people are subject to shared and popular memories that affect their accounts, and memory of the past is influenced by the events of the present. The oral histories of the WASP represent women's accounts and raise the possibility of challenging the traditional and dominant male explanations.⁴¹ The seventeen interviews on which this research is based are being used for the first time in a scholarly work. The thesis of this manuscript is that the following accounts given by the Women Airforce Service Pilots provide a unique description of why they learned to fly and decided to join the WASP, their time training at Avenger Field, their experiences flying as WASP, and their lives after deactivation.

⁴⁰Ibid., 5-6.

⁴¹Ibid., 6.

CHAPTER TWO

Wishing on a Star

For many of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), it was their family and friends who encouraged them to learn to fly, and for others, it was a dream they pursued without the support of their loved ones. Most of the women in this study had a close male relative or family friend who introduced them to flying. For some it was a coincidence, such as an air field opening in their home town, that gave them the opportunity to fly, but once they learned, they were all infatuated with it. For some of the women, their families influenced their decision to become pilots and join the WASP program while others simply wanted the opportunity to turn their hobby into a profession.

The WASP had little in common prior to joining the program other than their determination to be successful pilots. Their families' economic status ranged from privileged to surviving from meal to meal. They traveled to Sweetwater, Texas, from both rural and urban areas of the United States, and some grew up in religious households while others did not. The only two similarities they had other than flying and tenacity was an education, which was rare as they all were children during the Great Depression, and they had access to an airplane. Approximately three million children between the ages of seven and seventeen had to drop out of school in order to help their family by working during the Depression.¹ All WASP in this study graduated from

¹Kathleen Thompson and Hilary Mac Austin, ed., *Children of the Depression* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), xiv.

high school, most with high academic standing, and almost all continued their education by attending business schools, junior colleges, or four-year universities. This chapter maintains that the following seventeen women's oral memoirs will explain how their backgrounds played a vital role in why they learned to fly and decided to serve their country as the first women in the United States to fly military aircraft.

Born in 1916 in Grapeland, Texas, Ruth Dailey Helm was a member of the second class of WASP to graduate in 1943 (43-w-2). Grapeland was a small rural town where everyone knew everyone else, and everyone helped take care of everyone else. Her family was Baptist and she grew up attending church and Sunday School. The church was an important part of her life growing up, and at the age of nine she committed her life to Christ and ever since then she believes that her life has been a life of miracles. Her family had the usual family structure for the 1920s: her mother stayed home and took care of the house and children, and her father worked and came home for the midday meal most days of the week. Dailey had four siblings, a much older sister who was married by the time Dailey was in elementary school, a brother who was a few years older than she, and two younger brothers.²

When Dailey was a child, her father owned a Chevrolet agency in town as well as a ranch on the outskirts of town. Every morning he would wake up early to go to the ranch to make sure everything was all right. Often Dailey would go with her father in the morning. They had a Ford Model T car, and during that time in rural Texas, one had to open gates to go anywhere. As soon as she was tall enough to reach the car pedals, her father let her drive so he could step out of the car to open the gates. In 1928

²Ruth Dailey Helm, interview by Deanie Parrish, 12 November 1999, Waco, TX, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

when she was about twelve or thirteen her father was selling a large number of cars to farmers. The farmers told her father that their wives did not know how to drive a car, so he would arrange for Ruth to teach them. The people of the town used to say that “if they could see a car coming down the road and it didn’t look like it had a driver, that it was [Dailey].”³

When she was eleven years old, an old barnstormer had a forced landing near Grapeland. The pilot went to her father’s motor company to borrow some tools and equipment to repair his plane. Because he had no money to pay for the tools and equipment, he offered to compensate him with a free ride. Her mother did not want Dailey’s father to go because he was the sole financial provider for the family, so Dailey asked to be the one allowed to take the ride. The afternoon of the free ride, they took off in the plane, and she looked down at all the houses and decided at that moment that someday she would learn to fly.⁴

During her junior year of high school, Dailey decided to attend college at Baylor University. Her cousin was attending Baylor and encouraged Dailey’s parents to send her there as well. At first she did not want to go to college because she wanted to attend a flying school in either San Antonio, Texas, or Tulsa, Oklahoma, instead. Her parents told her that if she went to Baylor and earned her degree, then she would be allowed to go to a flying school. In order to be able to start flying school sooner, Dailey enrolled in Baylor in the summer of 1934, but a month before she was to leave for school her plans changed when her father was killed in an automobile accident. Dailey believed that it was important for her to earn a business degree as soon as possible to be able to

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

return home to take care of her mother. While in school she was able to have a car, not because her family was wealthy, but because she drove 130 miles home every other weekend to help with her family. Both her older brother and sister had attended the University of Texas, but both had dropped out. Dailey assumed the responsibility of caring for her mother once her father was gone, so she finished Baylor in three years and returned home.⁵

When she arrived home after finishing school, she told her mother that she had earned her degree, and now she could learn to fly. Her mother corrected her and said that yes, she had her degree, so now she could earn her own money to learn to fly. Her family never told her she could not fly, but they never encouraged her either. After working for about a year, Dailey drove sixty miles to the airport in Tyler, Texas, to inquire about lessons. She found an instructor who told her it would cost her about \$360 to earn a private license. After looking at her for awhile, he asked if she was old enough to attend college. She told him that she had already graduated from Baylor, so her instructor told her to go to Tyler Junior College and enroll in his Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) class for twenty-five dollars instead. The opportunity to earn her license at a cost of twenty-five dollars instead of \$360 was one of the first of many miracles Dailey believed she experienced before flying with the WASP program.⁶

Instead of moving to Tyler, she arranged to spend a couple of nights a week there. She attended ground school at night and flew on Saturdays and Sunday afternoons. After learning to fly, she joined a flying club in Palestine, Texas, about twenty-five miles away from her home. At the time, she was the only one in the club

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

who had a license. The plane she was using at the Tyler Airport was not in good condition, so she told the airport manager that she wished she had her own plane. One day he called her and told her there was a plane, an Aeronica Chief, for sale in Kilgore, Texas. The price for the plane was \$1,500, and since she did not have the money, Dailey went home and asked her mother for the money but was turned down. The next day she went to the bank to ask for a loan. In 1939 it was uncommon to receive a loan for an automobile let alone an airplane, but the banker gave it to her. She bought her airplane and flew it back to Palestine.⁷

In the late afternoon after work, Dailey flew her plane for about thirty or forty minutes, but only after she drove the twenty-five miles to the airport which she thought was a waste of her time. Dailey decided to make use of the pasture behind her family's home and had a T-hangar built. The Mobil dealer provided her with aviation gasoline which enabled her to be able to take off and fly whenever she wanted. In the afternoons she could fly to Dallas, San Antonio, Waco, Austin, or Houston simply to buy a soda and then return home. In 1939 and 1940 all of her spare money was spent on flying.⁸

In 1941 Jackie Cochran, future leader of the WASP, contacted Dailey by telegram asking her to meet her at the Baker Hotel in Dallas on 15 December. Cochran was recruiting women to go to England to fly for the British because the British were desperate for pilots. She required the women to have 500 hours of flying time and experience with heavier aircraft, so unfortunately Dailey did not qualify. Many of the other women who met in Dallas asked Cochran about a program that would allow women to fly for their own country because Pearl Harbor had been attacked eight days

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

before, and they wanted to do something for their own country. Cochran assured the women that they were not needed to fly for the United States at this time, nor did the army air force want them, so Dailey returned home.⁹

In August 1942 Dailey received another telegram from Cochran asking her to have a physical. After her physical, Cochran qualified Dailey on the spot for the WASP program. Originally she had been asked to report on 15 November, but she told Cochran that she could not be there that soon because she had to sell her airplane first. On 15 December 1942, Ruth Dailey reported to Houston to be a part of the second class of WASP.¹⁰

Another woman who became a WASP was Elinore Owen Pyle, class of 43-w-3, who was born in Muskogee, Oklahoma, on 13 December 1922. Her father worked for the railroad and her mother took care of their home and two daughters. The family lived in a new development and her father owned two lots. Her father was too kind-hearted for the family's good and co-signed loans for two men he knew. When the stock market crashed in October 1929, her father had to pay off the loans which made life difficult for the family. At the time of the crash, Owen was in the fourth grade, and when her father lost his job in Muskogee the family moved by railroad car to Independence, Missouri, where she started the fifth grade. Her father commuted fifteen miles to work every morning to Kansas City and then back again in the evening. Eventually the travel became too hard on him and the family moved into the city.¹¹

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Elinore Owen Pyle, interview by Deanie Parrish, 30 July 2001, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

In high school Owen became interested in learning to fly. She first noticed airplanes when she was five years old after she saw a plane take off at the county fair. After that, anytime a plane flew overhead she would stop to watch it. When not in school, she would entertain herself by going to the local airport to watch the planes take off and land. Owen wanted to learn to fly, but her father told her that he would pay for college and not flying lessons. If she wanted to learn to fly, she would have to pay for lessons on her own. She attended Kansas City Junior College for a year while working to earn money for flying lessons. Through her connections at the airport, she was offered a job at the airplane tower in Lawrence, Kansas. At the time, she was unaware of any other women who flew.¹²

While in Lawrence, Pyle learned of a training program for air traffic controllers in Dallas, Texas. She applied and was accepted. Around the same time she learned about the WAFS and applied but was too young and only had fifty-five flying hours. She continued to accrue more hours while going through air traffic control training, and halfway through she applied again to the female pilot program and was accepted into the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD). She passed her physical and reported to Houston.¹³

Ruth Underwood Florey was a member of class 43-w-4 and was born in 1922. Her father worked as an accountant, and her mother took care of the home and children. She grew up in Brownwood, Texas, and graduated from high school in a class of 125 students. After graduation she attended Daniel Baker College in Brownwood because the college owed her father money. Underwood worked for both the college newspaper

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

and yearbook, and while she attended Daniel Baker, the college began a CPT program that trained eleven men and one woman in each class. Learning to fly seemed interesting to her so she applied and was accepted in 1942 to be in the third CPT course the school offered.¹⁴

The first time Underwood flew over her family's home, her mother stood on top of the cellar doors waving a bed sheet so her daughter could see her. Underwood saw her mother, but her mother did not know what she looked like from the sky. Her mother had never been in an airplane or seen pictures taken from the sky so she had no idea of what her daughter's view was. Underwood's parents were supportive of her flying and taught her that she could do whatever she was old enough to do.¹⁵

In early 1943 Underwood received a letter from Jackie Cochran about the new female pilot program. Underwood interviewed for the program in Ft. Worth and had a physical at the airbase located there. As soon as she received orders to report to Houston, she drove down to the Bayou City. Her parents were more frightened of her driving to Houston alone than the thought of her flying.¹⁶

Out of her desire to stand out from the other women at her college, Sylvia Dahmes Clayton, class of 43-w-5, learned to fly airplanes and eventually joined the WASP program for the opportunity to be paid to fly. Dahmes was born in a small town near Clements, Minnesota. Her father was born in 1866 and had an engineering degree and a teaching certificate. At the start of the First World War, he bought a 160-acre

¹⁴Ruth Underwood Florey, interview by Deanie Parrish, 20 September 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

farm to avoid enlisting in the military. In 1917 he married Frieda Otto who only spoke German, and they had three children together, two girls and a boy.¹⁷

Dahmes' first school experience was in a one-room school house with one teacher for eight grades. The school was two-and-a-half miles away from the family farm so in the winter her father took her and her siblings to school in a little sled with a shell covering. The sled had benches and a window for her father to see out in order to drive the horses, and their mother would heat bricks and wrap them in rugs to help them stay warm. Her parents first sent her to school at the age of five, but she would become so upset at being away from her parents that the teacher would have to hold her in her lap. The school never had more than a total of twenty students who used outhouses and had no running water. Dahmes' mother packed her children's lunches with sandwiches made from homemade bread and meat slaughtered from the farm, a piece of fruit, and a cookie. In high school they had electricity that was used on darker or cloudy days to be able to see their work. Dahmes was the valedictorian of her graduating class of approximately sixty-eight students.¹⁸

At first Dahmes planned to become a dietician and in 1936 went to St. Olaf College her freshman year. After her father died in 1937, the family was unable to afford to send her there, so she transferred to a less expensive school, Western Union. While there she changed her mind and wanted to become a medical technician so she

¹⁷Sylvia Dahmes Clayton, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, 3 November 2001, *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

took courses at the Northwest Institute of Medical Technology that transferred back to Western Union.¹⁹

During her junior year she took the CPT course offered at Western Union. Her brother had been told about the program and relayed the information to his sister that the school allowed one female in the program. The college decided to accept her because she would be in the same class as her brother. The siblings went to Sioux City, Iowa, for physical exams, but her brother did not pass the test because he was colorblind. Even without her brother being able to learn with her, Dahmes wanted to learn to fly because it allowed her to be different from the other college girls, and it would allow her to wear pants. She believed she could learn to fly, and she wanted to prove it. First, Dahmes had to obtain her mother's signature to be allowed in the program since she was not yet twenty-one, and her family was supportive of her decision to become a pilot. For her first solo flight, her instructor had her take off in a field that had cattle grazing in it. He told her that if she could not miss the cows taking off and landing, then she had no business being a pilot. Dahmes took off and landed three times without hitting any cows.²⁰

After graduating from college, Dahmes heard about the WASP program while she was working at Harper Hospital in Detroit, Michigan. She had recently joined the Civil Air Patrol, and one of the other female pilots had read an article about Cochran and told Dahmes about it. She thought if they were willing to pay her to fly, she wanted to do it. She applied, was interviewed, and given a physical in Detroit. When she

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

received her WASP acceptance letter, she excitedly prepared to leave and took a train from Minnesota to Texas.²¹

Jo Myers Wheelis, class of 43-w-5, learned to fly because of her husband's interest in airplanes and joined the WASP to be able to continue to fly after her husband took her plane in divorce proceedings. Myers was born in Wylie, Texas, but her parents lived in Royce City and happened to be visiting family members in Wylie at the time of her birth. During her childhood her father worked on their family farm and grew cotton and a little grain. There was no electricity or running water available. On the farm it was her responsibility, along with her two other sisters to do chores such as collecting the eggs from the chickens and milking the cows.²²

Myers and her sisters walked three miles into town when they were old enough to attend school, and the elementary and high school grades were all in the same building. In high school Myers did not think about her plans after graduation. Nothing impressed her enough to pursue it. No one in her family pressured her or mentioned that she should plan for her future. The lack of aspirations for her life was not uncommon in the early to mid 1930s. Most young women married, went to work in stores, or became teachers after high school because there were not many options available for them. During her high school years her family moved to Dallas, Texas, where after graduating in 1936, Myers began working in a five-and-dime store. A year later she married at the age of eighteen. After the wedding she continued living in Dallas and worked in the business her husband's family owned. Five years later the

²¹Ibid.

²²Jo Myers Wheelis, interview by Deanie Parrish, 19 September 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

couple divorced, and Myers moved back home with her parents and started to work for a bakery.²³

While married she and her husband had taken flying lessons together. Myers's husband was interested in airplanes, and she decided to learn with him. Her husband bought her an airplane, so Myers was able to learn to fly quickly and soon made friends with several of the young women pilots in the area. They flew "breakfast hops" from one town to another to socialize, but she was unable to continue flying on a regular basis because her husband took the plane in the divorce. She was still flying occasionally when she heard about the WASP program at the end of 1942.²⁴

As soon as Myers heard about the program she made inquiries into the requirements for joining. She went to the Fort Worth office set up to register each applicant and inform them of the necessary steps they needed to take. After registering she took the mandatory physical exam at Love Field in Dallas. The military doctors were not accustomed to examining women so the situation was awkward for all involved in the exam. In April of 1943 she left by train to report to Avenger Field.²⁵

Marion Stegeman Hodgson, 43-w-5, applied to the University of Georgia's Civilian Pilot Training Program without any previous desire to learn to fly, but after her initial flying experiences, she quickly developed a love for it. Stegeman was born on 16 December 1921 while her father was a coach at the University of Georgia who later became the dean of men and director of athletics. During the Depression the family had to rent two of their upstairs rooms to college students, usually men, which made their

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

home exciting to Stegeman and her sister. She grew up in a home with loving parents, and during her girlhood years she and her sister played with paper dolls and made paper clothes for dolls which were secured to them with clothes pins. The family also bought a bicycle from the Salvation Army for the children to share.²⁶

Stegeman entered the first grade at the age of five. By second grade she was bored with her school work so the school skipped her to the third grade. At the age of seven her older brother taught her the third grade curriculum in one month. She started high school at age eleven and went to a junior college before transferring to the University of Georgia. During her senior year in 1941, the university offered students the opportunity to fly as a civilian pilot with the CPT program. Because she was not yet twenty-one, she needed her mother to sign a permission slip allowing her to join. Her mother cried when she was asked to sign, believing she would be signing her daughter's life away.²⁷

Finally, Ned Hodgson, an old family friend, convinced her mother that flying a plane did not equal a death warrant. Hodgson was an airline pilot and his brother was a pilot in the Air Corps, and he took his parents over to meet with Mrs. Stegeman to explain to her how safe flying was. Tearfully she signed the permission slip for her daughter. Stegeman received five hours of college credit for the CPT course, ground school, and her private license without any expense other than the twenty-one dollars for insurance. In her class there were four other "girls" and fifty "men."²⁸

²⁶Marion Stegeman Hodgson, interview by Deanie Parrish, 5 April 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

After graduating with a degree in journalism, Stegeman applied for work, but no one was hiring reporters in 1941, especially not women. Instead, she rented a typewriter for two dollars a month and taught herself to type, and then she bought a used short-hand book and learned short-hand. Stegeman found a job working as a stenographer at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta and made eighty-one dollars a month. Shortly afterward she moved to Chicago and in 1942 went to work for the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago in the War Department Office.²⁹

Stegeman was contacted by both Nancy Love, WASP executive with the Air Transport Command's Ferrying Division, and Cochran, but did not have the number of required flying hours either time. As soon as she received notice that she had enough hours to qualify for the WASP program, she was interviewed by Ethel Sheehy, Jacqueline Cochran's assistant, and was given a physical at The Palmer House in Chicago. Then Stegeman was told to report to Houston, Texas. She returned home to Athens to tell her family goodbye, but while she was there she received a telegram changing her orders to Sweetwater.³⁰

Another WASP, Mildred (Millie) McLelland Christiansen, 43-w-6, stumbled on the program and flying almost by accident. McLelland was born on 9 April 1918 in La Fayette County, Missouri. At the age of three she began first grade in a one-room school. There were a total of twenty-seven different-aged students in her school which made it easy for McLelland to pass the eighth grade spelling test while she was in the second grade. When she started first grade, the teacher picked her up in her buggy, but when she was older she walked the three-quarters of a mile to and from school. After

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

she completed third grade, her family moved to Independence, Missouri, and then to Odessa, Missouri, soon after. McLelland's family moved yet again when she was in the fifth grade to Pleasant Hill, Missouri, where they stayed through her sophomore year in high school. After completing her sophomore year, the family moved once again to Clinton, Missouri, where she finished high school. The family moved the first time because they had been starving on their family farm during the Depression and then continued to move as her father searched for work to support his family.³¹

In high school McLelland took classes primarily to prepare for college. She earned a scholarship to Tulsa University, but when her father lost his job she could not afford to go. McLelland went back to high school to take a few post-graduate classes that would give her the skills to find a job. She took typing, shorthand, office machines, business English, and sewing at the cost of two dollars a semester. After that she attended a business college before she began working for a group of stores that sold jewelry and luggage.³²

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, McLelland was inspired to help in the war effort. McLelland, her mother, and a female friend enrolled in a first aid course, and their instructor told them he was teaching first aid to the Civil Air Patrol and invited McLelland to join him. The experience changed her life. She joined the Civil Air Patrol and learned to march and fly. After learning first to fly in a

³¹Mildred McLelland Christiansen, interview by Deanie Parrish, 22 May 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

³²Ibid.

Taylorcraft, McLelland then flew a Stinson 10-A Voyager, a Piper Cub, an Aeronice, and whatever else became available to her.³³

When McLelland initially heard about the WASP, the program required a larger number of flight hours and more experience than she had. As soon as the requirements were lowered, she sent in her application. McLelland was accepted into the WASP but was told after her physical that she would need to gain weight or the WASP would send her home. Like all the other WASP who traveled to Sweetwater, McLelland had to purchase her own train ticket to Sweetwater.³⁴

Like a large percentage of the WASP, Maxine Edmondson Flournoy, 43-w-8, learned to fly with the Civilian Pilot Training Program and heard about the WASP program from other pilots. Edmondson had entered the world on 30 March 1921 in Wheaton, Missouri, and a few years later her younger brother was born. Edmondson's father worked as a dentist and her mother stayed at home to take care of the children. The family lived in Wheaton until 1933 when her parents divorced, and not long after her father remarried. The children preferred to live with their mother, but if she lost her job or there was not enough money to take care of them, they would live with their father and step-mother. When she was fourteen, her mother found a job in El Paso, Texas, and Edmondson and her brother moved with her. Edmondson was in charge of the grocery shopping and cooking the evening meal for the family while her mother worked. While Edmondson was in high school, her mother moved the family back to

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

Joplin, Missouri, where Edmondson graduated from Joplin High School in 1939 and took a job at a defense plant.³⁵

When Pearl Harbor was attacked, Edmondson did not know where it was. She recalled that soon after the attack government started a rationing program. Her brother did not go into the service, but many of her former classmates did, and several did not come back. Edmondson heard about the Civilian Pilot Training program offered at the local junior college from one of her girlfriends who was enrolled in the CPT class. Edmondson applied and was accepted into the CPT program along with nine men. They attended ground school at night and flew early in the morning. In the afternoons she would take classes at the junior college. Edmondson soloed her first time in a Piper Cub and soon after she applied to the WASP program and traveled to Kansas City to be interviewed by Ethyl Sheehy who worked for Cochran. Three months later she was told to report to Camp Crowder in Missouri for a physical which she passed and was then told to report to Sweetwater.³⁶

Marie Mountain Clark, class of 44-w-1, was one of the few female pilots who were motivated to learn to fly because of a local female pilot. Mountain grew up in Clover Hill near Des Moines, Iowa, on a dairy farm. Her father not only ran the farm but was also the town's mayor. Clover Hill was a town of about three thousand people, so her classes at school were small. Her graduating class had a total of 265 students. At the age of nine, Mountain had started taking flute lessons and as a junior in high school she won the state competition for flute. In high school she knew she would attend

³⁵Maxine Edmondson Flournoy, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, n.d., Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

³⁶Ibid.

college and her parents talked about her attending Julliard, but they could not afford it. Instead she continued to live at home and attended Drake University in Des Moines. While in college she taught flute in the music department as there were no flute teachers at Drake. After she earned her music degree she wanted to join a symphony, but after graduating in 1939 she gave flute lessons in the public schools. She did not earn much money teaching flute but continued to do so until she joined the WASP.³⁷

Mountain first became interested in airplanes as a small child, but did not learn to fly until 1940. A daughter of a family friend flew and when Mountain heard about it she was surprised a woman could fly airplanes and wanted to learn as well. She became interested in flying and began taking lessons with the CPT program at Drake. Her first ride was in a Piper Cub with one of the boys she had known in high school. Eventually Mountain taught ground school courses as well as flute lessons. All of her students from ground school classes went into the army air force.³⁸

The first time Mountain heard about the WASP program was when Ethyl Sheehy, who worked for the program, went to Des Moines to recruit several women who flew. Sheehy told the women that the purpose of the program would be to teach the women to fly the “Army way” with the goal of relieving male pilots for combat. Mountain joined the WASP with seventy-five flying hours. She and two other female pilots from Des Moines drove to Sweetwater together. They arrived in time to watch the previous class graduate.³⁹

³⁷Marie Mountain Clark, interview by Deanie Parrish, n.d., Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

Flying had never occurred to Elizabeth Wall Strohfus, 44-w-1, until she was introduced to it by chance when a pilot offered her a ride. Wall had been born in Faribault, Minnesota, on 15 November 1919. Her father had been fifty-four and her mother thirty-nine at the time of their marriage, and they had six children together. The family lived on a farm, was close-knit, and said the rosary together every night. If one of the girls had a date in the evening, the date could either wait while they said the rosary or was welcome to join them. In 1929, when Wall was ten years old, her father lost all of his money in the stock market crash. The children never knew their family was poor, because they had a chicken coop, garden, and a root cellar and never went hungry.⁴⁰

As a child in a family of six children, Wall wanted to stand out and dreamed of becoming a successful somebody. In 1937 she graduated from high school and wanted to go to college to become a physical education teacher, but because her father suffered a long illness before his death in 1940, there was no money for college. Instead Wall began working for the registrar of deeds as the registrar's secretary and later became the deputy registrar of deeds.⁴¹

One day a man came to the courthouse to bring her contracts to file and started talking to her about his airplane and flying. He offered to take her up, and during her first flight, he took her to 3,500 feet and did a spin. He turned around to look at Wall, and she said, "One more time." After each spin she would make the same reply until he became sick and landed the plane. He told her she had to learn to fly because

⁴⁰Elizabeth Wall Strohfus, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

previously, all of his passengers became sick in the spins first, and this was the first time he had become sick and a passenger did not. She did not know of any other women who flew airplanes at the time, but she still wanted to learn. The men at the airport were protective and kind towards her. Once she was late returning from a solo flight and several of the men went up looking for her. When they found her, they followed her to make certain she made it home safely.⁴²

In order to pay for flying lessons, Wall rode her bicycle out to the airport to do office work, sweep the floors, and anything they needed done just to have the chance to fly. Her mother thought her desire to fly was crazy, so Wall did not tell her mother too much about what she was doing at the airport. She was afraid her mother would forbid her to fly, and she did not want flying taken away from her. She loved being in the air and seeing God's creation. She was amazed every time by the beauty of the land and never felt closer to God than she did when she was flying.⁴³

Wall was invited by the male pilots to join the flying club but it cost \$100 to join. She only made \$50 a month at her job and took most of her money home to her mother. She heard that the bank would loan money, so she asked for a bank loan. When the banker asked why she wanted the loan and she told him, he replied that women do not fly. She responded that "this one is going to." He asked her for collateral and she said she had a bicycle. Because her older sister, Mary, had been his secretary, he not only gave her the loan, but co-signed for her as well. Eventually Wall talked her sister

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

Mary into learning to fly also. The first time her mother saw Wall fly she was impressed and changed her opinion about her daughters flying airplanes.⁴⁴

The sisters first heard about the female pilot program in the spring of 1943. A notice came to the airport about the program, and right away Wall and her sister let the WASP program know that they were interested. They were interviewed by Ethyl Sheehy who worked for Cochran and who told them they were eligible for their physicals. They passed their physicals and were told to report to Sweetwater. As their train left Minnesota, three of their flying friends flew their planes alongside the train until they crossed into Iowa.⁴⁵

Because she did not want to be bored over her summer vacation, Annabelle Craft Moss, 44-w-2, asked her brother to teach her to fly. Craft was born in Illinois on 30 July 1921 to a mother who did not have her cook or clean. She told her daughter that she would have plenty of time to do that after she married and to enjoy herself now. After graduating from high school with all "A"s, Craft wanted to become a nurse, but her father did not want to pay for her to learn to empty bedpans. Instead Craft entered the University of Nebraska and double majored in Spanish and primary education. She earned the highest honors in the program.⁴⁶

During the summer after her freshman year, Craft was bored and decided to learn to fly. As a child her hero had been Amelia Earhart, the first female pilot to cross

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Annabelle Craft Moss, interview by Deanie Parrish, 11 September 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

the Atlantic Ocean in June 1928,⁴⁷ and when Craft had been nine years old, Earhart had come to Craft's hometown in Illinois and Craft had met her. Her older brother, who had graduated from a private flying school in Oklahoma, taught her to fly. They went out to the airfield every morning and night that summer to teach her to fly.⁴⁸

After graduating from the University of Nebraska she was hired to teach school in St. Louis, Missouri. Craft learned of the WASP program at the University of Nebraska from a sorority sister who was a pilot and wanted Craft to join with her. Craft entered the WASP from St. Louis where she had been teaching. While she was in St. Louis, she had become engaged, and the young man wanted to marry before he was sent overseas, but Craft told him no. She wanted to have the wedding after the war because she did not want to risk becoming pregnant and not be able to fly with the WASP.⁴⁹

After overcoming obstacles Mary Helen Crane Foster, 44-w-3, saved enough money to afford flying lessons, and once she heard of the WASP program, she joined because being paid to fly was the opportunity of a lifetime for her. Crane had been born in Cuero, Texas, on 5 August 1921. Her father worked in the cotton fields but did not care for it, so he moved his family to San Antonio when she was three so he could work for an electric company. When Crane was nine, her father deserted the family, and her mother had to search for work. Life was hard for her mother because she had no education, but she regularly took her children, Mary and two younger boys, to the local Baptist church. When the minister found out how difficult it was for the family to

⁴⁷Sally Van Wagenen Keil, *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines: The Unknown Heroines of World War II* (New York: Four Directions Press, 1979), 17-19.

⁴⁸Moss.

⁴⁹Ibid.

afford necessities, he recommended that Crane's mother put the children in an orphanage. Crane who was about age ten, Bob who was five, and Jay age two were put into an orphanage. The minister assured her mother that if she would give money to the orphanage when she was able, she would be able to have her children back once she could afford to care for them herself.⁵⁰

Crane liked the orphanage in San Antonio because she had fewer responsibilities there than she had at home. Her job was to put the knives, forks, and napkins on the tables before meal times. Jay, her youngest brother, became seriously ill while there, and Crane was allowed to care for him. The orphanage believed that he became ill because he was lonely and missed his mother and siblings. When Crane was allowed time with him each day, he steadily improved.⁵¹

Eventually their mother married a man who was a good father to the children and made life better for the family. The children were allowed to return home, and Crane's mother was able to stay at home and take care of them. Crane's step-father attended church with the family because he did not like to be left home alone on Sunday mornings. After he was converted and baptized, he carried a Bible everywhere he went and tried to convert everyone he met.⁵²

In Crane's high school, the students gathered around the flag pole, said the Pledge of Allegiance, sang the National Anthem, and then the principal or a teacher would say a prayer for the day and dismiss them for class. Crane was an excellent

⁵⁰Mary Helen Foster, interview by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²*Ibid.*

student but would become bored because the lessons were not challenging for her. English was her favorite subject so she often hid a library book behind her class books to read. After high school she wanted to go to college to become a teacher, but she knew that there was no money available for her to go. Also her step-father did not believe that girls should go to college.⁵³

Shortly after her father had left his family, he moved to Waco, Texas, and remarried. The new wife wrote letters to Crane and invited her to spend the summer after her eighth grade year with them. While there her father commented that the marriage between him and her mother would have worked out if her mother had not been such a nag. Crane quickly defended her mother saying that she had been there through the hard times after he had abandoned them. Her father had also been angered by her regular church attendance when she had visited him and told her that when he died, he did not want her to take his body to a church for a funeral.⁵⁴

Crane graduated from high school in 1939 and started looking for work. At the businesses where she applied, she was told that she could leave an application but that if a man came in for the same job, he would be hired first. She found work at the state hospital and was provided with room and board as well. At the hospital, Crane earned \$35 a month and saved every penny of it, because after a year of working and saving, she wanted to go to college. For financial reasons and because her step-father strongly recommended she not attend a four-year college, she entered business school to learn typing, shorthand, book keeping, and filing but did not like it. The family's neighbor, Lieutenant Tony Rose, learned that she was about to finish business school and told her

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

that Fort Sam Houston, “Ft. Sam,” an army base in San Antonio, needed secretarial help. She went out to the base with him and was offered a job on the spot. Already there were rumors of a possible war, and after Pearl Harbor was attacked, Crane began to work a lot of overtime at the base. The military installed time-clocks to keep track of the hours worked which insulted her because she believed the military did not trust her or the other workers. For her overtime, the military gave her a retroactive bonus check that she used to purchase a full-length muskrat fur coat.⁵⁵

While working at Ft. Sam, Crane had started taking flying lessons. She and a friend had gone on a vacation to Corpus Christi, Texas, where they had met a navy pilot who took them out for dinner. The way he spoke of flying sounded exciting to Crane, and during the day while the girls were at the beach, he flew over the coast and waved his wings at them. When she returned home she decided she wanted to learn to fly and in early 1941 went out to Brown’s Flying School at Stinson Field to take lessons. She showed up wearing a dress and high heeled shoes. Mr. Brown, the flight instructor whose first name is unknown, at first refused to teach her because she was a female, but Crane told him that she had the money in her hand and that he would teach her to fly. Before her first solo flight, he told her that she would kill herself and wreck his airplane. When she landed safely, he said that at least she did not wreck his plane.⁵⁶

Ten other women were learning to fly at Stinson Field the same time as Crane. Each pilot could only fly thirty minutes at a time before they had to land and go to the back of the line to go up again. With all the time spent waiting their turn, the girls became friends and decided to organize a women’s flying club. They did not know how

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid.

to organize it so they decided to call Jackie Cochran who said she would be happy to fly down to speak to them. Cochran encouraged them about flying and spent hours talking with them about airplanes and flying.⁵⁷

One of the women in the group had a relative who was the commanding general of the Gulf Coast Training Command for the Air Force. An arrangement was made for officers at the cadet center to teach the women of the flying club the ground school courses the cadets were taking. Later, Crane and the other women read in the newspaper that Cochran was organizing women pilots, and a number of them applied.⁵⁸

Crane's mother and step-father did not like the idea of her learning to fly, but Crane believed that as long as it was not immoral, she would do it anyway. Her brother Bob had joined the Marines before the war to become a bomb site mechanic, and her other brother Jay had begun attending Baylor University with the intention of becoming a doctor. He had studied there for three years before he withdrew to join the Merchant Marines and then the army. While in the army he was the chaplain's assistant which pleased his sister, but she was furious with him at first for withdrawing from school because she had been the one paying his college tuition.⁵⁹

Crane was still working as a secretary at Ft. Sam Houston when she entered the WASP. She failed her first physical due to low blood pressure and being under weight, but every day after that she ate everything she could and took cold showers to raise her

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

blood pressure. She was able to pass her second physical, and after she was officially accepted, she drove herself to Sweetwater.⁶⁰

If it had not been for the army air force opening a military base in Marie O'dean "Deanie" Bishop Parrish's home town, she would not have had an opportunity to learn to fly. Bishop, class of 44-w-4, was born in Defuniac Springs, Florida, and at the time of her birth, had three older siblings, two brothers and a sister. When she was five, her family moved to the small town of Alturas, Florida, south of Orlando. Soon after the move, school started for her older siblings, and she wanted to go with them. Bishop followed her brothers and sister to school each day until the teacher gave in and let her enroll at the age of five. A few months later the family moved once again to Avon Park, Florida, but the school there told her parents that age five was too young to attend school. Her mother asked the principal to give Bishop a test and if she passed the test she could enroll, but if she did not, then she would go home. She passed and was allowed to continue going to school.⁶¹

While in Avon Park the family lived in a tent that had flooring and dividers for the rooms because in the latter half of the 1920s a hurricane had come into Florida and their home had disappeared. Fortunately her father was working for the Highland Lakes Resort which found a house for them. The house had two bathrooms, one on the first floor and one of the second floor, and seven bedrooms, so every week Bishop and her sister would take their beds apart and move into a different bedroom.⁶²

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Marie O'dean Bishop Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁶²Ibid.

Bishop studied hard through high school and graduated at the top of her class. While still in high school she had worked as a teller at the local bank and continued to do so after graduation since her family could not afford to send her to college. About the same time a primary school for air force cadets moved to Avon Park. Instructors from the school came into the bank to cash their pay checks, and she heard them talk about flying. Her interest in flight began to grow as she listened to the pilots talk enthusiastically about it. Working at the bank she made \$100 per month, and half an hour of flight instruction cost six dollars which was a lot of money for her to spend. Her family encouraged her, so in the afternoons after the cadets finished training, she would go out to the airfield for lessons.⁶³

After six or seven hours of lessons, she was allowed to solo. She took off and after she leveled the plane off, the joystick used to fly the plane came off in her hand. Bishop took off her seat belt, and leaned forward to reach the joystick in the front seat. She was able to use it to make sure the plane would continue flying straight and pick up speed before she climbed up and over into the front seat to fly the plane from there. She fastened her seat belt and noticed a large red sign that said, “DO NOT SOLO FROM FRONT SEAT.” As she had no choice, she did it anyway and safely landed the plane. Her instructor told her that she had the “right stuff to be a pilot.”⁶⁴

From that point on Bishop continued flying whenever she could. She had the opportunity to go to Houston to work at First City National Bank, and while there she began flying at Sky Port Airport and purchased an interest in an airplane. Bishop also joined the Civilian Air Patrol and flew along the Gulf Coast on search missions. She

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid.

heard about the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD), but was too young to qualify at that time. On her twenty-first birthday, Bishop submitted her application to the WASP program, passed her interview in Ft. Worth, and was told she needed a physical. She returned to Florida to wait until November 1943 to go to Sweetwater and had her physical there. To join the program the women had to be at least 5'2½". Bishop was 5'2¼" but the sergeant who took her measurements passed her regardless.⁶⁵

Another woman who became a WASP with the help of the Civilian Pilot Training program and the influence of her uncle, a navy pilot, was Doris Brinker Tanner, class of 44-w-4. Tanner had begun life on 6 December 1919 in Dallas, Texas, at Baylor Hospital, and her father had paid the three dollars and fifty cent bill before he took Tanner and her mother home to the family ranch in Lassiter, Texas. Soon after she was born, her father quit ranching and decided to follow his true passion of being a musician. He started his own band and performed all over East Texas. When she was around the age of seven, Tanner was allowed to travel with her father and his band in their Model T Ford. Because of Tanner's upbringing, she rarely experienced any restrictions on what was or was not considered proper behavior for women. Her parents divorced when she was eight years old, and her mother moved to Dallas and remarried a few years later.⁶⁶

Tanner attended school in Dallas until her family moved to Brownsville, Tennessee, during her junior year in high school. After graduating, she went to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, because the boy she loved at the time attended

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Doris Brinker Tanner, interview by Deanie Parrish, 12 August 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

there, but two weeks after arriving on campus Tanner realized there were other boys just as cute on campus. At first she was not sure what she wanted to study but soon decided to become a teacher of English and history. She also joined the sorority Delta Delta Delta and during her junior year dated her future husband Bill Tanner who was a member of the fraternity Alpha Tau Omega.⁶⁷

While in college Tanner decided she wanted to learn to fly and during her senior year enrolled in the Civilian Pilot Training program. Airplanes had not been a novelty to her because she had an uncle with a plane who had been a navy pilot. She was the only female in a class of twenty men, and the price of the class was thirty-five dollars for thirty-five flying hours and a private license. The first time she soloed she was up in the air before she realized she would eventually need to land. Before she worked her courage up to land, she circled the airfield six times, ran out of gasoline, and had no choice but to land. Her ground school training consisted of meteorology and little else.⁶⁸

Bill Tanner was a member of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps in college, and after graduation in the spring of 1941 he went into the service. Pearl Harbor came as a shock for Doris and her family, and it was not until they went to church and all the members were talking that she fully grasped the magnitude of what had happened.⁶⁹

Tanner knew he would be sent overseas, so he and Doris married before he left for the war. Their wedding was a simple, war-time wedding. Doris wore a previously purchased evening gown, carried a bouquet of gardenias, and had the ceremony in her

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

grandfather's home. For the first night of their honeymoon her mother had packed a large bottle of champagne in her suitcase. Her husband took the bottle down to the hotel kitchen to have it chilled to go with their dinner, but by the time their dinner arrived, she had consumed quite a bit of champagne and could hardly see her steak dinner, let alone cut it. When the couple returned to their room, Doris passed out on the bed. The second night of their honeymoon was spent with Tanner trying to repair their broken down car, while his wife stayed in an upstairs room of someone's home who had taken pity on them. The bed there was uncomfortable and filled with bugs, so the couple sat up all night. Finally the couple reached their destination of Fort Bragg Army Base in North Carolina, and rented a two room apartment. After being married for five months, Bill Tanner was sent overseas in October 1942. After her husband left, she started working at the army air force offices at Knollwood Field as a filing clerk.⁷⁰

After her husband left to go overseas, Tanner wanted to do more for the war effort, and when given the opportunity, she went to the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. to be interviewed by Ethyl Sheehy, Jacqueline Cochran's assistant, and also to meet Cochran for the first time. Tanner's first impression of Cochran was that she was beautiful with lovely, expressive brown eyes, and coincidently that day no one else was going to lunch but Cochran, so she invited Tanner to go with her. She took her to a French restaurant and ordered for both of them, because the entire menu was in French, and Tanner did not know a word of French. After lunch they walked back to the

⁷⁰Ibid.

Pentagon because it was a beautiful day. According to Tanner, Cochran was charming and a good conversationalist.⁷¹

On the walk back to the Pentagon, Cochran asked Tanner, “Well, what do you think the role between men and women is going to be in nineteen hundred and sixty?” Prior to that Tanner had never thought about the differences between men and women, or realized they existed. Cochran was the type of strong personality that one either loved or hated, and Tanner admired her greatly and believed she deserved more credit than she was given for her role in the WASP program.⁷²

After Tanner’s interview, she was accepted as a trainee, but neither Cochran nor Sheehy told her what to expect. Eventually Tanner was sent a letter telling her when to report to Sweetwater and her class assignment, 44-w-4. From her home in Fort Bragg, she took the long train ride to Sweetwater.⁷³

At first neither Tanner nor her in-laws told her husband of her acceptance into the WASP. He was fighting his way across North Africa at the time, and they did not want him to worry about his wife. Tanner did not tell him until he was finished fighting in North Africa and had been stationed in England. Her mother’s reaction to her acceptance into the WASP program was supportive and optimistic. At the time her mother was forty-three years of age, expecting another baby, and had a five-year-old to care for as well. Tanner’s mother had little time to worry about her daughter’s safety, but she was positive about her involvement in the program.⁷⁴

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

Out of her desire to do God's work, Anita Paul, class of 44-w-6, wanted to learn to fly and joined the WASP. Paul, also known as Sister Teresa after becoming a nun, had come into the world on 21 May 1924 in Nashua, New Hampshire. Her father had been gassed in the Battle of the Marne, a major battle during World War I. He had been treated by being turned upside down on his head so that the gas would rise in his body which was supposed to keep it from having a negative effect on his brain. Coincidentally to her later becoming a pilot, she was born on the anniversary of the day Charles Lindberg, the world famous pioneering aviator, landed in Paris. On her family's calendar was a small picture of an airplane that in her early years she believed to be some sort of bird. Her parents explained to her that it was not a bird, but a plane, and that a man had flown over the ocean in it. At such a young age, this meant little to her, but she understood that someone had an airplane on her birthday.⁷⁵

Her loving Catholic family trained Paul to be the Christian woman she was to become. Every night she saw her mother kneel to say her prayers. Her mother had pain in her knees, but regardless of the pain she experienced she knelt in prayer every night for at least fifteen minutes. From her mother's example she learned the meaning of "forgetting yourself for God."⁷⁶ No matter what, God came first. Paul grew up knowing that God existed, though she did not fully understand about Him at a young age.⁷⁷

⁷⁵Anita Paul (a.k.a. Sister Teresa), interview by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

When Paul became old enough, she began to attend the local Catholic school for ten cents a month which she carried to school in the corner of her handkerchief. The school was bi-lingual and taught in both French and English because of the large number of French immigrants who came to the area from Canada. During the midday recreation, the Sisters told the students stories of the missionaries in the Arctic and how they traveled by dog sled as well as stories of missionaries in Africa and how they traveled by safari surrounded by wild animals. Soon after hearing of the exciting adventures of the missionaries, Paul was home sick with the measles when a Piper Cub flew over her home, and everyone ran outdoors to catch a glimpse of the novelty. According to Paul, at the time it was believed that someone infected with measles should not be exposed to light; regardless, she could not contain her excitement and joined her family outside to see the small airplane. As she lay back down in her bed she began to think that it would make much more sense if the missionaries used airplanes instead of dog sleds and safaris because they would travel over the danger instead of through it.⁷⁸

The idea of becoming a missionary in order to fly planes began to grow in her mind. At that young age Paul believed one must be a missionary in order to fly airplanes; and in order to be a missionary, one had to be a nun. On the day of her first communion, the Sisters told her to pray and ask God to show her what He wanted from her in life. Paul knew that she did not need to ask. She already knew. Paul told God

⁷⁸Ibid.

that she was going to be a missionary and fly airplanes for the missions. She continued to grow up with that thought in her mind.⁷⁹

When Paul was in high school her family moved to Hudson, New Hampshire, to live on a 250-acre farm. She along with the rest of her family raised vegetables, worked in the fields, polished tomatoes, shined cucumbers, and counted corn. During the winter when there was little that needed to be done around the farm, she went skiing, sledding and skating, and during her free time in the summer she played tennis. All of her activities centered around the family farm, because the town and high school were too far away to interact regularly with their friends and neighbors.⁸⁰

In high school Paul took primarily commercial courses because she knew it was not possible to attend college since her family did not have the means to send her. She had high grades so she was quickly hired to work for a local company. She finished school on a Friday in June of 1941 and began work the following Monday at a company in Nashua. The man who was her immediate boss was in the Reserves, and in December of 1941 he was called into the service when the war began. He talked to her about going to Washington, D.C., because the military was building up the Quartermaster Corps and needed persons to compute all the requirements for the troops in order to ascertain that they were where they needed to be when they needed to be there. The following August shortly after her eighteenth birthday Paul arrived in Washington, D.C.⁸¹

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

In the spring of 1943 the Quartermaster Corps began discussions about the WASP clothing that had to be made for a new branch in the army air force. By joining the WASP, Paul realized she would have the opportunity to learn to fly and serve her country. After she learned about the WASP, Paul went to see the program's recruiting officer, and from there she was directed by the Pentagon to go to Bolling Field, an army air force base in Washington, D.C., for a physical. She was tested to make sure she was not color-blind, and she was required to run around a track to see if she became "winded." After passing her physical exam, Paul was admitted to the January class of 1944. The recruiting officer then asked her how much time she had flying. Paul had none and had never before set foot on an airplane, but had from July until December to put in thirty-five hours of flying time.⁸²

Fortunately for Paul, her dentist was in the Civil Air Patrol, and at the end of July he took her up for her first ride. She learned to fly with another woman who had been accepted into the same WASP class as she. They would leave by bus after work on Saturday night, sleep on the airfield lawn, attend Sunday morning church, and then spend the rest of the day in the air. Paul was unable to acquire enough hours quickly enough so she quit her job at the end of September to begin living at the airport. Without owning her own plane, she learned to fly by "bumming" rides off of anyone who had a plane in the air.⁸³

Paul received the training she needed to fly solo, and on her first solo flight the Civil Air Patrol simulated a wreck for which they looked all that Sunday afternoon. No one found it, so Paul decided she would look for it as well, but she flew out of the

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

traffic pattern and became lost. She flew around in circles looking for the airport and landing strips but was unable to find them because of the glare from the sun setting on the horizon. Paul said a prayer and continued to look for the landing strip, but she had no idea where she was, so she picked the direction that seemed right to her and flew. That took her directly over the airfield where the grass had been set on fire for her to see in the dark. Just to prove to those on the ground that she was not scared, she circled the field a second time before landing, but they thought she still could not see the landing strip so they threw more gasoline on the fire.⁸⁴

By the time she made her landing it was completely dark. She made it to the end of the field and cut the plane's engines off. Paul asked the ground crew if they wanted her to taxi the plane up the hill, but they told her no, they would prefer to push it. Her instructor was furious with her and told her that she was not to do that on a solo flight. Despite these complications, her first time to solo was a success; she took off and landed, and that was all that was important. Paul thanked God for guiding her in the proper direction, because she had no clue as to where she was or where she needed to go. After her solo flight she always said a prayer before she took off and when she landed.⁸⁵

Since she had completed her necessary thirty-five hours and had flown solo, she decided to return home. She learned of a man who was flying from the South to Boston in a two-seater airplane who would allow her to go with him. Instead of going back to Washington, D.C., she called and had her belongings packed and sent to her parent's home in New Hampshire, and took off for Boston. Unfortunately, the man was not a

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid.

skilled navigator and became lost. He landed the plane in a corn field in up-state New York, but they returned to the correct course and successfully made it to their destination. When she arrived home in Nashua, she packed her belongings to prepare to go to Sweetwater, Texas, and like all the other WASP, she paid her own fare to go there.⁸⁶

Francie Meisner Park, class 44-w-10, did not have a desire to learn to fly until she was offered a job as a link trainer operator to train pilots. Meisner had been born in Piper, Kansas, on 25 July 1919 to a father who was a lazy farmer but a happy bootlegger and gambler, and a mother who was a highly motivated milliner. Her father would not tend to the fields so her mother would then have to do with the help of Meisner's maternal grandparents. When she was in the second grade, her mother took Meisner with her to Kansas City, Kansas, to work as a milliner. In the fourth grade they moved to Chicago and then a year later in 1929 to Los Angeles. When they arrived, her mother learned that no one wore hats in Los Angeles and had a nervous break down. Meisner was sent back to Kansas to live with her maternal grandparents.⁸⁷

Her grandparents did well during the Depression so she never went without anything. Her grandfather was a prize-winning farmer; her grandmother was an excellent cook, but neither had the patience to teach their granddaughter. They grew oats, corn, and wheat, and one year when it was difficult to sell the corn, they sold it to a distillery for \$300 to make whiskey.⁸⁸

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Francie Meisner Park, interview by Deanie Parrish, 7 November 2001, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁸⁸Ibid.

Meisner graduated from the eighth grade in a one-room country school and started a high school that had 110 students with twenty-two in her class. In high school she was not allowed to date because her grandparents said that they were too old to sit up late at night waiting for her to come home. They lived two miles away from the school so Meisner walked, rode her bike, or rode a horse to school. When Meisner graduated, there were five possible jobs for a woman outside of marriage: live-in maid, nurse, teacher, secretary, or beauty operator. She had liked typing and shorthand in high school so she decided to be a secretary and attended secretarial school in Kansas City. After finishing she found a job with a radio station, but after a year left to work for an insurance agency, but a year later returned to the radio station.⁸⁹

The job at the radio station did not keep Meisner busy so she began to look for more work and found a job with Trans World Airline (TWA) in the Hostess Department of the airport. Before working for TWA she had never thought about flying and did not take notice when a plane flew overhead. While at TWA a flight operator from Wichita came to the airport to buy an airplane. He suggested that she should become a link trainer operator for the War Training Service (WTS), previously known as the Civilian Pilot Training Program. A link trainer simulated flight and was a way of learning to fly planes with instruments. He explained the job to her and said that she would be paid \$150 a month. Meisner took the course required to be an operator, but a month later the government ended the program and shipped the link trainers to the airlines. After being exposed to the link trainers Meisner decided that she wanted to learn to fly and was hired by Midcontinent Airline to work as a link operator. The Midcontinent job lasted from March to October of 1943 before the airline closed. She was then hired to be the

⁸⁹Ibid.

secretary for the man who had run the Midcontinent office, and he paid her enough money to take care of her necessities with her remaining salary to be paid in learning to fly. Once she had earned enough flying hours, she applied and was accepted to the WASP program.⁹⁰

Another WASP, Frankie Yearwood, class 44-w-10, learned of the program when a co-worker told her about it while they worked in a factory that made airplane parts. Yearwood had begun life in Rutherford, Tennessee, on 10 July 1921, but in January 1925 the family moved to Oklahoma in an old stripped-out car. In Tennessee her father had worked as an engineer producing electricity for the city, but in Oklahoma his job was to run a compress machine. Soon after arriving in Oklahoma, twin boys were added to the family of three girls making Yearwood the middle child in a family of five children. Two years later the family moved to Seminole, Oklahoma, so her father could work in the Seminole Oil Fields. A few years later the family moved once again to a ranch just outside of Sulphur, Oklahoma, where they stayed at the ranch with relatives for about four years. They ranched cattle, and for the children it was fun to ride horses and play in the hay wagon. Her years in junior high school were not eventful because the family lived out of town, and as a result she did not have many opportunities to socialize with children her own age. The family moved a fourth time to Gladewater, Texas, when Yearwood was in high school and stayed there until her senior year when they moved back to Ardmore, Oklahoma.⁹¹

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Frankie Yearwood, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

After graduating from high school, Yearwood's social life began to bloom. She enjoyed skating, riding horses, tennis, and softball. One of her girl friends had a car and would take Yearwood and several of their friends into Oklahoma City to play softball. Unlike her older sisters Yearwood preferred to be out-of-doors and active rather than learning to sew or washing dishes. She referred to herself as a tomboy, and as the third daughter she believed that by the time of her birth, her father was ready for a son, and so he "almost made one out of [her]." ⁹²

The family moved in August for the last time to Memphis, Tennessee. She left her friends in Oklahoma, but was quick to make new ones in Memphis. She started working at Postal Telegraph and made friends there who remained her friends for life. Then after the attack on Pearl Harbor she found a job at Fisher Aircraft as a riveter. The company made wing parts for the B-25 airplanes, and Yearwood enjoyed her job immensely. The women who took the men's jobs as they left for war began a competition to see if they could produce more in a day than the men had, and they did. ⁹³

After her job as a riveter became monotonous, she went to blue print school at night. When she finished there, she returned to Fisher as an inspector and was put in the same department in which she had worked as a riveter. From another woman working at Fisher she found out about the WASP and determined to meet the qualifications so she would be able to join. ⁹⁴

Yearwood began her training at the West Memphis Airport. After work she would find a ride from some of the women who also worked at Fisher Aircraft and lived

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid.

in West Memphis. Yearwood never thought about the fact that there were few women who knew how to fly airplanes, and the thought never crossed her mind that she might not be able to do it. She knew that she was competitive enough to believe that if men could do it, then she could handle it as well.⁹⁵

Her first instructor was an airline pilot named Bob Parker who was a nice man who made the experience of learning to fly an airplane enjoyable. After completing exactly eight hours and ten minutes of training, she was ready to solo, and when she had her pilot's license, she took her father up for his first ride in an airplane. According to Yearwood, he was scared to death but enjoyed it.⁹⁶

When she told her parents that she wanted to join the WASP program, they were skeptical at first. Her father just commented about her "crazy ideas,"⁹⁷ and her mother asked if she was sure she wanted to fly that high. Yearwood assured her parents that usually the higher you flew, the safer you were.⁹⁸

While she was learning to fly, her siblings were busy as well. Her oldest sister was married, and her other sister was working at Greyhound Bus Company as a cashier for the Memphis branch which was a job important to the war effort. One of her younger brothers, who had a bad foot, had been classified as "4F," meaning that he was not physically eligible for the service. The other brother went into the navy. Her

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid.

siblings were preoccupied with their own lives and did not give much thought to their sister learning to fly airplanes or joining the WASP.⁹⁹

After accumulating the required number of hours to qualify for the WASP program, Yearwood was told to go to the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., for an interview. She took a train there, although she had never been on a train by herself before and had certainly never been as far away from home as Washington, D.C. One of the senators from Arkansas met her at the train station and took her to the place the interview was to be held. After her interview she returned home and was told by mail to appear at the Sterrick Building to take the army air force test that all the men were required to take. At the Sterrick Building, she was one of only two women in a room of about forty people taking a written exam for the army air force. Later she received notice that she had passed her test and to report for an interview.¹⁰⁰

The air base where she had her interview had only men in it and not a single rest room for women. After finishing her interview, she was sent to have a physical by the army doctor, a male, who was just as nervous as she was to be examining a woman. Prior to her physical she had gone to see a chiropractor. To qualify for the WASP women had to be at least five feet and two and a half inches tall. Yearwood barely met the qualifications and was concerned that sitting in the waiting room for too long could cause her to lose a half an inch or so in height. By going to the chiropractor, she hoped to be stretched an inch taller. The chiropractor did not stretch her the desired full inch,

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

but she met the height qualifications for the WASP. After passing her interview and physical she received notice to report to Sweetwater.¹⁰¹

The WASP were following in the footsteps of previous great aviatrixes. In the late 1920s and 1930s there were approximately five hundred female fliers who made up less than a thirtieth of all U.S. pilots. Female pilots played an important role in aviation history, and many of these women were competitive or commercial pilots. In one estimate, one out of five female pilots flew professionally as test pilots, flight instructors, aerial photographers, and flying chauffeurs.¹⁰² The fact that women were actively involved in flight is surprising. Women remained in the periphery of automobile and railroad transportation, but with flight, they were often highlighted for their achievements. Compared to cars and trains, aviation held fewer restrictions for women.

The American public in the late 1920s and 1930s viewed aviation as requiring strength, dexterity, and intelligence and as being dangerous. In order to dispel the public's fear of flying, aviation companies hired women pilots to show that if women could successfully fly planes then it would be simple for men. Commercial aviation used the stereotype of the weak female to prove the safety and ease of flying an airplane. Jacqueline Cochran helped perpetuate the image in 1935 when she was forced to withdraw from a race because of engine problems. Instead of placing the blame on the mechanical failures she told reporters she "just got tired and quit."¹⁰³ Rather than

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Joseph J. Corn, "'Thinkable': Women Pilots and the Selling of Aviation, 1927-1940," *American Quarterly* 27 (Autumn 1979): 556-58.

¹⁰³Ibid., 567.

risk casting aviation in a negative light, Cochran took the blame on herself. With famous aviatrixes like Cochran maintaining the stereotype of women pilots as weak, it is no surprise that the army air force was reluctant to accept the WASP program and required more of them than the male pilots. Once they arrived for training the women set to proving the military wrong in their ideas about them.

CHAPTER THREE

On Wings of Silver

The physical facilities at Houston and Avenger Field impacted the experiences of the women who trained there more so than any other. In 1942 the Houston Municipal Airport was enormous and overcrowded, and at one end of the airport was Ellington Field where thousands of male combat pilots trained in airplanes ranging in size from 450-horsepower basic trainers to the large B-17 Flying Fortresses. The Houston Municipal Airport also had its own hangars, tower, and commercial airlines terminal. Located at the end of one of the airport's runways was a five-room shed and hangar that belonged to Aviation Enterprises, Ltd. that became the temporary home of the WASP.¹

Due to the frequent inclement weather, crowded skies, and lack of facilities at Houston, Jacqueline Cochran, director of the WASP, managed to move her pilots to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, on 5 April 1943. Avenger looked like all the other air bases located in Texas: long, short, grey wooden buildings near the edge of two intersecting 3,000-foot gravel runways. There were eight rows of barracks at Avenger that were divided into two six-woman units called bays. Two bays shared a bathroom. One building held the "ready room" where the trainees waited for their turn to fly; at the opposite end of the building were several classrooms for ground school. There was an

¹Sally Van Wagenen Keil, *Those Wonderful Women and Their Flying Machines: The Unknown Heroines of World War II* (Four Directions Press: New York, 1979), 145.

administration building onsite. A control tower and hangar was in the process of being constructed.²

The other physical aspects of their location such as the heat, sand, and bathrooms tended to influence the women's impressions of the training facility. The local vegetation consisted of mesquite trees, buffalo grass, and greasewood, and a northerly twenty-five mile per hour wind blew steadily and could create dust storms. By April, the high temperatures could easily reach 100 degrees Fahrenheit and could stay there until September. West Texas was an excellent location for learning to fly despite the uncomfortable environment. The land was flat and all the roads ran north-south or east-west which made navigation easier.³

After the women arrived on base, they were taken to the recreation room where they were welcomed to the field with the warning to look at the person to their right and to their left and told it was highly probable that those two women would not be standing there at graduation. They were informed that they had joined the army and were expected to perform up to army expectations. Their bays would be given military inspections, and a dime would have to be able to bounce off their bed sheets. Once in the bay assigned to them, the trainees noted the narrow army cots with a footlocker at the end which served as closet, bureau, and dressing table. A door at the end of the bay led to the bathroom shared by the adjoining bay. Twelve women shared two toilet stalls, two sinks, two shower heads, and one mirror.⁴

²Ibid., 155.

³Ibid., 155-162.

⁴Ibid., 157-158.

The instructors hired to work at Avenger Field were civilian employees of the War Training Service and were attached to the army air force. They were not always objective with their female trainees and most were resentful that they had to teach women. Instructors commonly yelled and swore at the women just as they would have with male cadets. In the Primary Trainers, the student sat in the front seat and the instructor in the back. The trainee wore a helmet and earphones to be able to hear her instructor over the engine, but communication was one way. The trainee was not able to communicate back. The first two weeks of training were spent in the PT-19 with their instructor. After two weeks they soloed. Primary Training was followed by Basic and Advanced.⁵

After completing the first stage of training, the second stage was to learn how to fly at night. During Basic Training, the trainees learned to fly after dark by using a curtain to block out the sunlight forcing them to use only their instruments. Another way they practiced for night flying was by using the Link trainer that simulated flight. The Link trainer was uncomfortable and earned the nickname “sweat box.” Stepping out of it into the West Texas summer heat was a relief. Ferry pilots were only supposed to fly during daylight hours, but the army air force wanted them to be trained to fly with their instruments if necessary. The third stage of training was long distance navigation. The trainees practiced by flying in a triangular route from Odessa, Big Spring, and Sweetwater. Check rides were given at all three stages of training by army-check-ride pilots, and the majority of army-check pilots were overly harsh with the women. One check pilot was nicknamed “Captain Maytag” for washing out so many. Washing out

⁵Ibid., 163.

meant going home and seemed almost a fate worse than death to a lot of the young women. A trainee was in the bay in the morning and by evening all traces of her were gone.⁶

The women's morning started at 6:15 A.M. with reveille, and they were expected to be in breakfast formation by 6:45 A.M. After the first week of training, most trainees no longer attempted to fix their hair or apply cosmetics; instead they found shortcuts so they could try to have an extra half hour of sleep. Throughout their time in training, the women attended ground school courses for half a day. In ground school the trainees received over four hundred hours which equaled a degree in aeronautics. They were taught physics, aerodynamics, electronics and instruments, engine operations and maintenance, meteorology, navigations, mathematics, and military and civilian air regulations. No trainee washed out because she could not pass her ground school courses.⁷ All seventeen WASP in this study described in their oral interviews their time training at Avenger Field as positive even with the hardships they experienced there.

Ruth Dailey Helm, 43-w-2, who had to graduate from college before her mother would let her learn to fly, reported for training on 15 December 1942 to Houston, Texas. After moving into the motel with her roommate, they settled in to their routine. They were picked up early in the morning in cattle trucks that had benches down the sides to take them to the airport. There was a room at the airport where they were served breakfast, and after breakfast they marched down to the flight line or ground school. Half had morning flight times and ground school in the afternoon and the other half did the

⁶Ibid., 163-181.

⁷Ibid., 158-180.

opposite. Their ground school courses included Morse code, weather, navigation, and instrument flying on a link trainer. The school was run by a civilian corporation and the women were taught by civilian pilot trainers.⁸

The women started on the PT-19 which had a heavier horsepower than any of them had ever flown before. They worked six days a week with Sundays off. Dailey attended church every Sunday, and, according to her, she was scared the whole time that she was going to wash out. She believed that the church she attended prayed her through training. After completing her training, Dailey and her mother drove to Sweetwater for the graduation ceremony. At the ceremony the graduates officially became employees of the Civil Service that was attached to the army. Cochran had wings made for the women, and she presented them to each one. Of the pilots who entered with the second class, only ten washed out and one who became ill during training was held back to graduate with the third class.⁹

Elinore Owen Pyle, 43-w-3, who did not know another female pilot at the time she learned to fly, first lived in a motel room with a roommate when she arrived in Houston for training. In the mornings a big tractor trailer would take them to the airport where they were taught by civilian instructors. Leoti Deaton, Cochran's assistant, was in charge of the women at the motel and was often the go-between for Cochran and the trainees. Some of Owen's classmates washed out, but it did not affect her much because she did not know them well. She did not have time for socializing.¹⁰

⁸Ruth Dailey Helm, interview by Deanie Parrish, 12 November 1999, Waco, TX, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Elinore Owen Pyle, interview by Deanie Parrish, 30 July 2001, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

The typical schedule for the third class in Houston was one in which they were picked up at 7:00 A.M. to be taken to a cafeteria where they were served fruit, juices, toast, cereal, and sweet rolls. Before being given their zoot suits, the women flew in khaki pants and white blouses. While in Houston they trained in older, smaller airplanes, but were able to have larger planes when they were moved to Sweetwater, Texas. Owen thought the move was excellent because Avenger had better facilities and the Houston airport smelled badly because of a nearby glue factory. When the program was moved to Sweetwater, Owen flew a BT-13 from Houston to Avenger.¹¹

Owen's class kept the same roommates they had in Houston, but their schedules changed. They had to be ready earlier, make their beds, and march to mess hall where they were frequently served powdered eggs. One pilot from Owen's bay died during training. The trainee and her instructor had gone out for training but never came back. Accidents were mostly ignored and rarely spoken of by those in charge at Avenger. Owen did not think much about it either; she was sad because she had liked the trainee but was not close to her. The class of 43-w-3 was the first class to graduate from Avenger in June 1943, and Cochran flew into Sweetwater for the celebration and to pin on their wings. At this point in the program, the WASP were not asked for an assignment preference, and Owen was assigned to Wilmington, Delaware.¹²

Ruth Underwood Florey, 43-w-4, who learned to fly through the Civilian Pilot Training Program at Daniel Baker College, arrived in Houston and immediately reported to the airport for training. The airport gave her directions to the motel where she and the

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

other trainees were housed. She did not know a soul when she started and was assigned a “ditsy” roommate who Underwood did not know why she had been accepted into the program. Underwood complained and was given a new roommate, and the original roommate was sent home within the first two weeks. Underwood remembered the motel as being infested with large cockroaches.¹³

The airport in Houston was crowded and did not have enough airplanes, but ground school had good instructors. Luckily they were only in Houston a month before moving to Avenger Field close to the first of February. Some of the class helped fly planes to Sweetwater, but Underwood had a car that she had to drive to West Texas. Taps was played in the morning, followed quickly by roll call where they stood in between barracks. After roll call they marched to the mess hall. Following breakfast they had fifteen minutes to clean up the barracks before reporting to either the flight line or ground school.¹⁴

Underwood and her classmates were upset when a member of their class died in a crash. The pilot had lost control of the plane and spiraled to the ground. Similar to what occurred when a WASP trainee died in Owen’s class, a prayer meeting was held before breakfast the following morning which ended any further discussion or thought of the crash, and a collection was taken up to send the body home. When a male pilot was killed, he was treated like a hero. Nothing was done for the deceased female pilots or their families.¹⁵

¹³Ruth Underwood Florey, interview by Deanie Parrish, 20 September 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

Sylvia Dahmes Clayton, 43-w-5, another female pilot who had learned to fly because of her college's Civilian Pilot Training Program, was told that when her class started she would be trained to ferry planes from the manufacturing plants to where they would be taken overseas or to a training base. She knew ferrying planes was important and would help the war effort. It was March 1943 when she reported to Avenger Field and trained throughout the hottest months before graduating in September. Dahmes believed she would put up with anything if she were to be allowed to fly and considered the whole experience exciting.¹⁶

Sharing a room with five other women and a bathroom with eleven others was a big adjustment for her. They made it work because they all wanted to complete the program. There were those who did not though, and Dahmes was often afraid she would be the next trainee to wash out. She had a particularly close call once early in her training. She and her instructor were out training when she no longer could hear his instructions to her, and right before a possible midair collision with another trainee flying solo, her instructor took the controls. Dahmes was safe from washing out because she had been focusing on hearing her instructions from her instructor, but the other pilot had no excuse for her dangerous flying and was washed out of the program for it. There were also several women from her class who were not so fortunate and were killed. One accident happened right before Dahmes's first night cross-country trip. Before the trainees' deaths she had never dealt with tragedy in her life, but on the days following each fatal accident, the trainees were back on the flight line. At the time, it seemed hard-hearted to her, but in hindsight perhaps it was the best way to handle the situation.

¹⁶Sylvia Dahmes Clayton, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, 3 November 2001, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

At the end of her training, Dahmes was able to pick her assignment and chose Romulus, Michigan. At the graduation ceremony Cochran pinned wings on her, and a few generals were in attendance and spoke.¹⁷

Jo Myers Wheelis, 43-w-5, who joined the WASP as a way to continue to fly after her divorce, was a member of the first full class that trained in and graduated from Sweetwater. She considered Avenger Field desolate, barren, and devoid of opportunities for a social life. After settling into her assigned bay, the training routine began. Every morning the trainee awoke to a horn blowing, then hurriedly dressed in zoot suits, and lined up outside to be counted. Following that, she marched to the mess hall for breakfast.¹⁸

Life during training could be difficult for the women. One of Myers' bay mates washed out of the program, and two women from her class were killed while flying at night. After their deaths she was more careful in the air. Their families had to pay for the transportation of the bodies and the burial, and they were not given a United States flag to place on the coffin. One of the lighter aspects of her training was once during her time at Avenger, Myers lied in order to have a weekend off in Dallas with some of the other trainees. She told the officers that her aunt had died so they let her go. The women went to the Adolphus Hotel in Dallas, Texas, where they had a big dinner followed by dancing. Frank Sinatra was the entertainment that night. Myers' family came from Dallas to watch her graduate in September. At the time, the WASP did not have

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Jo Myers Wheelis, interview by Deanie Parrish, 19 September 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

permanent uniforms and were still wearing white blouses and khaki pants as their uniform.¹⁹

Marion Stegeman Hodgson, 43-w-5, a graduate of the University of Georgia, first experienced Sweetwater, Texas, in March 1943 at the Bluebonnet Hotel, the only hotel in town. She spent the night at the hotel and waited until the cattle wagon from Avenger came for her and a few other new arrivals. Upon arrival at Avenger, the women were taken through the entrance gate and past an armed guard to the administration building. Seeing the armed guard made Stegeman realize what she had gotten herself into; it made the war real to her. At the administration building she was finger-printed, photographed, and given an identification card. Next the women were lined up and issued sheets, towels, and two zoot suits. Stegeman learned that the zoot suits were actually coveralls made for men and did not fit the women well. They had to wrap the belts around their waists twice and roll up the sleeves and pant legs to be able to function in them. Eventually all the women were expected to go into town to buy a pair a tan slacks and a white shirt to wear on Sundays. Stegeman was assigned to Barracks D-5 along with six other women. Most barracks had six women, but Stegeman's had seven until one washed out.²⁰

The first night in the barracks the new trainees were hazed by the older class. A few of the women gave them a hard time by making them stand at attention and do all types of stupid acts. After they left, a kind upper classman came in and explained that not all of them were like that. She described what they should expect and answered all of

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Marion Stegeman Hodgson, interview by Deanie Parrish, 5 April 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

their questions. Two weeks later she was killed, which was Stegeman's first shock in training.²¹

In the beginning of her training there were still male cadets using the training facilities. Stegeman's barrack was next door to the men's barracks, and if a woman in Stegeman's barrack stood up after dark without a uniform on, the men would whistle at them. The women learned how to duck down and walk around their barracks crouched over so the men could not see them. Their commanding officer found out that there were no shades on the windows so he ordered the windows painted black. Unfortunately, West Texas becomes uncomfortably hot in the summer and the trainees had to open the windows to ventilate their room.²²

A typical day started with the bugle sounding. The base's buglest was Nell Carmady who had her own band prior to the war. According to Stegeman, she could "jazz" up anything and "jazzed" up reveille for the trainees. Her version of reveille almost made it pleasurable to be awakened each morning. After waking, the trainees could hear the sound of airplanes being warmed up on the flight line as they rushed through dressing. Then they would line up outside to march to the mess hall for breakfast where they ate from tin trays and sat at long wooden tables on benches. Stegeman had ground school in the morning, and before lunch she also had physical training. After lunch, she took her turn flying.²³

After completing Primary Training, the class moved on to Basic Training where they learned to fly 400-450 horsepower engines. They nick-named the planes in which

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

they trained during this stage the “Vultee Vibrator” because of its tendency to vibrate more than any other plane. Also during Basic Training they learned to use radios and instrument training. Stegeman thought Basic Training was the hardest because suddenly she had to learn to fly a larger plane, fly it “blind,” and use the radio when landing. To practice for night flights, the instructors covered the windows of the airplane with curtains to simulate night flying which forced the pilots only to rely on the instruments which was referred to as flying blind.²⁴

After completing Basic Training, Stegeman started Advanced Training. The women flew the AT-6, the North American Texan, which they enjoyed. Part of its charm was that it had retractable landing gear. The other plane they flew was a twin engine Cessna which had several nicknames: the “Flying Boxcar,” the “Double Breasted Cub,” and the “Woodpecker’s Delight.” Stegeman did not like the plane because it was difficult for her to land. Eventually, after she had ferried many of the Cessnas in the Ferry Command she was able to land them smoothly.²⁵

While in Advanced Training, two of her classmates and an instructor were killed. The two trainees had flown out with their instructor but did not come back. All the planes had landed, but when their plane did not, scouts were sent to find them hoping they had been forced to land elsewhere. The following morning it was clear to the base that the plane had crashed. The army air force never ascertained what happened, and there was unproven talk of sabotage among the trainees. There were several planes

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

where cables were cut, rags stuffed in the fuel system, or where sand or sugar was poured into the fuel system.²⁶

The remains of the trainees were sent home escorted by volunteers. Those who volunteered usually were friends, who would sit up all night in the box car of the train with the casket. In the summertime it was stifling hot and in the winter it was freezing, but there was always an escort to take the caskets home. When the body arrived home, the family could not display a gold star in the window or place a flag over the casket, and there was no military service insurance. In the 1940s, the women did not complain about the lack of respect given to the pilots who died, but believed they were fortunate to have the opportunity to do something for their country that women had never been allowed to do before. Simply the fact that they were allowed to fly the big, beautiful airplanes helped them overlook the discrimination.²⁷

After receiving their wings and orders, the class of 43-w-5 had a lively graduation party. Among some of their antics were dumping the sleeping underclassmen out of their beds in the middle of the night and running all over the post. Stegeman had the establishment officer chase her up on the roof of one of the barracks, but she escaped her. The trainees had worked hard for six long months under sparse conditions often in 100 degrees or higher temperatures without having the weekends off. They believed they had earned some much needed fun. After a few days of vacation, Stegeman reported to Love Field in Dallas, Texas.²⁸

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

When Millie McLelland Christiansen, 43-w-6, who had learned to march and fly in the Civilian Air Patrol, arrived at Avenger Field she first noticed that the barracks were not completed. There were no windows or doors on them. She had expected the program to provide them with a few of the necessary items such as towels, but it did not. The first few weeks McLelland was there she dried off in the West Texas winds until she was allowed to go into town to buy supplies. At night in hot weather, the trainees would drag their cots outside between the rows of barracks to sleep, but one night a woman found a rattlesnake by her barrack's entryway. McLelland's roommates changed periodically as pilots washed out or voluntarily withdrew.²⁹

McLelland recalled that the pilots of 43-w-5 were especially kind to the incoming trainees of 43-w-6. They taught them how to make their beds properly and showed them what would be expected from them. Prior to 43-w-5 deciding to be nice to the incoming women, it had been common to haze the newest trainees on base. After 43-w-5, it became customary for the upperclassmen to help the underclassmen as much as they were able.³⁰

The first Sunday that McLelland was allowed, she attended the First Baptist Church in Sweetwater. A woman came up to her and invited her home for dinner. McLelland accepted and the woman's home and family became McLelland's home and family whenever she was off base. When her family came for her graduation, the church family graciously allowed McLelland's family to stay at their home.³¹

²⁹Mildred McLelland Christiansen, interview by Deanie Parrish, 22 May 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

A trainee from McLelland's class was killed, but due to the busy schedule and heavy demands placed on her, she did not have time to be affected by it. She was more afraid of washing out than of being killed or injured. One of the women in her class fell out of her airplane while doing a spin. The seat belt unfastened, and she fell out. She was able to parachute down but wind dragged her across a field and into a fence. Her injuries prevented her from completing training.³²

The hardest part of training was the mechanical part of it. Fortunately the WASP had excellent mechanics who took care of the airplanes for them. McLelland enjoyed learning Morse code and was able to teach it to other women in her bay that needed extra help with it. The best part of training for McLelland, as it was for the majority, was being able to fly daily. Until they were no longer allowed to do so, she and a few others would go out to the air field at night when the planes were sitting and they would climb in to the planes and go over the entire flight procedures for extra practice. Upon graduation McLelland was granted her request to be assigned to Love Field in Dallas.³³

Maxine Edmondson Flournoy, 43-w-8, who also had learned to fly because of the Civilian Pilot Training Program, was met at the train station by Avenger Field officials and was taken along with several other arriving trainees in the cattle truck to Avenger. When they reached the base, she saw a group of trainees in their khaki slacks and white shirts marching while airplanes flew overhead. She was impressed by what she saw and was excited and proud to be a part of the program. By the time the class of 43-w-8 passed through the gates of Avenger Field, the trainees were no longer allowed to pick

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

their bay mates, but were assigned alphabetically. Edmondson liked all her bay mates. Four of them were from California and one was from New York, so with Edmondson also being from California, they had a fun time teasing the New Yorker; all of them graduated. She also recalls that the summer she was there, they were served squash almost every day. She had never eaten squash before and hated when they put the “yellow blob” on her tray. She was not able to say she did not want any; the kitchen staff served it to the women whether they liked it or not.³⁴

Avenger had a few auxiliary fields that were not paved. They were fields of grass or in the summer, dirt. The fields became dusty in the summer and the wind blew dust all over West Texas. Edmondson recalled how it made its way into their bedding so she shook her sheets out before climbing into bed. The dust and dirt stuck in their hair as well so that hair became stiff with it. On Saturdays the bays were inspected by an officer in white gloves. If he found any dust on a trainees belonging, she was not allowed to leave base that weekend.³⁵

Edmondson graduated soon before Christmas and was able to go home to Joplin, Missouri, before having to report to Hondo Army Air Base in Hondo, Texas. While she was home none of her friends or relatives knew what she did. At that point the WASP did not have an official uniform so she did not receive much recognition. Shortly after Christmas she reported to Hondo.³⁶

³⁴Maxine Edmondson Flournoy, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*

Marie Mountain Clark, 44-w-1, who taught flute lessons before joining the WASP, was immediately assigned to a bay upon her arrival at Avenger Field which she found easy to keep neat because of the sparseness of the room. She shared the mess hall with instructors, but sometimes the instructors had a steak dinner when the trainees did not.³⁷

Mountain's first time on the flight line was exciting. Not long into her training she had an experience in an open cockpit airplane which would have been either a PT-17 or PT-19. She was thrown out while training with her instructor at one of Avenger's auxiliary fields. Her safety belt came unfastened, and when she popped the stick for a spin recovery, out she went. Fortunately Mountain had been taught in ground school what to do in that situation. She was about three-thousand feet above the ground when she pulled the rip cord in her parachute harness. Her instructor was able to land the plane, and Mountain made a soft landing in a cotton field. She gathered up her parachute and started walking down the rows of cotton. A plane flying above her gave her directions to the nearest road where an instructor took her in a truck back to the auxiliary field. She became the first WASP to join the Caterpillar Club, named because the parachutes were made of silk. She soloed two days later.³⁸

When Mountain had time off base, she went to church. She performed on her flute in the services when she was able. Despite the time training took, she found time to practice in the washroom. Once or twice she was asked to perform for a WASP related

³⁷Marie Mountain Clark, interview by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

³⁸Ibid.

function such as a graduation. As much as she enjoyed the machinery of the day, she needed to hear music.³⁹

Although Cochran attended many graduations, she was not present at Mountain's graduation. The 44-w-1 trainees wore the new Santiago Blue uniforms for the first time at graduation. Mountain's parents took a train to Sweetwater a few days prior to graduation to watch her on her last day of flying. They sat at the base of the control tower, and her dad took pictures. Mountain, as were all of the members of her class, was given a choice of assignments and asked for the Southwestern part of the US. She had two weeks of vacation time before she reported to Las Vegas, Nevada.⁴⁰

Liz Wall Strohfus, 44-w-1, who as a child had dreamed of becoming a successful somebody, was shocked at how hot it was in Sweetwater. All the new trainees in her class met at the Bluebonnet Hotel before being driven to the air field in the cattle trucks. As was fashionable for the time, every one of the women had on skirts and high heeled shoes. They were met by an establishment officer who took them to their assigned barracks. The bay assignments were made alphabetically so Wall and her sister Mary were in the same bay. Both were shy and modest. Stepping into a shower with their bay mates around was difficult. Wall went so far as to change her clothes in the small locker provided for each woman. No longer having privacy was an adjustment for Wall, but the WASP were an exciting time in her life. She was grateful for the opportunity to fly military airplanes.⁴¹

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Elizabeth Wall Strohfus, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, n.d., Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

Her sister did well in ground school and tutored Wall who had a difficult time. But Wall knew her sister was afraid to do acrobatics. They had been at Avenger about five weeks before her sister washed out. The sisters had the same instructor who later told Wall that he would yell at Wall's sister and swear at her. She was not accustomed to that type of language and it made her more nervous. The instructor asked Mary what he could do to help her relax. She asked him to stop swearing at her, which he did. The instructor knew she needed to overcome her fear of acrobatics, so he told her they would spin down in the plane until she pulled out. She did not pull out. He washed her out because he knew if he did not wash her out; it would not be long before she was sent home in a box. When she washed out, she was sad but not bitter. Wall's sister was well behaved at all times, but both sisters' hearts were broken that she had to go home.⁴²

Wall enjoyed flying, but after she had completed Primary and Basic Training, a farmer from her hometown flew his private plane down to see her. He said she had flown enough military aircraft and now it was time for her to come home and marry him. After two days of mentally going back and forth on the decision, they went to Big Springs, Texas, together. No place was available where they could rent two rooms, so they stayed in one room together. They agreed she would take the bed and he would take the chair, but he fell asleep on the bed. Wall sat up in the chair all night with the light on until morning. She had never been so nervous, and the next morning they returned to Avenger Field. She thought he had been nice to her, so maybe she would marry him. He wanted her to leave with him immediately, but she told him she had to stay a day to say goodbye to her friends and the airplanes. She would meet him in Kansas City where he would be visiting his cousin. She then went to Leoti Deaton to tell her that she wanted to resign,

⁴²Ibid.

but before she could resign, Deaton told her she had to fly the AT-6. After the flight she called him and said she would not go home to marry him. She finished her training and graduated.⁴³

When Annabelle Craft Moss, 44-w-2, who had double majored in Spanish and primary education, arrived at Avenger and saw all the airplanes, she wanted to turn around and go home. She did not know if she would be able to survive the training. She was one of the few who was not bothered by living with so many women and enjoyed having them all around. After only two weeks, she was the only one left in her bay who had not washed out. One night she slept all alone. The next day the remaining women were moved around to fill in the empty spaces.⁴⁴

In her free time Craft wrote love letters to men she knew. They were apparently good love letters because she received compliments on them. A pilot for a United States' general came to visit her at Avenger Field. Usually the trainees were not allowed guests, but being a general's pilot made him important enough to break the rule. The love letter she had written to him must have been a little too good because he showed up with the intention of marrying her. Craft was shocked he had come to see her to make a proposal of marriage. The two never spoke again after that.⁴⁵

Before one of her first cross country training flights, Craft and other trainees were taught to fly above five-hundred feet at all times. Some pilots took this too seriously and went up so high they did not have enough oxygen. They barely made it to their

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Annabelle Craft Moss, interview by Deanie Parrish, 11 September 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁴⁵Ibid.

destination in Tucson, Arizona, before continuing on to Blythe, California. In California the women met a group of male pilots who were worried about the women flying home to Sweetwater. The male pilots told the trainees to circle around a nearby lake after take-off. When all were there, they moved into formation to fly to Avenger. The WASP trainees were not taught to fly formation so they just kept going around the lake to the male pilots' frustration. Finally the lead pilot threw his hands in the air and motioned for them to follow. General Arnold pinned the wings on the class of 44-w-2. Craft received orders to report to Randolph Field in Texas. After graduation she was never with another WASP again.⁴⁶

Mary Helen Crane Foster, 44-w-3, who had worked at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio before being accepted into the WASP program, was not impressed with Avenger Field. Her first impression of Avenger Field was that it was hot, dry, dusty, and generally not pretty. Because she had been taught Preflight in San Antonio, she was allowed to miss ground school and only go in once a week to take the tests along with the other members of her class. Unlike most of the trainees who commented on having difficulties in ground school, calisthenics was the hardest part of training for her.⁴⁷

Crane had more close calls than the majority of trainees. Her first was on a solo cross country flight with a small group of trainees. They were scheduled to fly to Amarillo, Oklahoma City, and Greenville, Texas, before returning to Avenger. She was assigned to fly a sputtering PT-19 that would not move very fast. Crane asked to take off first just in case something happened with the plane. The engine died while she was in

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Mary Helen Crane Foster, interview by Deanie Parrish, n.d., Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

the air, and she had to make a forced landing in a peanut field. Two young teenage boys were nearby on horseback and rode over to the plane to make sure the pilot was not hurt. They called, “Hey mister, are you okay?” The boys were shocked when she said she was a woman and was all right. They offered to let her ride one of their horses to the nearest phone, but she preferred to walk. Leaving the two boys to guard the airplane she walked to the farm house and was welcomed in by the farmer and his wife. That night she slept on a feather bed, and the next morning the farmer’s wife prepared a huge breakfast. Later that morning two instructors landed next to the plane. She explained the problem, and she and one of the instructors took off together to go to Ft. Worth for repairs.⁴⁸

When she finally returned to Avenger late that night, she was exhausted from the whole experience, but was immediately handed maps and told to be ready to fly to California the next morning. In the previous class, a trainee had been killed while flying the same cross country route to California. Her plane caught on fire from a gasoline leak and when she bailed out, she hit her head on the plane. She parachuted down and was picked up by a group of miners who rushed her to the hospital. While Crane was flying she began to smell gasoline. She could not feel anything damp so she continued on to California. After landing, she asked the mechanic to check out her airplane for a gas leak. He told her he would. The next day when she was preparing to take off she asked the same mechanic if he had fixed the problem and he told her he had. Crane found the airplane sitting in a pool of gasoline. She found the mechanic and he said he would fix it

⁴⁸Ibid.

again. The trip back to Avenger was nerve-wracking because she could still smell the gasoline and thought about the WASP who had died.⁴⁹

Another time Crane started an AT-6 on a cold morning and primed the engine before starting down the runway. The engine caught on fire so she called the tower to inform them the engine was on fire. She told the tower she was still on the flight line, but they kept asking her where she was. After the incident she was restricted to the base for three weekends and wrote a 1000-word thesis on how properly to start the AT-6. A mechanic later told her someone had put too much oil in the engine causing it to over flow. The excessive amount of oil started the fire and not her having primed the engine, but she was blamed for it.⁵⁰

Her parents and Jacqueline Cochran attended her graduation. She was not given a choice on her orders and was assigned to Malden, Missouri, which was a Basic Training field. She was the only WASP ever assigned to that location.⁵¹

Deanie Bishop Parrish, 44-w-4, left her job as a bank teller to in Houston to travel to Sweetwater, Texas, and like the others before her, was picked up for training from the Bluebonnet Hotel. She was taken to the army air field which seemed to have more sagebrush and rolling tumbleweeds than airplanes. Upon arrival at the base she was issued her clothing and bedding and was told the trainees were only allowed one small suitcase in the barracks. Her class was divided alphabetically into the barracks and into their flight groups. The first half of the alphabet was in flight A and the second group in

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

flight B. Her five bay mates were all from different parts of the country. One was a model from Houston, Texas; one was from California, another from Arizona, and one from Michigan. One was from South Carolina and her father was a personal friend of a Supreme Court Justice.⁵²

Bishop was told that she would spend seventy hours in Primary Training, seventy hours in Basic Training, and seventy hours in Advanced flying. Basic Training emphasized learning to use instruments to fly and Advanced was spent learning to fly cross country. At this point the program was still not militarized, but many of the WASP and trainees believed it was only a matter of time. Commanding General of the Army Air Forces Henry “Hap” Arnold believed it would take Congress too long to grant military status, so they were given civilian status so they could be trained and flying as soon as possible to help the war effort. The WASP were paid by the Civil Service Administration and had civilian instructors, but at Avenger the ground army officers were in charge and they had army officers perform the check rides.⁵³

There were three students to an instructor. If the instructor believed that the trainees were not meeting the requirements, he would send the trainee on a check ride. If the trainee failed the test, she would go before a board of army officers. Usually when that occurred, a trainee would be in the barracks in the morning and her locker would be cleaned out before the other residents of the bay came home. Over half of class 44-w-4 washed out. On graduation day Jacqueline Cochran was there to pin the wings on the

⁵²Marie O’dean Bishop Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁵³Ibid.

graduates, and the remaining members of the class received their orders. Bishop was the only member of her class sent to Greenville, Mississippi.⁵⁴

Doris Brinker Tanner, 44-w-4, who was one of the small number of married WASP, arrived by train to Sweetwater and spent the night at the Bluebonnet Hotel along with all the other new trainees who had already made it to Sweetwater. Her first impression of the other pilots was that they were all much better flyers than she and that she would end up being the dumbest and least experienced of them all. Fortunately, she did well in training. After the first woman washed out only two weeks into the program, she never doubted her flying abilities again during training. Tanner was determined to stay and receive her wings.⁵⁵

The first day on base the class was given preventative typhus injections which made the whole group sore and sick for a couple of days. After receiving her bay assignment, her biggest adjustment to life at Avenger was the bathroom she shared with eleven other women. To her it seemed like she could never use it when she needed. There were two sinks, two toilets, and a shower stall with two shower heads in it. Most trainees quickly forgot all modesty.⁵⁶

Class 44-w-4 was trained differently from the previous classes. They were the “guinea pigs” for the army. They went straight from Primary Training to Advanced Training. The military wanted to try the new training method with the male cadets but decided to find if the women were able successfully to do it first. They did not want to

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Doris Brinker Tanner, interview by Deanie Parrish, 12 August 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁵⁶Ibid.

lose any of the men, and if they were going to have to lose an entire class, they preferred it to be the women. The experiment was successful. After completing Primary and Advanced Training, they were then taught how to fly using instruments.⁵⁷

On graduation day, 44-w-4 was the first class to be able to wear the new official WASP uniform for the ceremony. The Santiago blue uniform was created by Neiman Marcus, an upscale department store, and was made out of a beautiful gabardine fabric. Tanner was assigned to Douglas Air Force Base in Arizona along with two others from her class. After graduation they were granted two weeks before they were to report for active duty. Tanner visited her relatives in Dallas and Brownsville, Texas, before visiting her mother in St. Louis. From St. Louis she caught a ride on a B-17 to Douglas Air Force Base.⁵⁸

Anita Paul, 44-w-6, who had wanted to become a missionary in order to fly airplanes, recalled that she never had any problems with her bay mates. Everyone did as they were told with the exception of once in the summertime. One of the bay mates hid a watermelon in the ice house. One afternoon they were able to sneak over and enjoy it. On Sundays Paul was allowed off base to attend Mass and found the people of Sweetwater to be kind. Often she was invited home with them for dinner, but generally refused because the trainees were supposed to be back on base immediately after the worship service they attended.⁵⁹

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Anita Paul (a.k.a. Sister Teresa), interview by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

During training Paul's instructor took her up in an open cockpit plane. In order to emphasize the importance of the seat belt, he had her let her arms hang down. She wanted to hang on to the sides, but the instructor made her let go and hang from the seat belt. Another instructor lost his student doing that, but fortunately she was able to parachute safely to the ground. One pilot died from class 44-w-6 while soloing. She started to do a spin and ended up doing four in a row before the plane was out of control. Paul and others at Avenger watched the airplane spiral to the ground. Her bay was at the end of the line of barracks. The windows overlooked the airplane graveyard where damaged airplanes from as long as there had been an airfield at Avenger were placed. The instructors used the graveyard as a reminder to the students to be careful and not to be "hot pilots."⁶⁰

Paul's sister came to Texas to watch her graduate. They were unable to spend much time together because one of the WASP father was a colonel in the army air force and offered anyone needing a ride back to Washington, D.C., a spot on the B-24 he flew to Avenger. From Washington, D.C., Paul took a train to Boston to spend a few days with her family before reporting to Altus, Oklahoma.⁶¹

Francie Meisner Park, 44-w-10, who had worked as a link trainer operator, felt good when she arrived on a Sunday night in Sweetwater. For Meisner it was an adjustment to share a room and bathroom after having grown up as an only child. She eventually began to enjoy the camaraderie and was a part of one of the few bays which never lost anyone by resignation, washout, or death. By the time the class graduated,

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

almost 50 percent washed out. Having been a Link operator before entering the program helped her fly by the instruments easier than most of the women. In training they were required to complete thirty-five hours of Link training.⁶²

While in training Meisner, as well as the other members of 44-w-10, were notified that the WASP would be disbanded. Most WASP anticipated being militarized in September 1944, but rumors abounded as to their fate. The trainees went to bed with one set of rumors and woke up with another set the remainder of training. In September 1944 the WASP were not militarized and a date for deactivation was set in November. The last day for the WASP would be 20 December 1944. The class of 44-w-10 was scheduled to graduate on 7 December 1944. They had their bags packed to go home, but the commanding officer announced that they would be given two week assignments. They were all sent as close as possible to Sweetwater so they would not waste their time traveling.⁶³

Frankie Yearwood, 44-w-10, who had first worked at an aircraft company as a riveter before being promoted to inspector, thought she was the only WASP in her class who had not been to college. Her highest level of education had been high school so she knew she needed to give the WASP everything she had to be able to make it. She considered herself inferior to her classmates and thought they knew more than she did. Once she came to know her bay mates, she found out that they did not know much more about flying than she did. By graduation only two of her bay mates graduated with her.⁶⁴

⁶²Francie Meisner Park, interview by Deanie Parrish, 7 November 2001, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Frankie Yearwood, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, n.d., Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

Toward the end of her training, the entire class received the news that the WASP program would be disbanded. They would be sent on a temporary basis to an assignment, and they were all disappointed. Yearwood was assigned to tow targets. The disbanding seemed as though they had gone through training for no reason. For the graduation of 44-w-10 General Arnold gave them their wings. Cochran was also in attendance and special efforts were made to make the ceremony as nice as possible. A disappointment hung over the graduates still with the special arrangements. Yearwood was sent directly to her assigned base without any vacation time.⁶⁵

Determined to overcome the challenges in front of them, the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) entered training in either Houston or Sweetwater, Texas. They suffered prejudices from their male instructors and check pilots, watched their friends “wash out” of the program which also served as a reminder to them that they could be washed out anytime as well, and a few classes mourned the death of classmate. All of the seventeen WASP in this study remember their time at Avenger Field fondly. They comment on the camaraderie of living with women who were working toward the same goal and how the friends made there became their friends for the rest of their lives.

As the first women to fly planes for the military, they were of considerable interest to male pilots and the medical community in particular. Avenger Field had originally trained male cadets from Britain, but after Cochran arranged to move her female pilot program there, no more male cadets were sent there for training. The last group of men left Avenger Field shortly after the first class of women pilots arrived. Neighboring army air bases were curious about an all female air base and in their first

⁶⁵Ibid.

week as an all female base, over one hundred male pilots made “forced landings” at Avenger Field. The base command ordered Avenger Field closed to all outside air traffic with the exception of emergency situations.⁶⁶

The medical community was also interested in the WASP. All trainees had to pass the strenuous Form 64 Army Air Forces physical exam, but as many WASP noted in this study, they were rarely given an adequate exam. The doctors commonly were unsure what to do when examining women or became embarrassed by the situation. Only one military base is known to have closed off an entire ward so that two potential female trainees could be examined properly. While training they were examined more closely by Army Flight Surgeon of Avenger Field, Doctor Nels Monsrud. Dr. Monsrud monitored their every move. He kept records of their weight, menstrual cycles, and compared them to the women’s performances in ground school and in the air. He found that the trainees tended to perform better at the start of their period and concluded that the women tried harder on those days. His intent was to determine if women could physically handle the daily stress of flying.⁶⁷

The joy all the WASP experiences at graduation was well deserved. They had struggled in a short period of time with the trying West Texas climate, the loss of friends and class mates to wash out or death, and adjusting to the “army way.” With anticipation, the newly graduated WASP looked forward to their new assignments all over the continental United States. Some would be joining a group of WASP already stationed at their assigned base and others would be the only WASP to be assigned to their location.

⁶⁶Keil, 161.

⁶⁷Keil, 168-169.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fly Girls

The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) initially flew as ferry pilots, but as the program grew they also worked as test pilots and instructors, towed targets, and learned to fly the military's largest and fastest airplanes. The WASP who flew as ferry pilots had the opportunity to travel extensively and received various reactions around the country. One WASP was mistaken for a female plumber while wearing her khaki flight suit. Another time in early 1944 four WASP were forced to land in Americus, Georgia, due to inclement weather. They borrowed a car to drive into town for the night to find a place to sleep but were stopped by the police for wearing slacks in public after dark and arrested for impersonating officers. The women were not allowed to make a phone call until 2:00 A.M. when they called Nancy Love, WASP executive with the Air Transport Command's Ferrying Division, who immediately made arrangements for their release.¹

On 15 October 1943 the first seventeen WASP were sent to B-17 school at Lockbourne Army Air Base in Ohio. The B-17, nicknamed the "Flying Fortress," was a heavy, four-engine bomber that was difficult to fly. All seventeen women assigned to fly it had to be a minimum of five feet four inches in height or preferably taller as ordered by Jacqueline Cochran, the director of the WASP program. The average height among them was five feet eight inches with two of the women reaching six feet in height.² The women were enrolled in B-17 school for three months where they learned to fly the

¹Sally Van Wagenen Keil, *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines: The Unknown Heroines of World War II* (New York: Four Directions Press, 1979), 258-259.

²Ibid., 184 – 187.

plane. The women also had to be able to disassemble and reassemble parts of the airplane. When the WASP graduated from Lockbourne, they earned among the highest scores in their class.³

While in B-17 school, the WASP were closely watched by the Army Medical Corps just as they had been in Sweetwater, Texas. Early in their training, an anthropologist arrived at the base to measure the size of their skulls. Later in their training they were taken to nearby Wright-Patterson Field in Dayton, Ohio, to be tested in the high altitude chamber. They all earned their certification to fly above 35,000 feet in the unpressurized airplanes. The WASP were among the first women to receive their certification along with a handful of female nurses.⁴

The first ten WASP were chosen to attend Pursuit School in Palm Springs, California, on 1 December 1943, before the school was moved to Brownsville, Texas. One of the pursuit planes the WASP flew was the P-47, the biggest single-engine plane in the United States. The P-47 weighed 12,500 pounds and had a 2,400 horsepower engine. The plane was valued at \$100,000 and often carried secret equipment and medical supplies to troops overseas. On ferrying trips the pilots had to be careful with the plane and cargo. The WASP were taught to carry guns with them to shoot a specific spot on the fuselage that would instantly ignite the airplane if they were forced to land in suspicious circumstances. The WASP who flew the pursuit planes had a lower accident rate than the men.⁵

³Ibid., 189 – 209.

⁴Ibid., 194.

⁵Ibid., 235-252.

Twenty-five women from the class of 43-w-3 were selected by Jacqueline Cochran for a top-secret mission. If these twenty-five WASP were successful, more would be given non-ferrying assignments. These WASP were also tested in a high-altitude chamber and received their certification to fly as high as 38,000 feet and were sent to Camp Davis in North Carolina. Upon their arrival at Camp Davis, the twenty-five WASP knew that they would not be ferrying airplanes, but they did not know what their job would be. Camp Davis had 50,000 officers and enlisted men including 600 pilots whose job was to act like the enemy and simulate attacks for the training of thousands of army air force air-to-air and ground-to-air gunners. The pilots at Camp Davis flew poorly maintained A-24 Douglas Dauntlesses while towing a twenty foot muslin sleeve behind the airplanes. The gunners first used tracer bullets that were dipped in different colored paint that made it possible for the officers to gauge the accuracy of the gunners, and then they would progress to using live ammunition. The gunners could be just as dangerous to the tow-target pilots as the enemy because it was not uncommon for them to shoot at the airplanes because of miscommunication or poor aim. Sadly, two WASP were killed while at Camp Davis because of the bad condition of the planes. Traces of sugar were found in one of the airplane's gas tank, but Cochran's official investigation did not mention it as a cause of the crash which angered and frustrated the WASP assigned there.⁶

Of all the jobs performed by pilots, the job of being a test pilot was most often refused by men. They believed that if they were going to risk their lives, they wanted it to be in combat. On fifty plus training bases the WASP were assigned to be the primary pilots performing test flights. Every plane a test pilot flew had a problem from something

⁶Ibid., 210-221.

minor to an exploded engine, and the test pilot's purpose was to ensure the plane had been repaired properly before it was used in training again. One mechanic accidentally fastened his fifty-pound toolbox to the right wing of a plane after making other repairs to it which caused the plane to pull dangerously to the right.⁷

Before the WASP were deactivated, fifty WASP were sent to Orlando, Florida, for a four week Army Air Force School of Advanced Tactics in preparation for the militarization of the program. The WASP studied military flow charts, military law, and court-martials. They were also shown top-secret bomb-sights and radar equipment in addition to being trained for jungle survival. The women were given whiffs of mustard gas and cyanide to prepare them in the event of chemical warfare.⁸ The seventeen WASP interviews used in this study describe their role in easing the pressure in the army air force caused by the shortage of male pilots.

On 14 June 1943 Ruth Dailey Helm, 43-w-2, who had trained in Houston, reported to Love Field in Dallas, Texas, to fly for the Ferrying Division. Dailey enjoyed being stationed in Dallas because it was not as "military" as other bases. Love Field was run by older airline pilots who jokingly referred to the Air Transport Command as the "Army of Terrified Civilians."⁹ At the time of Dailey's arrival many WASP were already stationed there who had originally been members of the Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron (WAFS) and acted as the newly graduated pilots' commanding officers.

⁷Ibid., 272-275.

⁸Ibid., 276.

⁹Ruth Dailey Helm, interview by Deanie Parrish, 12 November 1999, Waco, TX, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

At Love Field the WASP had their own barracks with a ready room, offices, and bathing facilities on the first floor with individual private sleeping rooms upstairs.¹⁰

The WASP squadron was set up like the men's: they had a commanding officer and an operations officer, and they received orders from base operations to WASP operations. Dailey's first assignment was to pick up a PT-13 in Wichita, Kansas, and deliver it to a base in Florida. When the group of WASP landed in Florida, they were the first women the men on base had seen in awhile so their pictures were taken often. The WASP received publicity on base newspapers, but were kept out of the civilian newspapers. In the beginning, Dailey flew new airplanes straight from the factory lines, but at the end of the war she flew more "war weary" airplanes.¹¹

In the fall of 1943 the WASP at Love Field were given the choice of learning to fly pursuit or heavier aircraft, and Dailey opted to go to pursuit school in Palm Springs, California. In Palm Springs the pilots spent a week on each pursuit plane and checked out in the P-39, P-40, P-47, and P-51. After completing pursuit training, Dailey flew a large number of pursuits with a red star painted on them that were being taken to Alaska where they would be picked up by Russian pilots.¹²

In May 1944 Dailey was one of the fifty WASP chosen to attend Officer Candidate School in Orlando, Florida, and according to Dailey, the WASP were taught nothing that was useful. They were taught aircraft recognition and survival among other classes that were useless to the WASP. In the survival class the instructor gave tips on how to live in the Everglades and eat rattlesnake. After a wasted month in Florida,

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

Dailey returned to Love Field where she learned of the planned deactivation of the WASP and was devastated. The war was not over yet and the WASP at Love Field were still busy which made the news more difficult. Dailey knew that she would continue to fly after the war, but did not plan on making it her career. The WASP who hoped to make flying a permanent career were especially saddened by deactivation.¹³

Elinore Owen Pyle, 43-w-3, who trained in Houston but graduated from Sweetwater, paid for her own train ticket to Wilmington, Delaware, and was picked up from the train station by an army car that took her to her first base assignment at New Castle Army Air Field. The majority of her assignments were to ferry PT-19s and Piper Cubs from factories in the North East to training bases in Texas and Oklahoma. After she delivered the airplanes she would take a commercial airline back to New Castle. The WASP were given top priority with the airlines which allowed them to “bump” from a flight all but the highest ranking officials.¹⁴

Not long after Owen arrived at New Castle AAF she began to feel ill and thought it was a cold. After she had been sick for six weeks she saw a doctor who diagnosed her with mononucleosis and immediately grounded her and put her in the hospital for three weeks. The hospital’s treatment for mononucleosis was to feed her a great deal of food. When she was released from the hospital, she immediately resumed her ferrying duties.¹⁵

Soon after her discharge from the hospital, Owen was given orders to report to Maxwell Field near Montgomery, Alabama. The base command was not sure what to do

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Elinore Pyle, interview by Deanie Parrish, 30 July 2001, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

¹⁵Ibid.

with her so it was not long before she was transferred to the training base at Greenwood, South Carolina, to fly as a test pilot. She shared a room with the only other WASP stationed there, and they decorated their room with curtains earning it the nickname “The Bridal Suite.” While at Greenwood, Owen met the man who would become her husband, Army Air Force First Lieutenant William “Bill” Pyle, a flight instructor at that base.¹⁶

Owen was transferred a third time to Randolph Army Air Force Base (AAFBB) near San Antonio, Texas, for instructor school where she was taught formation flying, acrobatics, and instrument training. After completing her instructor training she returned to Greenwood for a short time before she resigned and moved to California to be closer to her sister and Bill Pyle. Before resigning she had a month of leave available to her so she used it to aerial hitchhike to California. She caught a flight with a general flying from Greenwood to California. After she settled herself comfortably with a paperback book to read during the flight, the general asked to see her. He wanted her to figure out their location and, once she accomplished that, to take over the flying of the plane. While she flew he asked her why she wanted to go to California, and she explained it was to see her fiancé who was stationed at Santa Rosa Army Air Field in Santa Rosa, California. Coincidentally he was the general in charge of that particular base and made arrangements with the radio operator on the base to have Pyle meet the plane. Pyle met the plane, but no one had told him why the general wanted him. He thought he was in trouble for flying under bridges and was surprised to see Owen exiting the plane behind the general. While the couple was being reunited the general told the radio operator to contact the St. Francis Hotel where he arranged for the couple to have rooms and be married the following day. Bill had not yet asked Owen officially to marry him, but the couple married on 20 May

¹⁶Ibid.

1944. Both the bride and groom wore their uniforms for the ceremony. When her leave was over, Owen returned to Greenwood to resign from the WASP.¹⁷

The first base assignment for Ruth Underwood Florey, 43-w-4, who had had a classmate killed in training, was Love Field in Dallas, Texas. She was not in Dallas long before she was selected to go to Camp Davis in North Carolina. At Camp Davis she flew tow target and smoke-laying missions in A-24s and A-25s. While she was stationed there her brother was sent to an army air force training base in Georgia, and she was granted permission from her commanding officer to check out an A-25 to visit him for the day. Underwood flew to Georgia without problems, but she had a problem common among the WASP when she tried to land. The radio operator in the control tower told her “this is a military airfield and we have an A-25 trying to land, woman get off the airways!”¹⁸ Underwood futilely explained she was trying to land the A-25, and when she finally landed, military police were waiting to escort her to the flight line and removed her from the plane. Her brother had waited for her on the flight line but wanted her to go home immediately because she flew the A-25. He was embarrassed to be flying primary trainers while his sister flew more powerful aircraft.¹⁹

A similar incident occurred when she flew to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to visit a friend from her home town who was stationed there. Again she had difficulty being allowed to land and once again was met by military police. Underwood was removed from the plane by the military police and charged with stealing an aircraft and

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ruth Florey, interview by Deanie Parrish, 20 September 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

¹⁹Ibid.

impersonating an officer. She explained what she was doing there and finally the commanding officer called Camp Davis to verify her statement. As soon as she was able Underwood returned home without seeing her friend.²⁰

The WASP at Camp Davis were not welcome in the officer's club but were allowed to sit in an upstairs balcony separated from the men. The WASP would occasionally throw hard boiled eggs down on the officers seated below. After flying at Camp Davis for a while, Underwood was transferred to Camp Stewart, Georgia, and then to Biggs Army Air Field near El Paso, Texas. The WASP program was deactivated while she was at Biggs AAF, and from El Paso she returned to her home in Brownwood, Texas.²¹

Sylvia Dahmes Clayton, 43-w-5, who had chosen Romulus Army Air Base (AAB) near Detroit, Michigan, for her base assignment after completing training, was given the job of ferrying planes in the North Eastern United States and occasionally to Calgary and Ontario, Canada. While a WASP, Dahmes did not have an active social life. She went on occasional dates with pilots to the officers' club but more often would go out with other WASP and male officers in groups.²²

Dahmes received orders to go to Pursuit School in Brownsville, Texas, but after completing the training, she was not able to fly many pursuit planes because the WASP program was disbanded. The P-51 was her favorite plane to fly because it made her feel

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Sylvia Dahmes Clayton, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, 3 November 2001, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

as though she had left her stomach behind when she took off. Dahmes was at Romulus on 20 December 1944 and was disappointed to have to go home.²³

When she reported to Romulus Army Air Base in Michigan, Jo Myers Wheelis, 43-w-5, a member of the first full class to train and graduate from Avenger Field, remembered being taken to the living quarters she shared with the other WASP. There were four or five bedrooms with several cots set up in each room. Myers recalled that the military men on base objected to the WASP being there, but others were excited about the chance to date them.²⁴

Like the majority of WASP stationed at Romulus, Myers primarily flew ferrying missions. She commonly flew Russian planes to Great Falls, Montana, where they were picked up by male pilots and taken to Russia. She also picked up pursuit airplanes in Dallas, Texas, and flew them back to the east coast to be taken overseas. While on the ferrying trips Myers was unable to take many of her personal belongings with her. In the pursuit planes she was able to fit a small bag with a clean shirt, toiletries, and little more. After dropping a plane off she would return to base by train or another airplane.²⁵

Myers was also sent to Pursuit School in Brownsville, Texas, where she learned to fly the P-39, P-40, P-47, P-51, and P-63. The P-63s that were flown while she was in Brownsville had been used in China. Once she was flying in one when the control tower ordered her to return, and after landing she learned that there was a bomb in the nose of

²³Ibid.

²⁴Jo Myers Wheelis, interview by Deanie Parrish, 19 September 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

²⁵Ibid.

the plane with a little button on the gas control that would have dropped it. Someone had forgotten to remove it from the plane before it was flown in training.²⁶

Myers was also selected to attend Officers' Candidate School in Orlando, Florida. She and the other WASP there prepared for the possibility that the WASP would be militarized. They trained in the high altitude chamber, were fitted with masks and sprayed with poisonous gases, practiced survival skills on the ocean, and learned to identify aircraft. Myers believed it was good training and the education she received from it was valuable to her after the WASP was deactivated.

When she learned of the plans to disband the program, Myers decided she would go home early because she was tired. She had not had much time to rest while ferrying planes because she, as well as the others, had been over scheduled and it was wearing on her physically. Once she found out there was no future for her in the WASP program, she no longer wanted to stay so she returned home to Dallas where she lived with her parents and slept until it began to worry her family.²⁷

Marion Stegeman Hodgson, 43-w-5, who had enjoyed being awoken each morning by reveille, was one of the many WASP to be stationed at Love Field in Dallas, Texas. Her commanding officer was Florene Miller, one of the twenty-five original members of the Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron (WAFS). Stegeman lived in barracks T- Eleven which was a large wooden, two storey building with a communal bathroom that had no shower curtains downstairs and individual sleeping quarters on the second floor. The cots they slept on were, according to Stegeman, more uncomfortable

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

than the cots they slept on at Avenger. The WASP were in and out of the barracks all the time because of their ferrying schedules, so it was not uncommon to be alone in the building. One night a man went into Stegeman's room and frightened her because she thought he was a rapist, but before she could jump out the window, the man standing in her doorway scratched his head and muttered "I could have sworn this was T – Eleven" before he walked off. The male pilot who woke Stegeman had been overseas on a ferrying trip and was unaware that women had been moved into his old barracks.²⁸

One of Stegeman's ferrying trips took her to San Bernadino, California, to a flying school. After she turned in the airplane, she gathered up her belongings to catch the first available means of transportation back to Dallas. The "War BB" priority which meant a WASP could "bump" anyone off an airplane, except for a few top officials and the President of the United States. A senator who had been bumped from a plane had the benefit taken away from them, but two weeks later the privilege was reinstated because airplanes began to stack up which evidenced the importance of the WASP program. After arriving at their home bases, ferry pilots were supposed to be allowed a night's sleep in between trips, but frequently Stegeman would arrive back in Dallas around two o'clock in the morning and have orders to ferry another plane a few hours later.²⁹

While Stegeman had been in training, she had received word that her friend, Ned Hodgson, had been in a plane crash and was not expected to live. He had been a long-time friend of her family's and was responsible for convincing Stegeman's mother to sign the papers that allowed her to learn to fly in the first place. After his crash, Stegeman

²⁸Marion Stegeman Hodgson, interview by Deanie Parrish, 5 April 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

²⁹Ibid.

began writing to him everyday to keep his morale high. Because he was not expected to live, she wrote to him about everything she experienced in training and as a WASP. She wrote in detail about her experiences when her classmates were killed as well as sharing details of her flying that she thought would interest him. Hodgson was in the hospital for over a year and a half and he did not die. Once she was on active duty, Stegeman made illegal landings in Richmond, Virginia, near his hospital in Norfolk. As Stegeman continued to fly out of Love Field, Ned was released from the hospital and stationed at Eagle Mountain Lake in Fort Worth, Texas, where the Marine Corps had an air station.³⁰

Stegeman heard about the planned deactivation while she was away from her home base ferrying planes. She never heard anyone speak of it at Love Field but read about it in newspapers. She had difficulty understanding how in less than a year's time the United States had gone from a pilot shortage to a surplus of pilots. In 1944 men were thought of as the bread-winners for their families and believed that the woman's place was in the home. Stegeman understood that the WASP were there to release men for overseas duty and not to replace them. She did not have any bitterness about it and knew she had done her job well when she was needed. Being in love with Ned Hodgson also made it easier for her to accept deactivation because they planned to be married, so Stegeman resigned from the WASP before 20 December 1944.³¹

Mildred "Millie" McLelland Christiansen, 43-w-6, who had trained during the hot summer months, reported to Love Field and was soon checked out in as many airplanes as were available. She was a test pilot for the first ten hours of flying almost all the

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

planes she flew because the planes were new and had never been flown. On one occasion while testing a new plane the hatch flew up on the plane shortly after taking off from Oklahoma, but she was able to grab for it and hold it down until she landed. She was not able to close the hatch entirely, so she had to continue to hold on to it with one hand and land the plane with the other. Another frightening incident happened when McLelland was flying to El Paso, Texas. She was in the middle of nowhere when her engine quit, but before she had to jump out, she was able to start the engine again. When she arrived in El Paso the engine quit again as she started her landing, but as soon as she touched the ground it frustratingly started again.³²

McLelland was also one of the WASP who was sent to Officer Candidate School in Orlando. When she found out that no one from the WASP would become an officer, she was angry because she thought it was unfair. They had been told when they started the program that the WASP would be militarized and some of the WASP would have the opportunity to become officers. McLelland cried when she heard about the planned deactivation and volunteered to fly overseas. Some of the WASP volunteered to continue flying without pay, hoping to prolong their time flying for the war effort. McClelland resigned a week before the 20 December 1944 deadline because she had been offered a job as a secretary in Tulsa, Oklahoma.³³

Maxine Edmondson Flournoy, 43-w-8, who had graduated in time to be home for Christmas, was assigned to Hondo Army Air Base in Hondo, Texas, along with approximately seven to ten other WASP. Hondo AAB was a navigation school for male

³²Mildred McLelland Christiansen, interview by Deanie Parrish, 22 May 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

³³Ibid.

cadets. The commanding officer thought the WASP ought to be back at home in the kitchen, but he did not harass them about it. Later they were put in the charge of a younger officer who thought the WASP were wonderful and could do no wrong. Part of Edmondson's job at Hondo was to slow-time new engines, do engine extensions, and routine test flying. Slow timing an engine meant the pilot had to fly the plane slower than normal in a practice area for two hours to "break it in." After an engine had flown a large number of hours but was still working well, a test pilot would take the plane up to decide if the plane could be flown an extra number of hours before it needed to be overhauled.³⁴

Edmondson learned of deactivation two months before it was scheduled to happen and began to write to every aviation address she could find to apply for jobs. She had two favorable responses: one was from Michigan and the other from Alice, Texas. On the day of deactivation Edmondson returned all of her equipment and left without any special recognition for the job she had done.³⁵

The first assignment of Marie Mountain Clark, 44-w-1, who had continued to practice the flute while in training, was to teach instrument flying to men at Las Vegas Army Air Base in Nevada. Ten other WASP were stationed there with her. Since Las Vegas was a gunnery training school, Mountain eventually stopped teaching instruments and began simulating flight attacks and performing engineering test flights on planes brought back from Russia. While she was stationed there, the WASP were housed in the Bachelor Officers' Quarters along with the nurses.³⁶

³⁴Maxine Edmondson Flournoy, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Marie Mountain Clark, interview by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

Mountain attended B-17 school which is where she met her future husband, John Clark, who was a first lieutenant in the army air force. They met when he wanted to go up in an AT-6 but was not cleared to fly one. He needed someone to take him up and Mountain agreed to do so. Clark decided that he wanted to marry her because she could put on lipstick, talk to the tower, and fly an airplane all at the same time. Mountain was also chosen to attend Officer Candidate School (OCS) in Orlando, Florida, but while she was there, it was announced that the WASP were soon to be disbanded. She remained at OCS and took courses on military courtesy, radar, and learned how properly to use a gas mask. She was disappointed that the program was going to be disbanded, but she was thankful for the wonderful opportunity and decided to return home to her music career.³⁷

Elizabeth Wall Strohfus, 43-w-5, whose sister had washed out of WASP training, received orders to go to Las Vegas Army Air Base along with her classmate, Sylvia Dahmes Clayton. Wall had requested to be sent somewhere where she could fly fighter planes because she liked to fly fast. After two weeks of leave, she took a train at her own expense from Faribault, Minnesota, to Las Vegas AAB. Part of her job was to train gunners by simulating enemy attacks, and Wall said that she “scared the hell out of the gunners. Then they went overseas and won the war.”³⁸

Her first mission was to simulate an attack in an AT-6. Wall removed the canopy from the plane because it was a pleasant day but on her dive down, she was going so quickly that she lost her hat and earphones. From then on she either closed the canopy or did not dive as steeply. Another aspect of her job was to pull a muslin sleeve behind her

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Elizabeth Wall Strohfus, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, n.d., Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

airplane for the gunners to practice shooting. Each pilot had his own color of bullet, so after she landed her plane the sleeve would be examined to see which pilot had been the best at shooting down her aircraft.³⁹

The tow-target pilots, both male and female, were only allowed to fly for four hours each day because the type of flying they were doing was hard on the body. Wall tried to fly more hours each day because she enjoyed the job. Sometimes she flew eight hours a day, without her commanding officer knowing, by volunteering to take other pilots' flights for them. No matter what the mission was, she would take it after the original pilot had signed for it.⁴⁰

In her interview Wall said that she had believed she was the first woman in space. In several of her missions where she served as a co-pilot in a B-17 or B-26, she gathered together parachutes to make a pallet on which to take a nap. On one occasion she fell asleep quickly but was awakened abruptly when she started floating around the cabin suspended in space. The pilot had taken the plane as high in altitude as he could and then dropped it as quickly as possible causing zero gravity in the airplane. Wall viewed it as a humorous situation. She liked the men with whom she worked, and they treated her with respect because she expected it. She did not date much while a WASP and took the rules seriously about not dating instructors or enlisted men.⁴¹

Wall received orders to attend Officer Candidate School (OCS) in Florida, but before she left Las Vegas she became ill and was unable to leave her bed. On the second day of her illness the WASP with whom she lived took her to see the flight surgeon. The

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

flight surgeon told her she must be pregnant to which Wall replied that she was not married. The flight surgeon explained to her that she could become pregnant without marrying the man. In the end she was diagnosed with flight fatigue from flying eight hours a day for two months straight and was sent home for two weeks to rest before she was to report to OCS. Wall concluded that perhaps diving in airplanes for more than four hours a day did negatively affect the body.⁴²

Wall took a train from Faribault to Orlando, Florida, and had a wonderful time at OCS. She and the other OCS WASP had to eat salads made from trees and leaves, learned to acquire oil from a specific type of tree, and ate rattlesnake and other exotic foods that would prepare them for survival in a tropical location. After completing OCS, Wall returned to Las Vegas for a short time before being sent to Avenger Field for more instrument training. Afterwards she returned to Las Vegas to teach instruments and continue to fly dive bombing missions for the gunners to practice.⁴³

In early December 1944 Wall first heard the WASP were to be disbanded. Some of the WASP stationed at Las Vegas left at that time, but Wall stayed until the twentieth. She knew that her job had been to relieve men for combat duty, and now that they were coming back from overseas she was disappointed, but understood. On 20 December Wall turned in all her equipment and drove with Marie Mountain to Mountain's home in Des Moines, Iowa, before continuing by train to Faribault.⁴⁴

Annabelle Craft Moss, 44-w-2, who had been initially intimidated by Avenger Field, received a less than warm welcome at Randolph Field near San Antonio, Texas.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

She was not allowed to live on the field and had to stay in a hotel in San Antonio at her own expense until she found a place to live. Fortunately, the woman who issued her parachute happened to be looking for a roommate. Craft's job was to fly military officers mainly in an AT-6 to military bases and schools in Texas and occasionally nearby states. The AT-6 could only fit one passenger at a time, and she seemed more like a chauffeur than a pilot at times. She recalled that the officers were always polite to her unlike the experiences other WASP had.⁴⁵

On one of her trips she flew to New Orleans to pick up an officer from an airbase to bring back to Texas. The wind changed direction as she was beginning to land, and because the airbase was surrounded by canals, she had to hop over one before she could fly back around to try landing a second time. Making the mistake in front of pilots who were not generally friendly toward the WASP embarrassed her, and she was ready to return to Randolph Field.⁴⁶

Another flight took her to Houston, and minutes before she landed, bad weather started to come in from the Gulf of Mexico and knocked out the radio in the control tower. Craft did not realize it was the tower's radio that was down and went ahead and landed easily anyway. When she climbed out of her plane, other male pilots on the flight line commented on how hard their landings were without the assistance of radio. Craft never had an accident while at Avenger Field or while serving at Randolph Field. She

⁴⁵Annabelle Craft Moss, interview by Deanie Parrish, 11 September 2000, *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

attributes this to God looking out for her while she flew. She believed He helped her make it through training and WASP duty.⁴⁷

Craft was not at Randolph Field longer than a few months before she received a letter from her fiancé. He told her that he would be back from overseas and expected her to be back in Galesburg, Illinois, waiting for him to return. Craft resigned and went home expecting to be married soon, but when she made it home she called her fiancé's parents who told her he was not coming home anytime soon. She was furious that she had resigned simply because her fiancé did not want his future wife having too much fun without him.⁴⁸

Mary Helen Crane Foster, 44-w-3, who had been fortunate enough not to be required to attend ground school, was the only WASP ever assigned to Maulden Army Air Force Base in Missouri. She arrived in Maulden around ten o'clock at night and stayed at a hotel in town before she took a taxi to the airbase the following morning. She expected the men at the base to be glad to have her, and she was proud and excited to be there. Crane reported to the commanding officer on base, and he informed the sergeant that she was there. After a long wait, the sergeant sent word that she could go into his office. Three other officers were in the office to support him. She saluted him and he responded by saying, "I didn't ask for a woman." Crane replied, "I didn't ask to come to Missouri." The officers stared at her, not sure what to do with a woman and told her to go to the nurses' quarters to see if they would take her.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Annabelle Craft Moss, interview by Deanie Parrish, 11 September 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁴⁹Mary Helen Foster, interview by Deanie Parrish, n.d., Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

After settling into the nurses' quarters, Crane was taken to meet the major on base. At their first meeting he sat her in a chair away from the wall and walked in circles around the chair inspecting her. He hostilely asked what she could fly to which she responded that she could fly anything the army air force had. He told her he doubted that and gave her the option of being an instructor or a test pilot. Crane opted to be a test pilot because she did not want to teach men her own age. The lieutenant in the maintenance hangar was happy to see help arrive regardless that she was a woman. He checked her out in the airplanes and divided the test work between the two of them. After the repairs had been made, she or the lieutenant would fly the plane to verify it was acceptable for the instructors and students to fly.⁵⁰

On one occasion when she was co-piloting a plane with the lieutenant, the engine caught on fire. The lieutenant panicked repeating over and over again that he always knew he would die in a fire, but Crane extinguished the fire and landed the plane safely. Ambulances and fire trucks watched from the ground as she landed the plane. The amazed onlookers asked how the lieutenant extinguished the fire and landed the plane, but he rightfully gave Crane all the credit.⁵¹

Crane did not know the WASP were being deactivated until December 1944 when her commanding officer called her into his office to tell her that 20 December would be her last day. In the meantime, she was free to fly wherever she wanted to go to earn a commercial license.⁵²

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

Marie O'dean "Deanie" Bishop Parrish, 44-w-4, who expected the program to be militarized, joined two WASP who were already stationed at Greenville Army Air Force Base in Mississippi and lived with them in the nurses' quarters. She was told that she would be flight testing airplanes that were "red lined" meaning they had something wrong with them. Another part of her assignment was to fly officers where they wanted to go.⁵³

Bishop never received any discrimination from the men on the base. In fact, one day her operations officer told her he wanted to check her out in a twin engine aircraft. She had never flown a twin engine airplane before, but she went with him and made three or four successful landings before he told her that he expected her to take three army officers to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that day after less than an hour in the airplane. After lunch, Bishop successfully flew the officers to Baton Rouge and back to Greenville without a co-pilot.⁵⁴

Because of her success learning to fly the twin engine aircraft, Bishop was selected to go to B-26 school and passed all of her tests there. She was assigned to Tyndall Army Air Base, Panama City, Florida, to tow targets for gunners to use as target practice. At Tyndall the gunners being trained were in one of the six or seven turrets of a B-24 firing live ammunition at the target Bishop pulled behind her plane and giving them practice for what they would be doing in combat.⁵⁵

While Bishop was stationed in Florida, she met and dated a B-24 pilot who had recently returned from combat. In 1944 there was no Doppler radar available to gauge

⁵³Marie O'dean Bishop Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid.

the weather, so the base would send up a basic trainer with a pilot and observer to check if there were acceptable flying conditions that day or not. Bishop was assigned to go up on one of these flights as the observer and the B-24 pilot, who she had dated, as the pilot. Soon after take-off their radio went out, but Bishop had a pad of paper fastened to her leg and a pencil. Both Bishop and the B-24 pilot were accustomed to flying the larger, four-engine planes. The B-24 pilot was having difficulty flying the single engine plane and kept over-correcting on the controls causing Bishop to feel sick. She wrote him a note that said, "Please fly this thing straight and level. You're making me sick." At the bottom of the note she wrote in short hand "I love you," thinking that most men did not know short hand. When the pilot passed the note back to her, he had written "I love you" in short hand as well. Two years later they were married.⁵⁶

In October Bishop received notification that the WASP were going to be deactivated in December 1944. She believed that she had done her job and it was time for her to do something else. As she prepared to pack her bags and pay her own way home, the base operations at Tyndall requested that she and the other WASP stay and work as dispatchers or control tower operators. She decided to stay.⁵⁷

Doris Brinker Tanner, 44-w-4, one of the few married WASP, reported to Douglas Army Air Field in Arizona in May 1944. Most of the men at the field treated the WASP with respect and courtesy, but a few did not like the women being there. One of the officers stationed there constantly complained about the "damned woman pilots" in the officers' club. Some of Tanner's duties included slow timing new engines which she enjoyed because she could drift around the sky looking down at the scenery, singing as

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid.

loudly as she wished. She also had the responsibility of transporting the inspector general's representative from base to base.⁵⁸

Tanner was given an assignment to fly three nurses from Douglas to a convention in a UC-78 that had two seats in the front for a pilot and co-pilot and three metal bucket seats behind them. The flight was a little bumpy and the nurses had never flown before. They must have eaten a large meal before the flight because they threw up all over the plane and each other. Tanner had to wait to take the nurses back to Douglas, and while she waited a maintenance man on the flight line washed out the inside of the plane without her having to ask. He cleaned the plane so thoroughly that there was no odor left from the nurses being sick. Tanner wanted to tip him for the job but did not have any money with her. She thought about suggesting the nurses tip him, but decided against it because they were captains and she was not military. She assumed the nurses did not think to thank him because they were accustomed to cleaning up after their patients.⁵⁹

When Tanner first heard that the WASP were going to be deactivated she was shocked because she and the other WASP at Douglas were flying frequently. They were kept busy daily with test flying and ferrying, but 20 December 1944 Tanner turned in her equipment and left Douglas to visit her family.⁶⁰

Anita Paul, 44-w-6, whose barracks at Avenger Field had overlooked the airplane graveyard, reported to the commanding officer at Altus Air Force Base, Oklahoma. The first person who spoke to her after the commanding officer was the chaplain who asked

⁵⁸Doris Brinker Tanner, interview by Deanie Parrish, 12 August 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

her to fly him to the B-25 school in Enid, Oklahoma, because he was responsible for both bases. The chaplain liked Paul and arranged to have her assigned as his pilot, but she did other jobs as well when she was needed. Paul also slow-timed new engines, and sometimes the engines let off a black smoke when they were new. Once, Paul was preparing to land when the tower told her to fly in front of the control tower because she had smoke trailing behind her. She explained that it was a new engine but they insisted she fly by the tower anyway. Paul went around and they told her the smoke was thinning out, and she was safe to land. If the plane had been on fire there would have been little she could have done about it because she was flying too low to jump out, and the particular plane she was flying was one of the last planes to have a canvas fuselage. If the canvas fuselage caught fire the people on board the plane had about forty-five seconds to jump out before the plane exploded.⁶¹

When Paul and one other WASP arrived at Altus, they were assigned to stay in the Women's Army Corps (WAC) quarters. The WACS had officers with them every night of the week, so Paul and the other WASP requested to be moved because they did not want to be a part of that lifestyle. The commanding officer told them he had the perfect place for them and took them to the psychiatric ward of the hospital that had never been used. The ward had no doors and was designed so the patients would not be able to hurt themselves. They accepted the new living quarters and eventually there were six more WASP who lived there with them.⁶²

⁶¹Anita Paul (a.k.a. Sister Teresa), interview by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁶²*Ibid.*

When the WASP at Altus learned of the scheduled deactivation they were disappointed. They were not given a reason for the disbanding other than the war was scaling down. No one at Altus gave them a farewell party and no one came to say good-bye to them except the chaplain. The chaplain was the only person who told Paul good-bye and said he would miss her as his chauffeur. Paul paid for her own train ticket back to her parent's home in Massachusetts.⁶³

The class of 44-w-10 did not have much time to fly after graduating from Avenger. Francie Meisner Park, 44-w-10, whose time in training was filled with rumors of deactivations, was sent to San Angelo Army Air Field in west Texas for two weeks before the program was disbanded. There was not much for the nine WASP from 44-w-10 to do in such a short amount of time, so the commanding officer let them learn civilian procedures instead. Knowing the civilian procedures would have allowed them to earn their instrument ratings on their commercial licenses. A total of seventeen WASP were sent to nearby Goodfellow Army Air Force Base to take their tests, and Meisner was one of the few who passed it. On 20 December 1944, the commanding officer at San Angelo ordered pilots to fly the WASP stationed there home.⁶⁴

Frankie Yearwood, 44-w-10, who had thought at the beginning of training that she was inferior to the other WASP because she had not attended college, only had two weeks to spend at Foster Army Air Field, Victoria, Texas, after her graduation ceremony at Avenger Field. During those two weeks she flew an AT-6 and towed a muslin sleeve behind it for gunners on the ground to practice shooting at. After deactivation, she aerial

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Francie Meisner Park, interview by Deanie Parrish, 7 November 2001, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

hitchhiked to Pensacola, Florida, and from there she took a train to Memphis, Tennessee, where she joined a group of military men driving to Little Rock, Arkansas, her final destination.⁶⁵

A debate was occurring in Congress and the media while the WASP studied at Avenger and flew in active duty. On 30 September 1943 Representative John Costello of California introduced the WASP militarization bill, House Resolution 3358, to the House of Representatives. The bill was sent to the Committee on Military Affairs for approval or recommendations, and six months later the committee held hearings concerning the WASP bill. By then Costello had submitted a longer, more detailed bill, House Resolution 4219, that would not only provide for the militarization of the WASP but also detailed the administration of the WASP program after militarization. The meeting of the Committee on Military Affairs lasted less than an hour with Army Air Force Commanding General Henry H. Arnold as the only witness.⁶⁶

Before the Committee on Military Affairs met in the spring of 1944, General Arnold had closed all primary flight training schools and terminated the Civilian Aeronautics Administration War Training Services (CAAWTS) which had been previously called the Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) Program which left thousands of male pilots without flight-related jobs in January 1944. Overseas combat losses were lower than expected. Male pilots did not want to join the infantry where they were most needed

⁶⁵Frankie Yearwood, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁶⁶Molly Merryman, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 75-77.

for the invasion of Europe. Instead, they wanted to do the jobs of the WASP. One month later House Resolution 4219 was introduced to Congress to militarize the WASP.⁶⁷

Civilian pilots were not pleased with the closing of primary flight schools and the ending of the Civilian Aeronautics Administration War Training Services because it made them available for the Selective Service System and could possibly be drafted into the “walking army.”⁶⁸ Angered civilian flight instructors and trainees sent telegrams, wrote letters, and made personal visits to their congressmen protesting the bill to militarize the WASP. They were supported by the American Legion, many newspaper editors, and civilian aviation magazines. The civilian pilots questioned the necessity of the WASP when there were thousands of male pilots ready and willing to take over their jobs. What General Arnold and others expected to be a simple routine request for congressional approval ended up becoming one of his greatest battles with Congress.⁶⁹

The WASP bill would authorize army air force (AAF) commissions for current women pilots on duty and appoint AAF aviation cadets for women trainees. In addition, the bill would also allow women pilots the same privileges as men concerning insurance, hospitalization, and death benefits. General Arnold was the only witness for the WASP, and Henry L. Stimson, secretary of war, wrote a letter giving a full endorsement of the bill on behalf of the Roosevelt administration. During the war, Congress had not defeated any bill that Arnold argued was needed to win. Arnold spoke of the needs and uses for women pilots and pointed to the success of the WASP program. Regrettably, the

⁶⁷Keil, 288-289.

⁶⁸Ibid., 289.

⁶⁹Ibid., 289-290.

House Military Affairs Committee was more concerned with the 900 flight instructors, the 5,000 trainees, and the 8,000 civilian flight instructors without flight jobs.⁷⁰

No one knows exactly how many of those civilian pilots, flight instructors, and trainees were protesting the bill, but those who did, made sure they were heard. Unfortunately for the WASP, their protests were the first time many members of Congress learned about the WASP program, and the male pilots did not characterize the WASP kindly. Arnold responded to the protests that to let many of these men into the AAF would require the AAF to lower their standards simply because a man knew how to fly a plane. Arnold presented facts and figures proving that the WASP did some jobs better than men and did jobs men were unwilling to do such as towing targets, testing planes, and flying planes men were nervous to fly. These jobs were often viewed as too dangerous or demeaning for the men to do. The WASP did all the jobs given to them willingly and gratefully and met the AAF's highest standards. Arnold was curious why the civilian pilots, if qualified to meet the AAF standards, had signed up for the safer civilian jobs and not for combat in the first place.⁷¹ The WASP successfully did the flight jobs that needed to be done that the men did not want to do until they were threatened with combat duty.⁷²

By the spring of 1944 the press discovered the WASP issue. The question of WASP militarization was no longer only in aviation magazines but was front page news in the *New York Times* and *Herald Tribune* and the *Boston Globe*, all of which supported

⁷⁰Ibid., 289-292.

⁷¹Ibid., 292-294.

⁷²Merryman, 44-45.

the WASP bill. The Washington, D.C. *Post*, *Star*, *Daily News*, and *Times Herald*, and *Time* Magazine supported the men. Jacqueline Cochran kept her pilots from landing anywhere near Washington, D.C., to prevent them from being interviewed. The WASP were confused and hurt by the negative attitude of the press toward them. While the fight against the WASP bill was going strong, one WASP, Jill McCormick, waited in a hotel lobby in Raleigh, North Carolina, for the departure of her commercial flight back to her home base in New Castle, Delaware. When she heard a commotion and looked up from the books she was reading, she found herself surrounded by a group of angry uniformed men shouting at her to go home, she was not wanted, and she was in a bad organization. The men called her degrading names as McCormick tried unsuccessfully to escape but was rescued by an officer who kept her company until her bus to the airport arrived. She thanked the officer for his kindness and told him goodbye. He was disappointed and told her he had hoped she would join him in his room for a drink. She ran to her bus never wanting to return to Raleigh.⁷³

During the media debate the movie about the WASP, *Ladies Courageous*, was released and used as ammunition against the women. The movie falsely depicted them as irresponsible, emotionally unstable, yet glamorous pilots. The film also portrayed them as petty, flirtatious, and bickering women who were hazardous to the army air force. The movie furthered the false accusations that Cochran and the WASP used their femininity to acquire what they wanted from men. Suggestions had been made in the newspapers

⁷³Keil, 302-304.

that Cochran had seduced Arnold to have the WASP program started. The movie only encouraged the negative press to continue.⁷⁴

On 24 March 1944 Senate Resolution 1810 was introduced in the Senate with similar content as House Resolution 4219. Senator Robert Ramspeck chaired the Committee on Civil Service in the Senate and began an investigation of the WASP. Neither Ramspeck nor members of the committee visited the WASP training school or any bases the WASP had been assigned, but the Ramspeck Report found the WASP incompetent.⁷⁵

The House Committee on Appropriations also investigated the WASP, but unlike the Senate Committee on Civil Service, the House Committee on Appropriations reported that there were valid reasons to close the CAAWTS and primary schools. The committee reported that they were convinced:

...as to the genuine value of these women fliers to the war effort and agree with General Arnold that they should be given a military status and have the same responsibility as male pilots flying military airplanes, and, along with it, the same rights, privileges, and benefits to which such male pilots are entitled.⁷⁶

The Ramspeck Report was quoted widely in the media, but the report made by the Committee on Appropriations was rarely used in the media and was never fully introduced at the congressional hearings on the bill to militarize the WASP.⁷⁷

⁷⁴Merryman, 71-71.

⁷⁵Merryman, 82-84.

⁷⁶Committee on Appropriations, *Report No. 1606, Military Establishment Appropriations Bill, 1945*, 7 June 1944, 9. quoted in Molly Merriman, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 88.

⁷⁷Merryman, 84-88.

Representative James Morrison of Louisiana published an article in the *Idaho Statesmen* on 12 May 1944 that echoed previous accusations against the WASP. The article was also read in its entirety at Congressional hearings. The article can best be summed up by its last two sentences: “Probably it is the sentimental softness of American men in regard to their women. In colleges the smooth, good-looking gals can get A’s without a lick of work; and in the armed services it may be that dimples have a devastating effect even on generals.”⁷⁸ No one submitted news articles or opinion pieces that were in favor of the WASP, and unfortunately Ramspeck chaired the debate on 19 June 1944 when it went before the House. The debate was also attended by members of the male civilian pilots’ lobby who were vocal in expressing their incorrect opinions about the WASP. Not surprisingly, the House killed House Resolution 4219 by a margin of nineteen votes.⁷⁹

The WASP class of 45-1 was scheduled to report to Avenger Field on 30 June 1944 and many of the women had already left their homes. To ease the blow the AAF offered to transport the class home for free. The congressional decision left Cochran with three options: 1) deactivate immediately, 2) keep the current status, but fight for legislation that would provide for hospitalization and insurance, or 3) to continue the fight for militarization. The third choice was the most hopeless, but most attractive option for Cochran as it was the most honorable and dignified option for her, but on

⁷⁸*Congressional Record – Appendix*, 8 June 1944, A3096 quoted in Merryman, 91.

⁷⁹Merryman, 92-101.

3 October, both Cochran and Arnold had to send letters to the WASP confirming the deactivation of the program on 20 December 1944.⁸⁰

After the WASP program was deactivated the media began to praise the women, and this time provided factual information about them. The WASP were no longer considered a threat to the male pilots because they were no longer allowed to pilot military airplanes. When Germany surrendered in May 1945, the WASP were effectively forgotten. When Japan surrendered in September, no one mentioned that a WASP had been part of the top secret planning missions of the crews who had dropped the atomic bomb. With the jubilation brought by the ending of World War II, the WASP were completely forgotten by the media and the public. Their attention was on the United States' victory, the returning servicemen, and the postwar economy. If women were mentioned, it was their return to being housewives.⁸¹

⁸⁰Keil, 307-314.

⁸¹Merryman, 126-131.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Long Road Ahead

Sadly the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) returned home to their families to wait for husbands and sweethearts, and to jobs they had before the war. They returned to small towns and big cities where people did not understand what they had done for their country. The majority went home to a life of anonymity after marrying and having children. Most WASP never had the chance to fly again. Returning to their lives as though they had done nothing extraordinary, some were dissatisfied with their quieter lives. Others saw their time in the WASP program as a wonderful phase of their lives that was regrettably over, but looked forward to beginning the next. The long road ahead would bring good times and bad, but in the end they would all remember their time as a WASP as one of their crowning achievements.

Ruth Dailey Helm, 43-w-2, who had been stationed at Love Field in Texas, returned home to her family business in Grapeland, Texas, after deactivation. After the war she had to adjust to a quieter life living with her mother until she married. Dailey continued to fly occasionally until her marriage in November 1951 but stopped because her husband did not believe it was safe for her to fly. The couple had two children, a daughter in 1952 and a son in 1958, and bred quarter-horses on the family ranch. Dailey's daughter became a school teacher, and her son earned his private pilot's license while in high school. When asked what legacy the WASP would leave for future generations, Dailey stated that she wanted the WASP "to be remembered as a group of

women who loved to fly and were willing... to do whatever it took in the way of study and skill and character to accomplish that – and in a man’s world.”¹

After submitting her resignation, Elinore Owen Pyle, 43-w-3, who had been diagnosed with mononucleosis while at New Castle Army Air Field, went to Washington, D.C., with her husband while he attended Pursuit School before he was shipped out to the South Pacific. With her husband overseas, Owen returned home to Kansas City to live with her parents while she was expecting their first child. In June of 1945 her daughter was born and seven months later Pyle returned from overseas. The small family moved to Ridgewood, New Jersey, where her husband started working in the auto body repair business. Their second daughter was born there in 1948. Six years later the family moved to Merrill, Wisconsin, in search of a more family orientated place to rear their children. Owen’s oldest daughter was interested in horses and her youngest enjoyed gardening, but neither expressed an interest in learning to fly. In Wisconsin they started a successful archery business and sold equipment by mail. When asked what she was most proud of, she responded that it was the period in her life when she flew. The WASP branched out from what was considered normal for women and they became more than doormats stuck in a house to serve men.²

Like many of the WASP, Ruth Underwood Florey, 43-w-4, who had had difficulties receiving permission to land when away from her home bases because she was a female, returned home to the life she had before serving as a WASP. Underwood

¹Ruth Dailey Helm, interview by Deanie Parrish, 12 November 1999, Waco, TX, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

²Elinore Pyle, interview by Deanie Parrish, 30 July 2001, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

worked as a secretary for her father who teased her that whenever an airplane flew over she would knock the screens out of the windows to look and wave. While at home she met a military pilot, Ben Florey, who was friends with one of her brothers and had been stationed overseas for three years. After they were married on 3 May 1945, the couple moved to Galveston, Texas, where Florey was stationed until the end of the war. After the war they returned to Brownwood. Neither Underwood nor her husband could afford to continue flying after the war. They had two daughters and two sons who all earned college degrees which she said was her proudest achievement.³

After the WASP program ended, Sylvia Dahmes Clayton, 43-w-5, who had attended Pursuit School, went to Iowa for two weeks before traveling to California to visit one of her bay mates from her time at Avenger Field. In California she began working as a medical technician as she had prior to the war, but found that it was boring in comparison to being a WASP. Dahmes and her bay mate heard of a company that was hiring people to block test jet engines. Block testing involved placing the jet in a room or tunnel and running the engine to test it under a variety of conditions. Dahmes' job in the block testing was to sit outside of the testing cell and keep records of the oil pressure.⁴

The jet engines were not performing up to the standards the manufacturers said they should, so a civil engineer named Harry Clayton was sent to find out the cause. Coincidentally, Dahmes was assigned to assist him in his investigation. She enjoyed discussing aircraft engines and flying with him, because though he was not a pilot he was a project engineer on the first jet flight. The couple met in March 1946 and were married

³Ruth Florey, interview by Deanie Parrish, 20 September 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁴Sylvia Dahmes Clayton, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, 3 November 2001, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

the following August. After the wedding Dahmes quit her job and spent her time trying to adapt to housework and preparing meals. Soon after the wedding, the couple moved to Edwards Air Force Base in California where Clayton was the head of the engineering department. Eventually he was sent to Carswell Air Force Base in Texas to help design nuclear airplanes, but because they were nuclear powered airplanes, the scientists decided robots would have to fly the planes. Ultimately the scientists determined nuclear airplanes would never work. At that point Clayton left the civil service and moved his family to New Mexico where he worked for Hughes' Aircraft Company as the company manager. They moved one last time to Tucson, Arizona, and started their own company where Dahmes worked for her husband. Their company made the lights that were in Skylab, the first space station the United States launched into space in 1973.⁵

Dahmes and her husband had two children. Their son, Robert, became a mechanical engineer for the army, and their daughter, Sharon, became a full army colonel. Dahmes believed the legacy of the WASP is that a woman can do anything she wants to do, and she is most proud of earning her wings and being a WASP. She said that anyone could be a medical technician, but not very many could be a WASP and fly all the planes she was able to fly.⁶

When Jo Myers Wheelis, 43-w-5, who had primarily ferried planes in the North East, recovered from her exhaustion, she decided to visit Fort Stockton in Texas to see her sister. While she was there she met Theodore Wheelis, Jr. whom she married thirteen days after they first met. Wheelis worked as a Texas Game Warden until he retired because of his health in 1978. While her husband worked, Wheelis also worked in Fort

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

Stockton, and in the couple's spare time they bred and trained race horses. In the mid 1970s Myers began writing letters to her congressmen concerning WASP militarization and recognition. Senator Barry Goldwater from Arizona supported WASP militarization and sent Myers literature and personal letters that she believed helped the WASP cause.⁷

When asked what in her life she was most proud, Myers responded that it was her acceptance into the WASP organization. She received personal satisfaction from her accomplishments as a WASP and believed the legacy of the program will be one that teaches women they can do what they want to do, but they have to want to do it first. Women should believe that they need to satisfy themselves by doing whatever it is they want, and not for the purpose of satisfying someone else. Myers advised that women should try to have as many experiences as they can in a lifetime and not to be afraid to try something new. If anyone else is able to do something, then there is no reason you can not do it yourself.⁸

Shortly after resigning, Marion Stegeman Hodgson, 43-w-5, who had become engaged while at Love Field in Texas, took off her flight suit and put on her apron when she married Ned Hodgson. After the wedding Hodgson continued his post as the executive officer at Eagle Mountain Lake, Marine Corps Air Station where the couple lived for about a year. Hodgson was then transferred to another Marine Corps Air Station in Miramar, California. After the war ended, he went to work for Eastern Air Lines but could not fly for them because of the injuries he had received in a plane crash. He worked as an aircraft dispatcher until the couple's first child was born. Before the baby's birth,

⁷Jo Myers Wheelis, interview by Deanie Parrish, 19 September 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁸Ibid.

Stegeman worked painting signs, selling encyclopedias, and doing secretarial work to earn a little extra income. She also wrote and tried to sell her stories, but it took her a long time before she was able to do so successfully. Her first short story that was successful was published in *McCall's* magazine and she was paid a thousand dollars for it. Her next big sale was to *Good Housekeeping* magazine which bought a couple of her stories. After her son was born, she wrote more for regional magazines and newspapers and did a series of articles about women pilots for the Fort Worth *Star Telegram*. By the time of the birth of her second child, a daughter, her husband was working in the life insurance business in Fort Worth. The couple had their third child when Stegeman was forty years old.⁹

In 1990 Stegeman along with about twenty other WASP and their husbands were invited to travel to the Soviet Union to meet Soviet women pilots from World War II who had flown in combat. Mikhail Gorbachev was the premier of the Soviet Union when she visited, and there were many actions and items that were still illegal such as taking Bibles into the country. Meeting the Russian women pilots was a thrill of a lifetime for her. They looked like sweet grandmothers to Stegeman, not women who had flown in combat. Most of them did not speak English, but welcomed them with arms full of flowers and embraced and kissed them. Stegeman recalled it was like an instant sisterhood.¹⁰

Stegeman could not turn down the opportunity to smuggle Bibles into the Soviet Union. She had been given instructions that she could take one Bible with her, as long as it was not new, not intended as a gift, and if it was not in Russian. The three Bibles that

⁹Marion Stegeman Hodgson, interview by Deanie Parrish, 5 April 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

¹⁰Ibid.

she took broke all three rules, but she was not stopped by the Customs workers because she was there with a type of official delegation. The first Bible she gave was to a young woman who worked at the first hotel where the WASP were housed. The young woman took it hesitantly, but later in the night called Stegeman's room to ask if she had one more Bible. The young woman brought an elderly woman up to her room and explained that the woman had never seen a Bible in her life but had always wanted one. When Stegeman gave it to her, the woman began to cry and backed out of the room slowly, repeating "thank you" over and over again. The third Bible she gave to a maid in the hotel. When she handed the maid the Bible, the maid almost fainted but reached down to her chest and pulled a cross from her dress before quickly putting it back and hugging Stegeman.¹¹

A young pilot named Theodore "Ted" Christiansen took Mildred McLelland Christiansen, 43-w-6, one of the WASP who had attended Officer Candidate School, home after she resigned from the program. Christiansen and McLelland had gone on a few dates but were dating other people at the time of deactivation. At her new job in Tulsa, Oklahoma, McLelland was responsible for arranging pilots' schedules to fly "war weary" B-24s wherever they were needed. McLelland worked in the office and hated hearing the sounds of the airplanes and not being able to fly them. Sometimes at night she was able to slip by the guards to be in the plane when the crew arrived and would be allowed to go up and occasionally take the controls. After four months of working in Tulsa, Christiansen called McLelland to ask her to marry him in Florida immediately before he was sent overseas. A few days later on 10 April 1945 the couple was married

¹¹Ibid.

in Sebring, Florida. Three weeks after the wedding Christiansen was transferred to Montgomery, Alabama, for five months. In Alabama he was trained to fly the B-29 and was assigned to be a command pilot, but the war ended before he was sent overseas.¹²

The couple had their first child in June 1946 and their second child was born in November 1947. After her children were born, McLelland no longer had much time for flying. She worked at an airport and was offered the job of county pilot, but she had to turn it down because it would have taken time away from her family. When she was asked what the legacy of the WASP was, she responded that if it had not been for the WASP then the women who fly airplanes now probably would not have been given their opportunities.¹³

Maxine Edmondson Flournoy, 43-w-8, who had slow-timed new engines while stationed at Hondo Army Air Base in Texas, found a job as a pilot in Alice, Texas, after the WASP program was deactivated. She first worked at an airport that had been an auxiliary navy landing field before finding a job at a private company where she flew her employer wherever he wanted to go. Edmondson chauffeured for the company until she married Lucien Flournoy, who was in the oil well drilling business, a year and a half later. She continued to fly whenever she could after her marriage until she became pregnant three years later and did not fly again for twenty years. When her children were adults, they signed up for flying lessons and Edmondson decided to join them. She did

¹²Mildred McLelland Christiansen, interview by Deanie Parrish, 22 May 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

¹³Ibid.

not continue to fly long the second time she took lessons because she had started to suffer from hearing loss.¹⁴

Marie Mountain Clark, 44-w-1, who had attended both B-17 School and Officer Candidate School, returned to Des Moines, Iowa, to teach flute lessons again while she lived with her parents. John Clark, whom she had met in B-17 training, visited her parent's home and asked for her father's permission to marry her. After the war Clark went back to school to study mechanical engineering, and they lived in a one-room apartment with a Murphy bed that pulled down from the wall. While her husband was in school, Mountain taught flute lessons and started graduate work at the University of Michigan. After her husband graduated, he was accepted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge. During this time, Mountain taught flute lessons in Boston and performed with Boston area orchestras for the nine years they lived there. Eventually Clark became an engineering professor at the University of Michigan. Their son also became an engineer and continues the family tradition of flying planes. Their daughter became a medical doctor.¹⁵

Many WASP hoped to fly for the airlines after the war, but all received the same response as Elizabeth Wall Strohfus, 44-w-1, who had been diagnosed with flight fatigue from flying long hours each day: The airlines did not want women pilots. Wall was told she could work in the airlines' front offices or be a stewardess. Wall turned down the airlines' offers and moved to California to live with one of her sisters. Since she could

¹⁴Maxine Edmondson Flournoy, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, n.d., Wings Across American, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

¹⁵Marie Mountain Clark, interview by Deanie Parrish, n.d., Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

not find a job as a pilot, Wall worked as an archery instructor for Hollywood starlets, but did not know what she was doing half the time. After she stopped teaching archery she worked for the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. While she worked there, she heard about an air race and told Mr. Harvey Firestone, the tire manufacturer, that if he would sponsor her in the race, she would win it for him. He informed her that he already had a male pilot to fly in the race for him.¹⁶

Wall left California to return home to live with her sister Mary and their mother before she began working in aircraft communications which took her to Wyoming. Wall resigned her job in Wyoming as an aircraft communicator to return home to help care for her mother. She started working part-time with her sister in the local attorney's office.¹⁷

In 1947 she married Arthur Roberts, her first husband, and they had five children in five and a half years. Her mother died in the 1950s from cancer after a fifteen-year-long battle. Arthur passed away in 1969, and two months after his death, Wall's sister passed away after struggling with cancer for fifteen years just as their mother had. In 1970 Wall ran for public office but lost because no one wanted a woman as the registrar of deeds in the courthouse. Wall then worked and researched for the Cancer Society, assisting with "The Cancer Prevention Study" in New York City. While in New York she met her second husband Francis Langelag in 1979. He died nine years later from Alzheimer's disease. After his death her brother came to live with her because he had cancer of the throat. Wall took care of him until his death in 1995. After her brother's death, she met Martin Strohfus, her third husband, whose wife had passed away two

¹⁶Elizabeth Wall Strohfus, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

¹⁷Ibid.

years previously, but she had no intention of marrying again. Despite her intentions Wall and Strohfus married in 1990. The doctors discovered that he had a blocked artery and required a four-way-surgery bypass. He had a stroke after the surgery and was never the same. Wall was widowed for a third time.¹⁸

Shortly after her third marriage, Wall gave a presentation on the WASP where she met Major General Eugene Andreotti, the adjutant general for the state of Minnesota. He was impressed by her and asked if she wanted to fly an F-16, and she said she did. Andreotti arranged for special permission from the Pentagon because not only was she seventy-one years of age, but women were not allowed to fly the F-16. Two weeks later Andreotti called to tell her to meet him in Duluth the next day for her flight. The pilot who took her up flew her around for about half an hour. Wall told him, “You said this baby can fly, so show me!” He did maneuvers she did not know existed. Then he gave her the opportunity to fly the plane. She started doing maneuvers from her WASP days. The young pilot told her, “Hey, take it easy. I don’t have the brown bag in front.” She responded, “Honey, you can have mine. I’m not going to need it!”¹⁹ After they landed Wall received a pin showing she had pulled 6 Gs that day which is a measurement of gravitation caused by acceleration. In 2000 Elizabeth Wall Strohfus was inducted into the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame.²⁰

Annabelle Craft Moss, 44-w-2, who left Randolph Field in Texas early with the expectation that she was to be married, was disappointed to have to work as a librarian with an advertising agency. She thought the work was boring after being a pilot and

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

missed being in the WASP program. Not surprisingly, her engagement did not work out. At the age of twenty-two Craft decided to find a more exciting job and with \$200 her grandfather loaned her, joined the American Red Cross as a staff assistant. She trained at American University in Washington, D.C., before being sent to an airbase in Puerto Rico where American military men from North Africa were stopping before continuing on to Miami, Florida. The Red Cross women were popular at the airbase, and part of Craft's duties were to serve coffee and cake to the men, play cards with them, or simply talk with them. As with the WASP program, she was allowed to date officers but not enlisted men. She stayed in Puerto Rico until the war ended. The Red Cross wanted to send her to the Philippines, and she wanted to go but was engaged to a pilot she had met from Indiana. He wanted them to marry immediately in Puerto Rico, but Craft told him she wanted to return to the United States so they could know each other at home first. Craft found a job working for United Wallpaper in Chicago, and the young man went back to school. The more she knew him in the United States, the more she knew she could not marry him.²¹

At United Wallpaper, Craft was required to attend builder's shows and stores to demonstrate "ready pasted wallpaper."²² At a builders show in Detroit she met Arthur Moss, who she later married, and started to date him. Craft said she waited nine months before marrying him because she had been engaged too many times before. The couple lived in Detroit and because her husband traveled with his job, Craft decided she wanted to do more than stay at home and be a housewife. Craft found a job in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, working as a kindergarten teacher until she became pregnant. Her husband

²¹Annabelle Craft Moss, interview by Deanie Parrish, 11 September 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

²²Ibid.

decided he wanted to spend the summer at a cabin on Lake Eerie, and while they were living at the cabin Art was diagnosed and hospitalized with tuberculosis. Right after his release the couple bought a house but had no furniture, so Craft used porch furniture in her living room at first. Her first daughter was born on Christmas Eve and her second daughter was born eighteen months later. Craft loved her husband and children but wanted something else in her life. Later the family moved to Grand Junction, Colorado, where her husband purchased the local Lincoln-Mercury dealership. Their third daughter was born there. None of their daughters were interested in learning how to fly. When Craft was asked what she was most proud of in her life, she responded that it was learning to use a computer and email so she could stay in touch with her children and grandchildren.²³

After deactivation, Mary Helen Crane Foster, 44-w-3, the only WASP assigned to Maulden Army Air Base in Missouri, tried to find work as a pilot for the airlines. They did not want her as a pilot but said she could be a stewardess if she chose to. Crane told them she refused to be a “flying waitress.” She heard that seven Alaskan airlines were in desperate need of pilots, but she found out they, like all the others, would not hire women. Crane eventually found a job working for a whole sale jeweler in San Antonio who was trying to specialize in Mexican silver. She spoke fluent Spanish so she was hired immediately to run the office. Crane discovered that her boss was not an honest man in his business dealings after United States Customs Officials contacted her.²⁴

²³Ibid.

²⁴Mary Helen Foster, interview by Deanie Parrish, n.d., Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

Crane quit her job and decided she would at last earn a college degree. She enrolled at South West Texas University in San Marcos, Texas, where she double-majored in Spanish and English. At the university she met Paul Chapman, a chemical engineer. They were married on 28 February 1948 and moved to Galveston, Texas, because he worked as a chemical engineer for American Oil in nearby Texas City.²⁵

In Galveston they purchased a duplex and moved into half of it while renting out the other half. No longer working outside the home, Crane occupied herself by attending a women's Bible study class, visiting patients at the local hospital, and shopping. Then she had her first child, and before her second child was born the family moved to Dickinson, Texas. Crane stayed home and cared for her husband and children and was active in her children's lives. She was involved in the Parent-Teacher Association, was always a room mother for one of her children each year, went on field trips, and attended Little League baseball games. After graduating from Avenger, she never saw any of her WASP classmates again.²⁶

Marie O'Dean "Deanie" Bishop Parrish, 44-w-4, who had flight tested airplanes, towed targets, and attended B-26 school, began working as a dispatcher at Tyndall Army Air Base, Panama City, Florida, after the WASP program was deactivated. Her sister moved into an apartment with her and shortly afterwards the sisters decided they would move to Langley, Virginia. Bishop applied to be an aircraft dispatcher at Langley Air Force Base and was hired in the civil service position of chief aircraft dispatcher. Occasionally, the B-26 pilot, Bill Parrish, she had met in Florida would visit her from his

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

new post in Montgomery, Alabama. Eventually the couple became engaged, and Parrish received orders to go to the Panama Canal Zone. They decided to marry before he left and were married at the chapel at Langley Air Force Base. They had a beautiful military wedding in 1946 with crossed swords and Bishop's mother and younger brother were in attendance. After Parrish left for the Canal Zone, Bishop continued to work at Langley until she was able to join her husband.²⁷

At first they lived in a Panamanian home before they were given quarters at Howard Air Force Base. Bishop became bored doing nothing all day, so she applied and was hired as the personal private secretary for the director of operations for the 6th Air Force. They stayed there until 1949 when they were given the choice of staying in Panama an extended length of time or coming back to the United States a little early. They choose to return because Bishop was expecting her first child and wanted to have her baby in the United States. Parrish was sent to Lowery Air Force Base in Colorado, and their child was born in Denver. The family lived in Denver while Parrish worked at the base. Bishop's mother had passed away while she was in Panama, so her nine-year old little brother came to live with them in Colorado. Three years later Parrish was given orders to go to Japan. Bishop was left with two small children and a house to sell. After she sold their home she traveled to Seattle, Washington, in the winter of 1953 where she, her brother, and daughter took a troop ship to Japan. The deck of the ship was crowded with troops being taken to Korea. Nine months after arriving they were given government housing. They moved into a single family home with three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a full time maid. While in Japan their second daughter was born.

²⁷Marie O'dean Bishop Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

Two years later they moved back to the United States and were stationed in West Palm Beach, Florida, before being transferred again to McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey, and again to Maxwell Air Force Base before staying at Ellington Air Force Base, Houston for twenty years. Parrish decided to retire from the Air Force when he was given orders to go to Saudi Arabia.²⁸

After her younger brother and daughters left home, Bishop decided to return to school to have something to do and enrolled at the University of Houston. In 1979 she graduated Summa Cum Laude with a degree in hotel management. She was recruited by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to be a liaison between them and the University of Houston, but she did not want the job. The job would have required her to assist with the designing of the eating and sleeping facilities on the space station, but she did not want to be tied down. She and her husband later moved to Waco, Texas, to be closer to their children and grandchildren.²⁹

Their oldest daughter, Nancy Parrish, decided that the history of the WASP needed to be preserved and started Wings Across America with Baylor University. She was unable to find the history of the WASP in libraries or the history books used in schools, so she started Wings Across America with her mother as the WASP consultant.³⁰

After deactivation Doris Brinker Tanner, 44-w-4, who had been stationed at Douglas Army Air Field in Arizona, first visited her aunt in Dallas and her mother in St.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

Louis before moving to New York City with a friend she had met in the WASP. The two friends lived in a small, third-floor apartment until Tanner's husband returned home from overseas five months later. While she waited for him, Tanner occupied herself by shopping for civilian clothes. When he returned, the couple moved back to Union City, Tennessee, and Tanner's husband started farming while she began her life as a homemaker. The couple had two children, a daughter and a son, and after the children were older, Tanner taught first at a public high school and then for twenty years taught history at the University of Tennessee at Martin. She also served on the State Board of Education in 1985 which was a challenge that she enjoyed.³¹

Tanner served on the WASP Militarization Committee, the group of dedicated WASP who worked to gain military status for the WASP, and made several trips to Washington, D.C., in the 1970s. She was in charge of providing "documentation" that proved they had been promised military status in the 1940s. Tanner researched and found papers and letters that she presented to the congressional committee proving that the WASP had been promised military status. Tanner believed it was important for the WASP to be given military status because of all the women who would come after them, and when they were granted military status she was elated. She thought that an injustice had been corrected, and in 1988 Tanner was elected president of the WASP. When asked what she thought the legacy of the WASP would be, she responded that when people think of the WASP she wanted them to "hear the words coming from us 'go for it' because that's just what we did, we went for it, and proved it, and because we proved it,

³¹Doris Brinker Tanner, interview by Deanie Parrish, 12 August 2000, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

they'll know that they can too."³² Tanner believed that the WASP proved women could do whatever they wanted regardless of the obstacles in their path.

Anita Paul, WASP, Class 44-6, who had served as a chauffeur to the chaplain at Altus Air Force Base in Oklahoma, was hired to work at her pre-WASP job at the Quartermaster General's Office in Washington, D.C., after deactivation. Her job was to help with all the requirements for making 50,000 ski troopers ready to go into Italy which at the time was top secret. When the war ended, she wanted to become a missionary but was turned down because she was a single woman, so Paul decided to become a nun and went to Marynoll, the American Society of Foreign Missions. The society was interested in her flying as long as it was not any place especially dangerous. After the first six-month period of training, the society checked her health and discovered she had low metabolism and told her she would not have the stamina for missionary life. Paul went to the Lehey Clinic in Boston to be treated, but they could not find anything wrong with her.³³

Paul returned to Washington, D.C., to speak with a priest she knew at St. Matthew's Cathedral when another priest entered the room to ask if she knew shorthand. She said she did and was hired to be the secretary to the bishop of Washington. Three years later she decided to join the Carmelite Order and entered "training" in Boston. The vocation of a Carmelite is to pray for people. The Carmelite prays for another individual

³²Ibid.

³³Anita Paul (a.k.a. Sister Teresa), interview by Deanie Parrish, n.d., Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

and believes that God responds by giving them the light. The aim is to pray for people so that they will turn to God in full service and commitment.³⁴

Typically a Carmelite nun would stay in one convent for the rest of her life, but in 1955 Paul, now Sister Teresa, took her final vows when the Head of the Order in Rome visited all the Carmelites, nuns who devote their life to prayer and the service of humanity, in the world. The Head of the Order had the authority to move anybody at that time and was in need of bilingual nuns. Paul, who was fluent in English and French, was chosen to go overseas.³⁵

In 1968 the WASP tried to locate other WASP and placed advertisements in newspapers around the country. A priest who knew Paul answered the ad and told the WASP that he had last heard that she had entered the Carmelites in Boston. From there she was traced to Tokyo where she had arrived from Korea. In Korea she had been Sub-Prioress, or second in command because she knew French. She acted as the liaison between the nuns and the Army of Occupation of Korea for two years when the Korean War was over. After living in Korea for two years, she was exhausted and needed to leave the country for medical attention. Paul lived in Japan for ten years until she was transferred to Kenya because they needed someone who spoke English there. She later served in Guadeloupe, an island in the Caribbean and then in Maryland.³⁶

After she left the WASP, Francie Meisner Park, 44-w-10, who had a commercial license and ratings, was unable to find a job as an airline pilot. Instead she worked as an instructor in Marshall, Columbia, and Kansas City, Missouri, teaching both men and

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

women how to fly. Unlike most young women her age, Meisner was not interested in marriage. If a woman was not married by the age of twenty-five in the late 1940s she was conditioned by society to panic. Meisner decided she did not want to consider marriage until well after her twenty-fifth birthday, but she changed her mind when she met John Park, a pilot in Kansas City. He suggested they be married, but left her after she gave birth to two children and became infected with polio. Park told Meisner he had to leave for Brussels on a diplomatic assignment with the air force. A month after he left she received a letter in the mail confirming his marriage to another woman in Mexico. Sixteen years after the divorce she discovered he was a bigamist and that she was his eighth wife out of a minimum of ten. She was the only one who was able to attain a divorce from him. Park had left each woman after a couple of years.³⁷

Because of the polio and the divorce, Meisner and her children ended up on public welfare. She was too weak to work full-time, had to wear a back brace for twenty years, and did not have any money or family members still living. Her case worker heard that her ex-husband had been killed in Los Angeles, California, but was unable to locate proof of his death. A few years later Meisner learned he was piloting a plane that crashed during take-off in a South American country. She found a death record that time.³⁸

In the mid-1960s, Meisner received a letter from Teresa James, one of the original twenty-five WAFS recruited by Nancy Love. James was renewing efforts for WASP militarization, and although Meisner encouraged her, she could not do much beyond give moral support. In 1969 she went to the WASP reunion held in Palm Dessert, California,

³⁷Francie Meisner Park, interview by Deanie Parrish, 7 November 2001, Wings Across America, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

³⁸Ibid.

where James had planned to speak about militarization. James was terrified to speak before a group, so Meisner spoke for her. Receiving veteran status for Meisner was important because “it had to be done.” They could no longer ignore it. In 1970 at the age of fifty Meisner began instructing again and taught for the next for five years.³⁹

In addition to complications from polio, Meisner was diagnosed in the early 1980s with hypothyroidism which causes people to lose their sanity and die. She gained forty pounds before the doctors were able to diagnose and treat her. After recovering from hypothyroidism, she stopped smoking cigarettes in 1984, but in 1992 she had a stroke and lost her speech entirely. She did not lose her comprehension, coordination, or her ability to write which is unusual for stroke victims. Gradually her speech returned and she was able to participate in a three-hour-long interview with *Wings Across America* about her life in 2001. In 1995 she moved to Mesa, Arizona, to live with her daughter and was diagnosed with third-stage lung cancer that was inoperable. Her daughter found Meisner a cancer support group that believed in alternative medicine. Combining the alternative medications with chemotherapy and radiation, Meisner went into remission. She said in her interview that when she had nothing left, God always came through with a miracle for her.⁴⁰

After leaving the WASP, Frankie Yearwood, 44-w-10, who had only spent two weeks at Foster Army Air Field in Texas, made it home in time for Christmas with her family and found a job working as an inspector on the B-29 pressurized section for McDonald Aircraft Factory. Yearwood left the aircraft factory to work for a friend of hers who was an editor of a newspaper in West Memphis. There Yearwood learned to

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

take photographs and became a photographer. She learned how to develop and print the photos herself and processed her first pictures in the pantry of her house. A few years later she and her friend built their own studio and continued taking school pictures, and photos of accidents, aerial events, and dog racing.⁴¹

While she was working as a photographer, Yearwood went into the air force reserve in Memphis and was taken in as a first lieutenant because of her age and experience with the WASP. Five years later she was promoted to captain, but when the unit was moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, she had to give it up. In 1980 she closed her business and moved in with her sister. Yearwood was also active in WASP reunions, although she was hesitant to attend them at first because she thought most WASP would discuss only their children and grandchildren. She was pleased to find out that they mainly discussed flying.⁴²

In 1947 the WASP tried again to be militarized when the Order of Fifinella, the WASP service organization named after their insignia character, asked Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers, chair of the Veteran's Affairs Committee of the House, to introduce a resolution to grant WASP who had completed the program full veteran rights and status. The resolution did not receive enough committee support to be reported to the floor, and the hope for militarization was forgotten for almost thirty years.⁴³

In 1964 the first WASP reunion was organized, and by the time of the second reunion in 1969, more WASP had heard of the success of the first and attended the

⁴¹Frankie Yearwood, interviewed by Deanie Parrish, n.d., *Wings Across America*, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Molly Merryman, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 131.

second. The women discussed the disbandment of the program, and for many it was their first time to hear the full details of why they had been deactivated. In 1944 those who had known the details had been forbidden by the army air force to discuss them. Obtaining militarization became the primary topic of discussion at the reunions, and WASP began to work individually by contacting politicians, the media, and veteran's organizations in hope of finally being militarized.⁴⁴

The largest reunion of the WASP was held in 1972 and celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the program's beginning. Then in February 1973, WASP Nancy Crew, president of the Order of Fifinella, organized the WASP Military Committee with the express purpose of obtaining veteran status. The committee named retired air force Colonel Bruce Arnold, the son of deceased army air force Commanding General Henry H. Arnold, as the chairperson. The WASP Military Committee held biannual meetings and began assembling documents concerning the WASP program and the publicized accounts of the WASP from the 1940s. The committee also lobbied the Pentagon and Congress. In 1975 their efforts led to the introduction of WASP militarization bills in both the House and the Senate, but neither made it past their respective veteran's affairs committees.⁴⁵

The climate changed for the better for female pilots in 1976 when the air force made a major policy change that allowed women to serve as military pilots. That summer ten women officers entered flight screening at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, and graduated in September 1977. The ten women received media attention hailing them

⁴⁴Ibid., 136-137.

⁴⁵Ibid., 136-137.

as the first women to fly military aircraft. The WASP used the situation to their advantage by making it known that they were the true first female pilots to fly military planes. The media concluded that if the WASP had done a poor job in World War II then it would have taken a minimum of another fifty years to allow female pilots to fly military airplanes. The media in the 1970s used the deaths of WASP as evidence that their request for militarization was a legitimate one, whereas in 1944 the media had said their deaths were caused by their incompetence.⁴⁶

The WASP Military Committee welcomed the positive media attention and encouraged the WASP to have their stories told. The Veterans Administration, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Jimmy Carter, the president from 1977-1981, were still opposed to the WASP receiving veteran status when another bill was proposed. The WASP Military Committee began to fight by publicizing their opposition by having the WASP Public Affairs Office provided updates to the media regarding the progress of the bill, provided photographs and fact sheets, and arranged for individual WASP to give interviews. The WASP were determined to be militarized and would not be stopped by a uniformed or misinformed public.⁴⁷

The nation's only veteran magazine, *The Stars and Stripes*, offered the WASP a weekly column in the magazine in September 1977 which gave them an advantage over their opposition. With the magazine's support they were able to publish their reasons and attempts for militarization. In addition, having the magazine's endorsement let to other

⁴⁶Ibid., 137-139.

⁴⁷Ibid., 140-141.

veteran's organizations lending their support too. The Veteran's of Foreign Wars as well as local chapters of the American Legion began to support the WASP.

The bill went under congressional consideration again in 1977. The WASP Military Committee had studied all previous failed attempts and were determined past mistakes would not be repeated. Unlike in the 1940s, the WASP would be able to prove that the only reason they had not been previously militarized was because they had been discriminated against because of their gender. The WASP also had the media and powerful veteran groups on their side, but the veterans' affairs committees in both the House and Senate still opposed the bills. The WASP provided documented testimonies detailing their training, missions, and discharges, and Colonel Arnold testified that his father intended to have the WASP militarized in the 1940s. Arnold pointed out that the decision made in 1944 was a political decision that had not been made by the War Department.⁴⁸

The WASP proved that unlike civilians, they had orders of transfer, identification cards, and were required to carry at all times their Army Instrument Pilot Certifications when on flight duty. The WASP were on call twenty-four hours a day unlike civilians, and WASP proved they were subject to military discipline by providing court-martial sentences given to WASP. Further testimony revealed the WASP participated in top secret military projects, and they had been given firearms training and were required to carry and draw arms while guarding top secret airplanes and equipment. The most important piece of evidence in their favor was the Army Honorable Discharge certificates

⁴⁸Ibid., 148-154.

many had received which was key in the definition of a veteran.⁴⁹ One of the arguments against them was that if the WASP had not been called “soldiers,” then they could not be called “veterans.” The United States Code defined a veteran as “a person who had served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released there from under conditions other than dishonorable.”⁵⁰

On 19 October 1977 the Senate voted unanimously to add an amendment providing for the WASP veterans’ recognition to the GI Improvement Act. On 3 November 1977 the House of Representatives voted in favor of the WASP veteran status, and the following day the Senate passed the GI Improvement Act. After the WASP had waited almost thirty-five years, President Carter signed the bill into law.

The culmination of the efforts of the WASP and the female pilots who followed them occurred on 3 February 1995 when Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Eileen Collins was the first woman to pilot a United States spacecraft. In 1960 and 1961, seven women passed the same medical exams as those given to the original seven Mercury astronauts. These seven women were led to believe that some of them would be allowed to fly into space, but similar to the WASP before them, they were not granted what had been promised to them. Thirty-five years after they had been given exhaustive and rigorous tests to prove their ability to go into space, Eileen Collins piloted the space shuttle *Discovery*. Colonel Collins took with her gifts given to her by the seven women pilots

⁴⁹Ibid., 154-157.

⁵⁰“American Legion Opposes WASPs Bill,” *Stars and Stripes*, 2 June 1977, 15. quoted in Merryman, 153.

from the 1960s, a scarf that belonged to Amelia Earhart, and the silver wings of the WASP.⁵¹

⁵¹Leslie Haynesworth and David Toomey, *Amelia Earhart's Daughters* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1998), xi-xxii.

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