

## **Women Pilots of WWII**

### **Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) & Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)**

*US Army Women's Museum*

#### ***I. THE WAFS***

On 10 September 1942, Nancy Harkness Love, with the support of the U.S. Air Transport Command, organized 25 women pilots into the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS). WAFS headquarters were located at New Castle Army Air Base in Delaware; later other ferrying squadron centers were established. The purpose of the WAFS was to deliver planes from the factory to military bases.

For consideration of service in the WAFS, a woman had to be between 21 and 35, have a minimum of 500 hours flying time, possess a commercial license, and have at least a 250 horsepower rating. She must also pass a rigorous physical exam and successfully complete ground school instruction (usually a month in duration). The instruction consisted of navigation; meteorology; radio and Morse code; use of firearms; military courtesy and discipline; military law; and instrument training. The 25 original WAFS had an average of 1,100 flying time when they were accepted in the program. Forty women wore the WAFS uniform (which they had to pay for) before it was merged into the WASP.

#### ***II. THE WASP***

Immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Jacqueline Cochran, one of the most well known aviators of that time, tried to interest the Army Air Corps in women pilots who would be trained to fly military aircraft with the United States. Her failure to do so prompted her to recruit a group of women pilots to serve in the British Air Transport Auxiliary; she accompanied them to England, then returned to the U.S. to recruit a second group when she learned the WAF had been created and convinced General "Hap" Arnold of the Army Air Corps that the WAF would be unable to supply all the women pilots that would be needed. Both Jacqueline Cochran and General Arnold were opposed to enrollment of women pilots in the WAC.

On 16 November 1942, Cochran established the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) at Howard Hughes Airport in Houston, Texas, with an initial class of 25 women who were required to have 200 hours flying time and a commercial license. The mission of the WFTD was to perform whatever flight duties the Army Air Corps required within the United States. They ferried planes, tested them, delivered them for repair, performed check flights, put flying time on new engines, towed targets for anti-aircraft gunnery practice; flew searchlight tracking missions, instructed male pilot cadets, and performed many other tasks. Later, when the organization was moved to Avenger Field, Sweetwater, Texas, Cochran began accepting women cadets into an intensive training program. The cadets had to be licensed pilots with at least 35 hours of flying time.

On 5 August 1943, the WAFS and WFTD merged into the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) with Cochran as director of the WASP and its Training Division and Nancy Love as director of the Ferrying Division. In the 16 months the WASP existed, more than 25,000 women applied for training; only 1,879 candidates were accepted. Of these, 1,074 successfully

completed the grueling program at Avenger Field, a better "wash-out" rate than the 50% of male pilot cadets.

Cochran pressed for full militarization of the WASP but resisted making it part of the WAC; she insisted it remain a women's pilot organization whose members could only be assigned to flight duties. One of her reasons for this was that WAC recruits had to be at least 21 years old and could not have children under 14 (some of the WASP's most experienced pilots were mothers of young children). WASP were accepted as young as 18 if the woman had a pilot's license and flight experience. General Arnold asked General William E. Han, Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, for permission to commission WASP directly as Service Pilots, a procedure the Air Transport Command used routinely with male civilian pilots. On 13 January 1944, the Comptroller General of the Army Air Forces ruled against these practices. Then Cochran and Arnold went back to Congress where a bill (HR 4219) to make the WASP a women's service within the U.S. Army Air Force had been ignored since its introduction in September 1941. However, on 21 June 1944, it was defeated by 19 votes, despite vigorous lobbying efforts.

On 20 December 1944, the WASPs were disbanded. General Arnold's letter of notification to the WASPs stated, "When we needed you, you came through and have served most commendably under very difficult circumstances, but now the war situation has changed and the time has come when your volunteer services are no longer needed. The situation is that if you continue in service, you will be replacing instead of releasing our young men. I know the WASP wouldn't want that. I want you to know that I appreciate your war service and the AAF will miss you..."

On 20 September 1977, a select House subcommittee on veteran affairs heard testimony on Bill 3277, which recognized WASP service as active duty in the armed forces and entitled them to veteran's benefits. It was strongly supported by both houses of Congress and Senator Barry Goldwater, who had flown with the WASP in World War II; he led the move to get the bill passed. The bill was vehemently opposed by the American Legion on the grounds that "would denigrate the term 'veteran' so that it will never again have the value that presently attaches to it." Controversy went back and forth with the Veterans Administration opposing the bill and the Department of Defense supporting it. Then on 19 October, Senator Barry Goldwater attached the bill as an amendment to the "GI Bill Improvement Act," HR 8701; however, the committee chairs planned to strip the WASP amendment during the reconciliation process. This prompted two women representatives of the House (Rep. Margaret Heckler & Rep. Liddy Boggs) to take action and members of both houses were inundated with calls, letters, and telegrams supporting the WASP amendment. A compromise was finally reached that if the Air Force would certify that the WASP had been de facto military personnel during the war, the WASP amendment would not be stripped. The Air Force certified the WASP and in making their determination used the discharge papers of WASP Helen Porter, 1944, which read, "This is to certify that Helen Porter honorably served in active Federal Service of the Army of the United States," the same wording used in 1944 for all honorable discharges in the Army. HR 8701, as amended, passed the House with unanimous consent. On 23 November 1977, President Carter signed the bill into law.

**Source:** *US Army in World War II, Special Studies, The Women's Army Corps* (Treadwell); *The Women's Army Corps, 1945 - 1978* (Morden); and the US Army Women's Museum archives.