

So, Who Are the WASP Anyway?

by
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On a stormy Spring morning in 1942, inside Air Transport Command (ATC) headquarters, Washington D.C., Ferrying Division commander Col. William H. Tunner encountered Maj. Robert M. Love at the water cooler.

In his WWII memoir *Over the Hump*, General Tunner recalls their conversation.

“My wife flew to Baltimore to work this morning,” said Major Love, airing his weather concerns. “I hope she got there OK.”

“Good Lord,” Tunner exclaimed, “I’m combing the woods for pilots, and here’s one right under my nose.”

Tunner was in dire need of pilots to move thousands of warplanes from the factories to the flight training schools and to the docks for shipment abroad.

“Are there many more women like your wife?”

“Why don’t you ask her?” Love responded, and, Tunner writes, “a meeting was arranged right then and there.”

“Yes, there were many skilled women pilots,” Major Love’s wife, Nancy, told Tunner,

Tunner hired Nancy Love to draft the plan for what became the Women’s Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS). Then she located eligible women pilots and the Ferrying Division recruited them.

WAF Squadron makes its first trip from Hagerstown, Maryland. (l to r) Betty Huyler Gillies, Nancy Batson, Esther Nelson, Helen Mary Clark, Teresa James, Evelyn Sharp, and Captain Frank.

Official announcement of the WAFS was made September 10, 1942. The hunt for qualified pilots was on. The squadron, attached to the 2nd Ferrying Group, New Castle Army Air Base, Wilmington, Delaware, would number 28 women. Nicknamed “The Originals,” they were the first women to fly for the U.S. military.

On October 22, 1942, six of “The Originals” took 65-horsepower L-4Bs (Piper “Cubs”) from Lockhaven, Pennsylvania, to Mitchel Field on Long Island. This was their first delivery. On November 22, they began ferrying 175-horsepower PT-19 trainers from the Fairchild factory in Hagerstown, Maryland.

And there’s More to the Story

For more than a year, Jacqueline Cochran had sought approval from General Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Air Forces, to use women pilots for a variety of non-combat flying jobs. “The use of a few of our



Nancy Harkness Love

women pilots to ferry trainer planes is just one segment of a larger job to be done,” she told Arnold September 11, 1942 — the day after the WAFS had been announced to the press and Nancy Love introduced as their leader.

Earlier in 1942 Arnold had promised Cochran the leadership role in a woman pilots’ organization — if there was one. Cochran wanted that job and was on the warpath. “Hap” had to make good on his promise.

He summoned ATC commander General Harold L. George and in Cochran’s presence told George that the women’s project must be revised to include two factions and to work out the details. General George went to work.

On September 15, 1942, Arnold announced that Cochran would form and lead a second women’s program to be known as the Women’s Flying Training Detachment (WFTD). This unit would train more women pilots to ferry airplanes for the Ferrying Division. On November 16, 1942, WFTD Class 43-1 began training at Howard Hughes Field, Houston Municipal Airport. As more women reported for subsequent classes, the program outgrew Houston and on April 5, 1943,

training was moved to Avenger Field, Sweetwater, Texas. Class 43-1 graduated April 24, 1943.

What About the WAFS?

On January 1, 1943, to get ready for the arrival of more pilots, the WAFS were split up to form three new ferrying squadrons. Five each were sent to the 5th Ferrying Group, Dallas, Texas; the 3rd Ferrying Group, Romulus, Michigan; and the 6th Ferrying Group, Long Beach, California. The rest stayed in Wilmington to ferry PT-19s. The 23 Class 43-1 graduates reported to the Ferrying Division on May 1 and were essentially split evenly among the four squadrons.

Nancy Love had Colonel Tunner’s tacit approval to fly any airplane. She set out to prove that women could handle more than single-engine trainers. On February 27, 1943, she flew the P-51 becoming the first woman to fly the Army’s fastest pursuit. Among her other firsts were the C-47, B-25, B-17, and P-38. She paved the way for all women pilots to transition into bigger, more complex airplanes.

On July 5, 1943, Jackie Cochran was named Director of Women Pilots. She convinced Arnold



Jacqueline Cochran



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WASP in training on PT-17s at Avenger Field. (l to r) Josephine Martin, Clara Jo Marsh, and Elizabeth Lore of Class 44-3.

that she should be put in charge of all the women pilots flying for the Army. The same day, Nancy Love was named Executive for women pilots of the Army's Ferrying Division answerable to (now) General Tunner.

On August 5, 1943, Cochran changed their collective name to Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). She had pulled 25 Class 43-3 graduates from the ranks of the Ferrying Division and sent them to tow target school at Camp Davis, North Carolina. Several 43-4 graduates were headed there as well. The term "ferrying" squadron no longer described the many jobs about to be performed by the Army's women pilots.

In the meantime, other "Originals" followed Nancy Love's lead and transitioned into bigger, faster airplanes. Cochran took note of this and sent groups of "her girls" to learn to fly complex aircraft like the B-17, B-26, B-25, and perform a variety of flying jobs.

In the Fall of 1943, the delivery of pursuit aircraft became the Ferrying Division's number one priority. A school for pursuit pilot training opened December 1, 1943. Tunner sent several qualified women ferry pilots to each class. Upon graduation, those women began to ferry pursuits cross-country from factories to the docks for shipment abroad.

Factories were building pursuits by the thousands. The more women pursuit pilots the better since pursuits were the only aircraft the men moving up the Ferrying Division's transition ladder did not need to fly in order to qualify for the absolutely critical delivery of bombers and cargo planes overseas.

The women ferry pilots' primary responsibility became the movement of P-47 and P-51 pursuits to embarkation points at Newark, New Jersey, and Long Beach, California. They also moved P-39s and P-63s, destined for the Russians, to Great Falls, Montana.



The women were urged to ferry pursuits, but only if they chose to. Nancy Love made sure of that. Those who did not want to fly pursuits or were not able to qualify were transferred out of the Ferrying Division and sent where they would have more flight time.

By early 1944, the Allies were winning the war and General Arnold found that he had sufficient pilots to bring the war to a conclusion. He closed down the flight training schools, putting draft-exempt instructors out of jobs and into the draft pool. These men wanted the WASP's flying jobs as did the combat veterans who had completed their missions and were coming home.

In March 1944, Arnold sought militarization for his WASP, but the furor raised by the flight instructors, returning veterans, and others caught the ears of the press and Congress. A nasty anti-WASP smear campaign ensued. For the first time, Congress turned Arnold down. The WASP militarization bill was defeated June 21, 1944. Five days later Arnold cancelled further WASP training. Existing classes at Sweetwater were allowed to finish.

The WASP continued to fly. The ferry pilots found they were busier than ever because of the urgent need overseas for the pursuits they delivered daily to the docks. Then, in October 1944, the WASP received word that they would be deactivated December 20, 1944.



In addition to ferrying aircraft WASP performed other duties such as target towing with Curtiss A-25s

At the final graduation, Avenger Field, December 7, 1944, a very proud “Hap” Arnold told them: “You and 900 of your sisters have shown that you can fly wingtip to wingtip with your brothers.”

Over the 28-month duration of the program, WASP were assigned wide-ranging flying jobs at 120 U.S. bases. They flew whatever they were asked to fly. Two flew the B-29, which the men considered dangerous. Col. Paul Tibbets personally trained them to handle the big bomber as pilot and copilot to prove that a woman could fly it. The men got the message.

On December 20, 1944, the WASP went home. Soon, they were forgotten.

The Record

- 1,102 WASP served (That number includes 28 original WAFS and 1,074 flight school graduates)
- 303 were assigned to the Ferrying Division
- 134 qualified as pursuit pilots
- 38 died in service
- Fewer than 280 are alive today
- The youngest living WASP turned 85 in 2010
- The oldest living WASP turned 101 in 2010

In 1977, the WASP received their militarization authority for their service in WWII.

On March 10, 2010, the WASP were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal for patriotic service rendered to their country in World War II.



[Sarah Byrn Rickman is the author of four books about the WASP of WWII: Nancy Love and the WASP Ferry Pilots (biography); Nancy Batson Crews (biography); THE ORIGINALS: The Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (nonfiction); and the award-winning WASP novel FLIGHT FROM FEAR.

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