

Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)

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In September 1942, after several times rejecting proposals to use qualified women pilots for flying duties, Army Air Forces Commanding General Henry H. Arnold agreed to form two groups designed to help meet the need for pilots to ferry aircraft. The Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), led by Nancy Harkness Love, enlisted already-qualified women pilots to transport training aircraft from factories to training bases. Meanwhile, the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD), led by Jackie Cochran, oversaw an intensive training program to increase the number of women who could fly for the Ferrying Division. On 5 July 1943, Arnold put Cochran in charge of all women pilots, with Nancy Love as the Executive for women pilots in the Ferrying Command. A month later, on 5 August 1943, the WAFS and WFTD merged into a single unit for all women pilots, who were rapidly extending their qualifications to every type of aircraft in service. The new unified group called itself the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), with its pilots known as WASPs.

In its first few weeks, the WFTD required women pilots to have a private pilot license and 200 hours of flight time, and would then train them to fly "the Army way." But it soon began accepting women without any prior flying experience. The flight school at Avenger Field, in Sweetwater, Texas, ran most flight training for women pilots, who at first trained only on lighter or smaller planes. Eventually, however, women proved that they could fly almost every type of aircraft in the US military arsenal at the time, including the heaviest bombers and fastest fighters. Their pilot training therefore became the same as their male counterparts. The only aspect women's training did not cover remained combat acrobatics, since the Army Air Corps had from the start intended to use women pilots to free up male pilots for combat roles.

The WASP pilot training program graduated 1,074 graduates, who, combined with Nancy Love's "Originals," ferried over 50% of the combat aircraft within the United States during the war years. WASPs flew at 126 bases across the US, where they also towed targets for gunnery training and served as instrument instructors for the Eastern Flying Training Command. Thirty-eight of these women died in their service, 11 in training and 27 during missions.

Cochran and Love both eventually came to hope that as women proved their abilities and commitment to military aviation, the AAF would agree to militarize the program. Militarization would mitigate a number of unequal policies in salary and repayment of expenses, and it almost came about in 1944 when General Arnold planned to commission women pilots as Second Lieutenants within the AAF. These plans, however, encountered great opposition in the media and in Congress, where high-profile hearings in the House Committee on Military Affairs questioned the continued need for women pilots. Ironically, just as the military situation of 1942 had argued for the use of women pilots, the military situation of 1944 generated increased opposition. With the air campaign having successfully crushed the German Luftwaffe and now enjoying the ability to bomb German cities almost at will, Allied leaders now planned a massive ground assault that would finally end Nazi Germany. As part of these preparations, the AAF cut back its training for male pilots and revoked male civilian flight instructors' exemptions from serving in combat ground units. The men affected by these policies began a letter-writing campaign to their Congress members and to the media, which accused Arnold of trying to supplant male pilots with women. In June 1944, the Ramspeck Committee report argued that training women pilots was a waste of resources and should be terminated, though it allowed that women already trained could continue to serve. Congress rejected a WASP militarization bill on 21 June 1944, and Arnold himself came to believe that the crisis that had created the need for women pilots had passed. On 5 August 1944, he announced that the current class of trainees would be the WASP program's last.

The last WASP training class graduated at Sweetwater on 7 December 1944, and the WASP program itself ended on 20 December. At

the graduation ceremony, General Arnold told the last crop of pilots, "We of the AAF are proud of you; we will never forget our debt to you." But after the war ended the next year, the WASPs were in fact forgotten. Their records were classified and sealed from the public. Americans became absorbed into everyday routines of living, and no longer remembered the WASPs' contribution to the nation. When in the 1970s the Air Force announced that it would begin to accept women for pilot training, the media reported the story as if this would be the first time women could fly for the US military. The WASPs then rose up to demand the recognition that they deserved. Though opposed by the American Legion and other veterans' groups, on 23 November 1977, President Carter signed Public Law 95-202, Title IV, which granted former WASPs veteran status with limited benefits. Coincidentally, the Air Force graduated its first female pilots this same year. More recognitions followed in future years: the first WASPs received discharge certificates in 1979, and in 1984 they received World War II Victory Medals. Those who had served one year were also awarded American Theater Campaign medals. In 2009, President Obama signed into law a Senate bill providing the Congressional Gold Medal to the WASPs. Many of the surviving women pilots, accompanied by women Airmen in current service, accepted these medals at a ceremony in the White House on 10 March 2010.

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See the 1946 Army Air Forces Historical Study No. 55: [Women Pilots with the AAF, 1941-1944](#).

See this National Museum of the USAF [section on the WASP](#).

Read an [article on the WASP](#) from: *Friends Journal: the Magazine of the Air Force Museum Foundation*, Winter 2010/11.



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WASPs on runway, Laredo Texas, 1944.





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WASPs in classroom, Romulus Army Airfield, Michigan, 1944.



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