
The Round Tablette

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Written by Dr. Bernard Carpenter

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Welcome to the second March session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker is Sarah Byrn Rickman, author of *WASP of the Ferry Command: Women Pilots, Uncommon Deeds* (2016).

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, aviatrix Jacqueline Cochran talked with Gen. Harold Arnold, head of the Army Air Corps, suggesting the army utilize women pilots to ferry aircraft from factories to bases within the continental US, thereby freeing up male pilots for combat. She then recruited a group of women who went to Britain to join the British Air Transport Auxiliary, a successful employment of women in previously unthinkable roles. Cochran herself was the first woman to fly a bomber across the Atlantic from Canada to Scotland for ATA. Returning to the US, she learned that the army Air Transport Command had created the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron led by Nancy Harkness Love. The WAFS were civilians working for the ATC under contracts that required them to provide their own uniforms (only 40 did so), board, and quarters. WAFS had to be high school graduates (many were college graduates), have a commercial pilot's license, 500 hours of flight time (they averaged 1400 hours), and experience in cross-country flying. They were organized into six Ferrying Groups, each stationed at an air base near a major aircraft manufacturer.

Disappointed, Cochran persuaded General Arnold to authorize the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WATD) under *her* leadership. One key difference was that WATD candidates needed only 200 hours of flight time, though most candidates had more. Like Love's WAFS, they were civilians, lacking uniforms, and the elemental protections of either civil or military service like life insurance and death benefits. When one trainee died in a crash, Cochran paid to send her body home. After training, WATD pilots also ferried planes across the country, flew test flights, performed check flights, towed targets for live round anti-aircraft artillery practice, and instructed male pilot cadets.

In August of 1943, the two programs merged into the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)

under Cochran, who also supervised their training. Love continued to direct the ferrying division. In 1944, the Army Air Forces sought to direct commission women as AAF officers, just as the Air Transport Command routinely did for male commercial pilots, but the Comptroller General of the Army Air Forces would not allow it. Later that year, Congress rejected a bill that would make the WASP a component of the USAAF, largely because male pilots were returning from Europe having completed their required combat missions, and needed jobs, jobs the WASP were doing.

Cochran wanted the WASPs to be military but not part of the Women's Army Corps since WACs had to be 21 years old and either unmarried or married with children over 14 years old. Several of Cochran's best pilots were married with children under 14. WASP recruits normally had to be 21 to 35 years old, although several 18 years olds with commercial licenses were accepted. They needed to be at least 5' 2" tall, in good health, with a minimum of 500 hours of flight time.

The training curriculum, the same one the men followed, included Morse code, meteorology, physics, aircraft mechanics, navigation, and military law, as well as everything they needed to know to successfully fly military aircraft. They knew how to be pilots, but the army required them to learn to fly the army's way. Over 50,000 women applied, only 1,879 were accepted, and 1,074 (57%) successfully completed training. By contrast, 50% of male flight candidates washed out.

Most WASP pilots were white women. One woman, Ola M. Rexroat, was an Oglala Sioux from Pine Ridge Reservation. Two women were of Chinese descent, and two were of Mexican ancestry. Several American blacks applied, and some made it to the final interview stage before being rejected. Cochran told one black candidate that fighting anti-woman prejudice was hard enough, battling race discrimination was too much to ask.

The 1,100 WASPs flew 115,000 pilot hours, in every type of aircraft the army flew, over 9 million miles, delivering their aircraft safely and on time. Only 27 were killed on active duty missions, and 11 died in training accidents. In 1944, a chosen few flew jet and rocket-propelled planes, and two women were trained to fly the B-29, a difficult aircraft which

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

many males at first did not want to fly. Seeing them land the beast quieted the grumblers as General Arnold anticipated.

Though civilians, the British ATA women had uniforms, ranks, quarters, and received equal pay as men of equal rank received (WASP got 65% of comparable pay if they were lucky). Once certified in a class of aircraft (say four engine bombers) an ATA pilot (male or female) could be assigned to fly single engine aircraft or aircraft they were not familiar with. When they ferried combat aircraft, the guns were fully active and loaded since the Germans did not inquire about the pilot's military status before shooting at them. WASP pilots tended to specialize.

The Soviets had an aviation regiment of women who flew bombing missions into German rear areas. Known as the "Night Witches," they were feared by the Germans. Many Soviet women pilots flew close air support missions with great effectiveness. Soviet women served in ground combat as well and several earned a reputation as snipers by their excellence at the business of long range death. By contrast, German women played only minor roles in the Nazi war effort.

The program was terminated in December of 1944 without any ceremony or recognition. Civilians they were and civilians they remained until 1977, when HR 3277 passed, recognizing their service as active duty service in the armed forces of the United States entitling them to veteran status and benefits. Our allies did somewhat better by their women pilots.

The WAFFS were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in 2009, for service to their country as civilians — which they were throughout the time they served. Approximately 300 were still alive then and nearly 200 came, with their families, to Washington DC for the event in the Capitol. Today, only 39 of the 1,102 WASP are living.

FURTHER READINGS:

Sarah Byrn Rickman. *WASP of the Ferry Command: Women Pilots, Uncommon Deeds*. 2016.

Ann Carl. *A WASP Among Eagles: A Woman Military Test Pilot in World War II*. 2014.

Lettice Curtis. *The Forgotten Pilots: A Story of the Air Transport Auxiliary*. 2006.

Jacky Hyams. *The Femal Few: Spitfire Heoines of the Air Transport Auxiliary*. 2012.

Molly Merryman. *Clipped Wings: the Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) of World War II*. 1998.

Clare Mulley, *The Women Who Flew for Hitler: The True Story of Soaring Ambition and Searing Rivalry*, 2017.

Amy G. Stebe. *Flying for her Country: the American and Soviet Women Military Pilots of*

World War II. 2007.

Reina Pennington, *Wings, Women, & War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*. Kansas, 2002.

Announcements:

Vietnam War Roundtable - 15 Apr. 2019 - *Reporting on the War - Impact of the News Media* - mnvietnam.org - rldietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table -21 May 2019 - *Kentucky raider - Pvt. Commodore Perry Snell* - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com

St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - 22 Apr. 2019 - *Wisconsin in the Civil War* - 715-386-1268 - rossand-haines@comcast.net

Civil War Symposium - 6 Apr. 2019 - info@tccwrt.com
Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 - <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>

Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - www.mnangmuseum.org

8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130 - <https://www.8thmn.org>.

Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org

World Without Genocide - 651-695-7621 - <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show - 20 June 2020 - 320-564-6644 - <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie - 13-14 July 2019 - 952-746-6100 - www.wotn.org

Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - 24 Apr. 2019 - O'Shaughnessy, *Men Who Lost America: British Leadership ...* - sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com

Winston Churchill Book Club - lin.hopkins@hotmail.com

Alliance Francaise 612-332-0436 - www.afmsp.org - Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - crazyjer-ry45@hotmail.com

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.cafmn.org

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2019

11 Apr. General with Six Stars: J. H. C. Lee
9 May D-Day

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