

# WOMENS AIRFORCE SERVICE PILOTS (Nadine Harris-Bluhm)




The information shown below is a datacard from Texas Women's University for WASP class 43-W-7 listing as one of the students Thelma Nadine Harris Bluhm.



Women Airforce Service Pilots

**Thelma Nadine Harris Bluhm**

<p>Thelma Nadine Harris Bluhm</p>  <p>1922-</p>	<p><b>Class:</b> 43-W-7</p> <p><b>Base Assignment:</b> New Castle Army Air Base, Childress Army Air Field, Fairfax Field, Hondo Army Air Field, Long Beach Army Air Base</p> <p><b>Planes Flown:</b> AT-6, PT-19, BT-15</p> <p><b>Personal Collections:</b> <a href="#">View WASP holdings</a> Photos, oral histories, and papers <a href="#">click here</a></p>
---	--

Biofile: Many of the WASP have biofiles which consist of newspaper clippings.

*Texas Woman's University has served as the official archive for the Women Airforce Service Pilots since 1992.*

## Women Airforce Service Pilots



Elizabeth L. Gardner, WASP, at the controls of a B-26 Marauder

The **Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)** predecessors: The **Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD)** and the **Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS)** organized separately in September 1942. And they were the pioneering organizations of the civilian female pilots, employed to fly military aircraft under the direction of the United States Army Air Forces during World War II. The WFTD and WAFS were merged on August 5, 1943, to create the paramilitary WASP organization. The female pilots of the WASP ended up numbering 1,074, each freeing a male pilot for combat service and duties. They flew over 60 million miles in every type of military aircraft. The WASP was granted veteran status in 1977, and given the Congressional Gold Medal in 2009.

Twenty-five thousand women applied to join the WASP, but only 1,830 were accepted and took the oath. Out of these, only 1,074 of them passed the training and joined.

## Creation of the WASP



Deanie Parish in front of P-47 Thunderbolt on the flight line at Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida, in 1944

By the summer of 1941, Jacqueline "Jackie" Cochran and test-pilot Nancy Harkness Love, two famous women pilots, independently submitted proposals to the U.S. Army Air Forces (the forerunner to the United States Air Force) to use women pilots in non-combat missions after the outbreak of World War II in Europe. The motivation was to free male pilots for combat roles, by employing qualified female pilots to ferry aircraft from factories to military bases, and to tow drones and aerial targets. Prior to Pearl Harbor, General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, commander of the USAAF, had turned down both Love's 1940 proposal and that of the better connected and more famous Cochran, despite the lobbying by Eleanor Roosevelt. But he essentially promised the command to Cochran, should such a force be needed in the future.

While the U.S. was not yet fighting in World War II, Cochran had gone to England to volunteer to fly for the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA). The ATA had been using female pilots since January 1940, and was starting to train new ones as well. The American women who flew in the ATA were the first American women to fly military aircraft. They flew the Royal Air Force's front-line aircraft—Spitfires, Typhoons, Hudsons, Mitchells, Blenheims, Oxfords, Walruses, and Sea Otters—in non-combat roles, but in combat-like conditions. Most of these women

served in the ATA during the war. Only three members returned to the U.S. to participate in the WASP program.



Shirley Slade, WASP trainee—*Life* magazine feature story

The U.S. was building its air power and military presence in anticipation of direct involvement in the conflict, and had belatedly begun to drastically expand its men in uniform. This period led to the dramatic increase in activity for the U.S. Army Air Forces, because of obvious gaps in "manpower" that could be filled by women. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, it became evident there were not enough male pilots.

To those most involved within the new Ferrying Division of the Air Transport Command (ATC), the numbers were painfully obvious. Brig. Gen. William H. Tunner was in charge of acquiring civilian ferry pilots. And he decided to integrate a civilian force of female pilots into the AAF, after speaking with Major Robert M. Love, ATC staff officer, and his wife Nancy. Convinced of the feasibility of the program by Mrs. Love, who had a Commercial Pilot License, he asked her to draw

up a proposal, unaware that Arnold had shelved a similar proposal by Tunner's superior, Maj. Gen. Robert Olds.

Cochran had committed to go to Great Britain in March 1942 for the trial program of female pilots with the ATA. And she used her association with the President and Mrs. Roosevelt to lobby Arnold to reject any plan that did not commission women, and set up an independent organization commanded by women. Ironically, Tunner's proposal called for commissioning women in the WAACs, but was turned down after review by Arnold.

By the mid-summer of 1942, Arnold was willing to consider the prior proposals seriously. Tunner and Love's plan was reviewed by the ATC headquarters, and forwarded by Commander Gen. Harold L. George to Arnold, who was fully aware of it and gave it his blessing, after Mrs. Roosevelt had suggested a similar idea in a newspaper column. The Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) was headed by Mrs. Love, and went into operation on September 10, 1942. Soon, the Air Transport Command began using women to ferry planes from factory to airfields.

Cochran returned to the United States on September 10, 1942, as the new organization was being publicized, and immediately confronted Arnold for an explanation. Arnold claimed ignorance and blamed the ATC staff, in particular George's chief of staff, Col. (and former president of American Airlines) C. R. Smith. With the publicity involved, the WAFS program could not be reversed, and so on September 15, 1942 Cochran's training proposal was also adopted. Cochran and Love's squadrons were thereby established separately. The 319th Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) at the Municipal Airport (now Hobby Airport) in Houston, Texas, with Cochran as commanding officer, and the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, the 2nd Ferrying Group at New Castle (Delaware) Army Air Base (now New Castle Airport).

Though rivals, the two programs and their respective leaders operated independently and without acknowledgment of each other until the summer of 1943, when Cochran pushed aggressively for a single entity to control the activity of all women pilots. Tunner, in particular, objected on the basis of differing qualification standards, and the absolute necessity of the ATC being able to control its own pilots. But

Cochran's preeminence with Arnold prevailed, and in July 1943 he ordered the programs merged, with Cochran as director. The WAFS and the WFTD were combined to form the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP).

### **Initial WASP training**

The WASP training spanned 19 groups of women: The Originals, or WAFS led by Nancy Love, and the Guinea Pigs—Jacqueline Cochran's first of 18 classes of women pilots. They were required to complete the same primary, basic, and advanced training courses as male Army Air Corps pilots and many of them went on to specialized flight training. There were two Chinese-American women in the WASP, Hazel Ying Lee and Maggie Gee. Hazel Ying Lee died following a runway collision, but Maggie Gee survived the war. Ola Mildred Rexroat, an Oglala Sioux woman from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota, was the only Native American woman in the WASP. She survived the war and later joined the Air Force. All the other members of the WASP were white; no African-Americans were allowed to join the WASP.

The WAFS each had an average of about 1,400 flying hours and a commercial pilot rating. They received 30 days of orientation to learn Army paperwork and to fly by military regulations. Afterward, they were assigned to various ferrying commands.

The Guinea Pigs started training at Houston Municipal (Texas) Airport on November 16, 1942, as part of the 319th Army Air Force Women's Flying Training Detachment (AAFWFTD). This was just after the WAFS had started their orientation in Wilmington, Delaware. Unlike the WAFS, the women that reported to Houston did not have uniforms and had to find their own lodging. The "Woofteddies" (WFTD) also had minimal medical care, no life insurance, crash truck, or fire truck, and the ambulance loaned from the Ellington Army Airfield along with insufficient administrative staff, and a hodgepodge of aircraft—23 types—for training. As late as January 1943, when the third class was about to start their training, the three classes were described by Byrd Granger in *On Final Approach*, as "a raggle-taggle crowd in a rainbow of rumpled clothing", while they gathered for morning and evening colors.



Photo by Lois Hailey, Class of 43-3 in January 1943—start of training

This lack of resources, combined with the foggy and wet Houston weather delayed the graduation of the first class from February to April 1943. Conditions included the wet, sticky, clay soil everywhere, and a scarcity of rest rooms, which made the potential for morale problems significant. To minimize this, the *Fifinella Gazette* was started. The first issue was published February 10, 1943. The female gremlin Fifinella was conceived by Roald Dahl and drawn by Walt Disney, and used as the official WASP mascot that appeared on their shoulder patches.

The first Houston class started with 38 women with a minimum of 200 hours. Twenty-three graduated on April 24, 1943, at the only Houston WASP graduation at Ellington Army Air Field. The second Houston class, started in December 1942 with a minimum of 100 hours, but finished their training just in time to move to Sweetwater, Texas and become the first graduating class from Avenger Field on May 28, 1943. The third class completed their advanced training at Avenger Field and graduated July 3, 1943. Half of the fourth class of 76 women started their primary training in Houston on February 15, 1943, and then transferred to Sweetwater.

On March 7, 1943, the Houston classes incurred their first fatality. Margaret Oldenburg of 43-W-4 and her instructor, Norris G. Morgan, crashed seven miles south of Houston and were killed on impact. By the end of May 1943, the Houston 319th AAFWFTD was history. Later in the summer of 1943, both the WAFS and WFTD were combined into the WASP.

## Duties of the WASP



Florene Watson preparing a P-51D-5NA for a ferry flight from the factory at Inglewood, California

Each WASP had a pilot's license. They were trained to fly "the Army way" by the U.S. Army Air Forces at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. More than 25,000 women applied for the WASP, and fewer than 1,900 were accepted. After completing four months of military flight training, 1,074 of them earned their wings and became the first women to fly American military aircraft.

The women were not trained for combat. Their course of instruction, however, was essentially the same as that for aviation cadets. The WASPs thus received no gunnery training, and very little formation flying and aerobatics, but went through the maneuvers necessary to be able to recover from any position. The percentage of trainees eliminated compared favorably with the elimination rates for male cadets in the Central Flying Training Command.

After training, the WASPs were stationed at 120 air bases across the U.S., assuming numerous flight-related missions, and relieving male pilots for combat duty. They flew sixty million miles of operational flights from aircraft factories to ports of embarkation and military training bases. They also towed targets for live anti-aircraft artillery practice, simulated strafing missions, and transported cargo. Women in these roles flew almost every type of aircraft flown by the USAAF during World War II. In addition, a few exceptionally qualified women were allowed to test rocket-propelled planes, to pilot jet-propelled planes, and to work with radar-controlled targets. Between September 1942 and December 1944, the WASP delivered 12,650 aircraft of 78 different types.



Thirty-eight WASP fliers lost their lives while serving during the war – all in accidents—eleven in training and twenty-seven on active duty. Because they were not considered military under the existing guidelines, a fallen WASP was sent home at family expense without traditional military honors or note of heroism. The army would not even allow the U.S. flag to be placed on the coffin of the fallen WASP.



Helen W. Snapp, WASP, Washington, D.C., Low-target Squadron, Camp Stewart, Georgia, June 1944



Madge Moore showing the Daedalian Fighter Flight (Nellis AFB, NV) the WASP Congressional Gold Medal she was presented in Washington, D.C.



In July 2009, President Barack Obama signed the WASP Congressional Gold Medal into law.

### **Battle for militarization**

The WASP was considered civil service and did not receive military benefits, unlike their male counterparts. On the other hand, they were not administratively tied to the Army Air Forces and could resign at any time after completion of their training, although few, if any did.

On September 30, 1943, the first of the WASP militarization bills was introduced in the United States House of Representatives. Both Cochran and Arnold desired a separate corps headed by a woman colonel (similar to the WAC, WAVE, SPAR, and Marine heads). The War Department; however, consistently opposed such a move, since there was no separate corps for male pilots as distinguished from nonrated AAF officers. Instead, it preferred that women be commissioned in the WAC, and added to some 2,000 "Air WAC" officers assigned to flying duty, legally permissible.

On June 21, 1944, the House bill to give the WASP military status was narrowly defeated. The civilian male pilots lobbied against the bill: reacting to closure of some civilian flight training schools, and the termination of two male pilot training commissioning programs. The House Committee on the Civil Service (Ramspeck Committee) reported on June 5, 1944, that it considered the WASP unnecessary, unjustifiably expensive, and recommended that the recruiting and training of inexperienced women pilots be halted.

Cochran had been pushing for a resolution of the question: in effect, delivering an ultimatum to either commission the women or disband the program. The AAF had developed an excess of pilots and pilot candidates. As a result, Arnold (who had been a proponent of militarization) ordered that the WASP be disbanded by December 20,

1944. Arnold is quoted from a speech he delivered at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas on December 7, 1944:

"The WASP has completed its mission. Their job has been successful. But as is usual in war, the cost has been heavy. Thirty-eight WASP have died while helping their country move toward the moment of final victory. The Air Forces will long remember their service and their final sacrifice."

At the conclusion of the WASP program, 915 women pilots were on duty with the AAF: 620 assigned to the Training Command, 141 to the Air Transport Command, 133 to the numbered air forces in the continental United States, 11 to the Weather Wing, 9 to the technical commands and one to the Troop Carrier Command.

## **Legacy**

All records of the WASP were classified and sealed for 35 years, so their contributions to the war effort were little known and inaccessible to historians. In 1975, under the leadership of Col. Bruce Arnold, son of General Hap Arnold, the WASP fought the "Battle of Congress" in Washington, D.C., to have the WASP recognized as veterans of World War II. They organized as a group again and tried to gain public support for their official veteran recognition. Finally in 1977, the records were unsealed after an Air Force press release erroneously stated the Air Force was training the first women to fly military aircraft for the U.S.

This time, the WASPs lobbied Congress with the important support of Senator Barry Goldwater, who himself had been a World War II ferry pilot in the 27th Ferrying Squadron. President Jimmy Carter signed legislation #95-202, Section 401, The G.I. Bill Improvement Act of 1977, granting the WASP corps full military status for their service. In 1984, each WASP was awarded the World War II Victory Medal. Those who served for more than one year were also awarded American Theater Ribbon/American Campaign Medal for their service during the war. Many of the medals were accepted by the recipients' sons and daughters on their behalf.

Because of the pioneering and the expertise they demonstrated in successfully flying military aircraft, the WASP records showed that

women pilots, when given the same training as men pilots, were as capable as men in non-combat flying.

On May 10, 2010 President Barack Obama and the United States Congress awarded the WASP the Congressional Gold Medal. Three of the roughly 300 surviving WASPs were on hand to witness the event. During the ceremony President Obama said,

"The Women Airforce Service Pilots courageously answered their country's call in a time of need while blazing a trail for the brave women who have given and continue to give so much in service to this nation since. Every American should be grateful for their service, and I am honored to sign this bill to finally give them some of the hard-earned recognition they deserve."

On May 10, 2010, the 300 surviving WASPs came to the US Capitol to accept the Congressional Gold Medal from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other Congressional leaders.