

Women Airforce Service Pilots



Elizabeth L. Gardner, WASP, at the controls of a [B-26](#).

The **Women Airforce Service Pilots**, also known as **WASP**, and the predecessor groups the **Women's Flying Training Detachment** (WFTD) and the **Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron** (WAFS) (official from September 10, 1942) were each a pioneering organization of civilian female pilots employed to fly military aircraft under the direction of the [United States Army Air Forces](#) during gender-sensitive days of [World War II](#) that eventually would number in the thousands of female pilots, each freeing up a male pilot for combat service and duties. The WFTD and WAFS were combined in mid-1943 to create the para-military WASP organization.

Creation of the WASP

By the summer of 1941, the famous women pilots [Jacqueline "Jackie" Cochran](#) and test-pilot [Nancy Harkness Love](#) independently submitted proposals for the use of female pilots in non-combat missions to the [Army Air Forces](#) (the predecessor to the United States Air Force or [USAF](#)) after the outbreak of [World War II](#) in [Europe](#). The motivation for both proposals was to free up more male pilots for combat roles by employing qualified female pilots on missions such as ferrying aircraft from factories to military bases, and towing drones/aerial targets. So leading into Pearl Harbor, [General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold](#), commander of the [USAAF](#), with characteristic male prejudices of the time, had turned down both Love's 1940 and the better connected and more famous Cochran's 1941 proposal despite unsubtle lobbying by [Eleanor Roosevelt](#), but essentially promised command of any such effort to Cochran, should such a force be needed in the future.

While America was not yet directly involved in the war itself, it was apparent to many by 1940–1941 that it was inevitable. Cochran went to England to volunteer and fly for the [Air Transport Auxiliary](#) (ATA)^[1]. The American women who flew in the ATA were the first American women to fly military aircraft.^[2] They flew the Royal Air Force's front-line aircraft—Spitfires, Typhoons, Hudsons, Mitchells, Blenheims, Oxfords, Walruses, and Sea Otters—in a non-combat role but in combat-like conditions. Most of these women served the war in the ATA. In fact there were only three members of the ATA who made it back to the US to participate in the WASP program.



Shirley Slade, WASP trainee—[Life Magazine](#) feature story.

The U.S. had been building its air power and military presence in anticipation of eventual direct involvement in the conflict and had belatedly begun to drastically expand its men in uniform. This period had led to a dramatic increase in activity for the U.S. Army Air Forces, and there were obvious gaps in "manpower" that could be filled by women. However, it was not until after the [attack on Pearl Harbor](#) brought the United States armed forces fully into the war that it became evident to some there were not enough male pilots to serve all necessary roles. To those most involved with military transport, especially in the new Army Air Forces [Air Transport Command](#) (ATC), the numbers were painfully obvious, and [William H. Tunner](#) fell under the influence of Love when she took a civilian position with his command. Ignorant of Hap Arnold's prior considerations, Tunner ask Love to draw up a proposal and soon began using women via [Air Transport Command's Ferry Command](#) to ferry planes from factory to air fields, which soon became the beginnings of the para-military [Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron](#) (WAFS), which was officially founded in September 1942 under the command of [Love](#).

With the sudden realization of war realities by mid-summer of 1942, [General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold](#), commander of the [USAAF](#), was willing to consider the prior proposals seriously. One of Cochran's proposals was to use women as civilian instructor pilots. He came to find he'd already been pre-empted by [ATC](#) founder and commander [General William H. Tunner](#). By the time Hap Arnold found out his decision had been ignored and circumvented, Tunner had tens of women ferrying planes from factory to air fields as independent contractors. Initially pre-war, Gen. Arnold had simply shipped the 'troublesome' women to England to help the British with the war supply effort, feeling that there was no real need for their assistance at home, as America was still largely uninvolved. Half a year after the Pearl Harbor attack, he was convinced not so much by Cochran and unaware of Love's influence with Tunner but by Tunner's exercise of initiative that the women could really make an impact—they were simply already doing so.



Deanie Parish in front of an early [P-47](#) on the flight line at [Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida](#), in the early 1940s.

Cochran's and Love's squadrons were thereby established separately (as the 319th *Women's Flying Training Detachment* ([WFTD](#)) at Municipal Airport (now [Hobby Airport](#) in [Houston, Texas](#) under Cochran as commanding officer and the *Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron* [WAFS](#) at New Castle (Delaware) Army Air Base (now [New Castle Airport](#), respectively), in 1942 and then later merged to form the Women Airforce Service Pilots in July of 1943^[3].

[\[edit\]](#) Initial Training of the WASP

WASP training spanned 19 groups of women including The Originals, or WAFS lead by Nancy Love, and The Guinea Pigs, [Jacqueline Cochran](#)'s first of 18 classes of women pilots.

The WAFS, each with an average of about 1,400 hours of flying, received 30 days of orientation to learn how do Army paperwork and to fly the military way. After that, they were assigned to various ferrying commands. (Lois Hailey was one of the 83 who received, but did not accept, the invitation to join the WAFS, but later became part of Houston class 43-W-3.)

The Guinea Pigs started their training at Houston Municipal 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, no crash truck, no fire truck, a loaned ambulance from Ellington, in sufficient administrative staff, and were trained with a hodgepodge of aircraft - 23 types. As late as January 1943, when the third class was about to start their training, the three classes were described as "a raggle-taggle crowd in a rainbow of rumbled clothing."



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

Add to this lack of resources the foggy and wet Houston weather, which delayed the graduation of the first class from February to April, the wet sticky clay soil everywhere they went, and the scarcity of

rest rooms, and you have plenty of potential for morale problems. To minimize all this, the Fifinella Gazette was started. The first issue was published on February 10, 1943.

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, which started in December of 1942 with a minimum of 100 hours, finished their training just in time to move to Sweetwater and become the first graduating class from Avenger Field on May 28, 1943. The third class, of which my mother was a member, completed their advanced training at Avenger Field and graduated on July 3, 1943. Half of the fourth class, 76 women, started their primary training in Houston on February 15, 1943, and then transferred to Sweetwater.

On March 7, 1943, all four Houston classes were hit with a very sobering slap - the first WASP fatality. Margaret Oldenburg of 43-W-4 and her instructor, Norris G. Morgan, crashed 7 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 WFTDs were renamed WASP.

Duties of the WASP

The WASP were a unique corps of women pilots, each already possessing a pilot's license and dedicated to helping her country. They were trained to fly "the Army way" by the [U.S. Army Air Forces](#) at Avenger Field in [Sweetwater, Texas](#). After completing months of military flight training, 1,078 of them earned their wings and became members of 'WASP', Women Airforce Service Pilots, 'the first women in history to fly American military aircraft.'



Ferry pilot Florene Watson warms up her [P-51](#).

After their training, the WASP were stationed at 120 air bases across the United States, relieving male pilots returning from combat duty and assuming numerous other flight-related missions. They flew more than sixty million miles of operational flights from aircraft factories to ports of embarkation and military training bases, towing targets for live anti-aircraft artillery practice, simulated strafing missions, and transporting cargo. Almost every type of aircraft ever flown by the USAAF during WWII, including the very early American jet aircraft, were also flown by women in these roles. Between [September 1942](#) and [December 1944](#), the WASP delivered 12,650 aircraft of 78 different types to their destination and had flown over sixty million cumulative miles. Over fifty percent of the ferrying of combat aircraft within the United States during WWII was carried out by WASP, under the leadership of [Nancy Love](#).

Thirty-eight WASP fliers lost their lives while serving their country during the war. Because they were not considered to be actually in the military under the existing guidelines, a fallen WASP was sent home at the expense of her family without any traditional military honors or note of their heroism.



Four women pilots leaving their ship at the four-engine school at Lockbourne during WASP training to ferry [B-17 Flying Fortresses](#).

Battle for militarization and legacy

The WASP were considered civil service employees and did not receive military benefits, unlike their male counterparts^[4]. On [June 21, 1944](#), a bill in the [United States House of Representatives](#) to give the WASP military status was narrowly defeated after civilian male pilots lobbied against the idea. As a result, General Arnold ordered that the WASP be disbanded by [December 20, 1944](#)^[5]. USAAF General "Hap" Arnold is quoted from a speech he delivered at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas on December 7, 1944: "The WASP have completed their 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."^[6]



[Fifiella](#).

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 for many years. 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 belatedly obtain recognition as veterans of WWII. They organized as a group again and tried to gain public support for their official recognition. Finally, in [1977](#), with the important support of Senator [Barry Goldwater](#) (having been a ferry pilot himself during the war with the 27th Ferry Squadron), President [Jimmy Carter](#) signed legislation #95-202, Section 401, The G.I. Bill Improvement Act of 1977, granting the WASP corps the distinction of full military status for their service. In 1984, each WASP was awarded the [WWII Victory Medal](#). Those who served for more than one year were also awarded American Theater Ribbon/[American Campaign Medal](#) for their service during WWII. Many of the medals were received by their sons and daughters on their behalf.

The female gremlin [Fifiella](#), originally conceived by [Roald Dahl](#) and drawn by [Walt Disney](#), was used as the official WASP mascot and appeared on their shoulder patch.

Regardless of their many accomplishments since their deactivation, the most important WASP legacy is their contribution as military pilots during World War II. Because of the pioneering and the expertise they demonstrated in successfully flying every type of military aircraft, from the fastest fighters to the heaviest bombers, the WASP blazed a trail for women of future generations to follow. The WASP had proven conclusively that female pilots, when given the same training as male pilots, are just as capable as men.



[Jackie Cochran](#) (center) with WASP trainees.

Notable WASP aviators

- Ann Baumgartner Carl [\[7\]](#)
- [Jacqueline Cochran](#)
- Nancy Batson Crews [\[8\]](#)
- [Cornelia Fort](#)
- [Sara Payne Hayden](#) (Veteran's Affairs chairwoman)
- Teresa James [\[9\]](#)
- [Hazel Ying Lee](#)
- Barbara Erickson London [\[10\]](#)
- [Betty Gillies](#)
- [Nancy Love](#)
- Mabel Rawlinson [\[11\]](#)
- [Margaret Ringenberg](#)
- [Evelyn Sharp](#)
- Dora Dougherty Strother [\[12\]](#)
- Lois Hailey [\[13\]](#)

- [Women Airforce Service Pilots Badge](#)
- [Women's Auxiliary Air Force](#) (WAAF—British)
- [Women's Army Corps](#) (WAC)
- [WAVES](#)
- [SPARS](#)
- [United States Army Air Forces](#)
- [United States Air Force](#)



Helen W. Snapp, WASP, [Washington, D.C.](#), Low-target Squadron, [Camp Stewart, Georgia](#), [June 1944](#).

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- Williams, Vera S. *WASPs: Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II*. Osceola, Minnesota: Motorbooks International, 1994. [ISBN 0-87938-856-0](#).
- [Air Transport Auxiliary](#)
- [The American Experience: Fly Girls](#)
- [WASPS: Breaking Ground for Today's Female USAF Pilots](#)
- [Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron](#)
- [Nancy Harkness Love Biography](#)
- [Description of Fifinella from USAF website](#)
- [WASPS Demonstrate their Abilities](#)
- [WASP Disbanded](#)
- [WASP Epilogue](#)
- [Women Pilots with the AAF, 1941–1944](#)

Further reading

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- Sarah Byrn Rickman. *The Originals - The Women's Auxilliary Ferrying Squadron of World War II*. Disc-Us Books, Inc., 2001. [\[14\]](#)
- Celeste Graves. *A View from the Doghouse of the 319th AAFWFTD*. AuthorHouse, 2004. [\[15\]](#)
- Schrader, Helena. *Sisters in Arms: British and American Women Pilots During World War II*. Pen and Sword Books, 2006.



Service members of WASP on the flight line at [Laredo Army Air Field, Texas](#), [22 January 1944](#).

External links

- [Texas Woman's University: Women Airforce Service Pilots Collection](#)— TWU maintains the official WASP archives and includes oral histories, photographs, and other archival collections on the WASP.
- [WASP on the WEB](#)
- [Women Airforce Service Pilots \(WASP\) Remembered by those who knew them](#)

- [Women in the U.S. Army](#)
- <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/flygirls/> PBS American Experience: Fly Girls—Website for the PBS documentary on the WASP.
- [Blitzkreig Baby](#)—Information on WWII U.S. women's service organizations, including uniforms.
- [USAF Museum: Women Pilots in World War II History](#)—Air Force Museum virtual exhibit.
- [Winged Auxiliaries: Women Pilots in the UK and US during World War Two](#)—Draws comparisons between British ATA and American WASP pilots in World War II.
- [Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library's archives](#)—Important information and documents about the WASPs and Jaqueline Cochran.
- [Thirty-eight women earned their second pair of wings during the WASP program](#)

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