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## The Ladies of Cochran's Convent<sup>[1]</sup>: The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of WWII

By Cari Lyle

By the 1940s, aviation was a highly technical and multifaceted aspect of the United States military. The pinnacle of flight during this time was illustrated perfectly by the B-29 Superfortress, which was the most sophisticated type of aircraft available with features such as an electronic-fire control system and remote controlled machine gun turrets. Flying was not only dominated by military prowess, but also controlled entirely by males. The United States Army Air Corp (USAAC), soon to be renamed the Army Air Forces (AAF), commanded all things aviation. They were behind research, development, manufacturing, testing, and piloting these technological wonders. With World War II imminent, the government mobilized these resources to win the war. To pilot all of the aircraft manufactured at factories in the United States, the government needed more pilots. Through negotiations and determination, the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) were created in order to "release men pilots for more advanced combat duties."<sup>[2]</sup> The WASPs would not be wartime pilots, but domestic pilots that, among other duties, ferried airplanes to various aircraft depots across the United States. They released male pilots of these jobs and could showcase their ability to the world, thus helping break a number of barriers for women in aviation, the military, and civilian society in general.

Though the WASPs shared similarities with other women's divisions of the military such as the Women's Army Corp (WACs) or the Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Services (WAVES), they proved to be incredibly unique. The WASPs had stricter age, weight, height, and education requirements along with the most fundamental requirement a pilot's license.<sup>[3]</sup> The WASPs were also a fascinating organization because they were not militarized during World War II. Militarization was granted to the other women's military units, the WACs, the WAVES, the SPARs (Women's Coast Guard), and the Women's Marines. This meant that they were a civilian body under the management of the Army Air Forces and were not conferred veteran rights, such as the G.I. Bill.

The WASP Program was an exceptional association that contributed immensely to the war effort. In order to break down this organization, it is important to examine how the women themselves viewed this program and their role within it. The results provide insight into how legitimate the WASP Program was. The women's previous flight experience illustrates the initial preparedness of the WASPs. Some women trained through the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP), while others enlisted the teaching of private instructors. Flight requirements were originally set at two hundred hours of flight time, but, in order to increase the candidate pool, requirements dropped down continuously from two hundred, one hundred, seventy-five, and finally thirty-five hours.<sup>[4]</sup> Along with personal interviews with WASP Director, Jacqueline "Jackie" Cochran, the WASPs needed at least one year of college. They also had to be between twenty-one and thirty-two years old as listed in the Commanding General of the United States Army Air Forces, Henry "Hap" Arnold's memo.<sup>[5]</sup> With educational and pilot experiences, the women of the WASP program were extremely prepared to fly.

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Despite their preparedness, the military made less than adequate preparations for the WASPs to do their jobs. For example, the women did not receive suitable uniforms, such as helmets or flight jumpsuits. Lackluster preparations gave rise to the belief that the military was not ready or not willing to accept the WASPs as viable pilots. However, over time, the military did make adjustments and improved the conditions for the WASPs. This contributed to the WASPs' feeling like they had made their contributions to the war effort as a result of all the work they had done. Not only were their needs met at Avenger Field and at other army bases, but also, thanks to Jackie Cochran, their routine was extremely militarized despite their civilian status. A strict military routine gave the women a sense of fulfillment because they felt like credible attributes to the military. They had often questioned why they were never militarized when they had been instructed in a very military-like environment.<sup>[6]</sup>

Though their routine was heavily structured, they did have free time, which they spent doing activities that reflected how they viewed their roles as women in the military and as women in the 1940s. Initially, the American public considered these women morally and spiritually weak because of their participation in something that was always perceived as men's jurisdiction. Also, the relationships these women had with their male instructors and peers offers depth to how cohesive the program was run and how the women were viewed among the males, including how the women perceived themselves in an essentially all male institution. Because these women were in a male dominated-sphere and relieved male pilots of their domestic duties, they were trained to perform tasks that exceeded ferrying responsibilities, which included towing targets and reconnaissance practice. While they ultimately went back to more traditional female roles after the WASPs disbanded, they gained a new perspective on their roles as women.

## **Origins**

The beginning of the WASP Program started as early as 1940, even though the program itself was not created until July 1943. In 1940, aviatrix Jacqueline "Jackie" Cochran approached the United States Army Air Corps (USAAC) with a proposal for commissioned women pilots. General Henry "Hap" Arnold rejected this proposal initially because he did not feel they were necessary with the United States not yet militarily involved with the war. However, it launched a chain reaction of events that would eventually lead to a women's pilot program. The origins of the WASP Program reveal the legitimacy of the program as a whole. Since this was the first government-funded program, which trained women to fly, researching the cautious planning stages is crucial to understanding the successes and failures of the WASP Program.

Soon after Jackie Cochran's initial proposal, Major General Robert Olds of the Air Corps Ferrying Command sent out a questionnaire to all women with pilot's licenses. This questionnaire was to explore the possibility of having a women's pilot program under the supervision of the United States government. The Ferrying Command had a domestic flying division that housed all organizations that would fly aircraft within the United States; thus, the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), the WASP predecessor, was stationed under the jurisdiction of the Ferrying Command. The survey, sent in July 1941, stated, "No conclusions have been reached about the future of such an organization, and it has not been determined whether it should be formed on a military or civilian basis, temporary or permanent."<sup>[7]</sup> Though this questionnaire was general and preliminary, it directly asked questions that would determine a woman's capacity to perform in a high profile and experimental organization. Some of the questions included, "Would you be interested in joining an organization which is government sponsored at a salary not less than \$150 per month to start?," "To carry out any assignment of flying which you are assigned to that the person in charge considers you qualified to do?," and "Are you free to take up residence where you are requested for the purpose of serving this organization six months to one year and devote your full time?"<sup>[8]</sup> These types of questions meant that, depending on the answers he received, Major General Olds would seriously consider

implementing such a program. Not only was he looking for women who held a pilot's licenses, but also women who were willing to accept a specified salary, move to whatever destination was assigned, and consent to military discipline.

Meanwhile, in the spring of 1942, Jackie Cochran and a group of female American pilots were sent to England to ferry for British Air Transport, a branch of England's military. Cochran and the rest of these women served as a trial to find out whether or not women could fly in this capacity. She noted that these women and "their activities constituted a definite preliminary step in the development of the large scale AAF [Army Air Forces] women pilot program that followed."<sup>[9]</sup> Cochran utilized this experience and submitted another proposal for a program that would train women pilots using the same standards as men. She noted, "This seemed particularly important considering that one of the purposes of any women pilot program was to determine the capabilities, limitations, strength, and weakness of women as pilots, and this could be done only by having them carefully selected, assigned, checked, and supervised."<sup>[10]</sup> This suggested that even if a female pilot program was created, they needed to give women similar training to male pilots because they would constantly be judged and compared to them.

Along with Jackie Cochran's new proposal, the United States Army Air Force accepted another aviatrix's proposal, that of Nancy Harkness Love, to create a group of trained pilots for ferrying duties. Under Love, the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) operated separately at the New Castle Army Air Base in Delaware from Cochran's Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) in Fort Worth, Texas.<sup>[11]</sup> By the summer of 1943, both the WAFS and the WFTD merged to create the WASPs. Jackie Cochran remained the director, while Nancy Harkness Love became the second in command.

The WASPs were officially founded in July 1943 with three main objectives mandated by General Arnold. These objectives were: "(1) To see if women could service as military pilots and if so, to form the nucleus of an organization that could be rapidly expanded; (2) to release male pilots for combat; (3) to decrease the Air Forces' total demands on the cream of the manpower pool."<sup>[12]</sup> Because they were in a male dominated field, they constantly had to prove their legitimacy as pilots. Jackie Cochran noted, "The WASP were continually cautioned to leave the glamour and glory for their brother pilots who were over the front lines, and that the WASP operation was a routine group endeavor."<sup>[13]</sup>

The question of militarization had troubled the WASPS since its very beginnings. It was uncertain whether the WASP Program would remain a civilian organization or become militarized, for example under the direction of Oveta Culp Hobby and the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC). However, in the summer of 1943, General Arnold sent a memo calling for the incorporation of the WASP (both graduates and trainees) into the Army Air Forces. He argued that the WASPs were training to be pilots and thus, needed to be managed by the AAF. Also, the WASP and the WAAC had a very different set of entrance requirements, which meant that the WAAC was not qualified to supervise the WASP Program.<sup>[14]</sup> This question remained contentious throughout the program's duration.

In regards to the type of women eligible to join the WASP Program, Jackie Cochran noted, "The selection was entirely a matter of choosing clean-cut, stable appearing young girls of the proper ages, educational background, and height, who could show the required number of flying hours properly noted and certified in a log book."<sup>[15]</sup> With Cochran's insistence, the WASP Program was created to train women pilots for tasks that included ferrying, towing targets, and repairing aircraft. This was a very controversial undertaking at the time. In addition, it presented an alternative view of female roles in the 1940s, especially during wartime. Women are often studied

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from the perspective of the home front during war and rarely for their contributions to the military. The WASPs present an unorthodox view of women's responsibilities during wartime and how those responsibilities affected their status in civilian society. While there were other female military divisions, the WASPs had stricter requirements, the most important being the ability to fly and the possession of a pilot's license.

### **Previous Flying Experience**

General Arnold's memo about the incorporation of women pilots and trainees into the Army Air Forces listed some of the requirements for entrance into the WASP Program. He stipulated that these women must pass aviation cadet tests, just like male cadets. He also called for a small, but highly trained organization of women pilots under the command of the AAF.<sup>[16]</sup> Probably the most significant requirement for acceptance into the WASP Program was flight experience; all women must have already had their pilot's licenses. In the latter months of the program, the flight hours required to join were lowered in order to increase the pool of candidates. The initial requirement was set at two hundred hours of flight time, but according to Jackie Cochran, the hours were "successively reduced to 100 hours, then to 75 hours, and finally to 35 hours, where it remained until the end of the program."<sup>[17]</sup> She commented:

It was known from the beginning that the requirement of 200 hours would not permit the objective of 500 trained women pilots to be obtained, but the desire was to have the more experienced licensed women pilots in the earlier classes to help the program off to a smooth start.<sup>[18]</sup>

Essentially, Cochran made an executive decision as Director of the WASP Program to cut the required hours so as to increase the number of applicants.

The Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) was a common way for both men and women to obtain civilian pilot's licenses in the late 1930s and early 1940s. President Franklin Roosevelt began this program to train college students throughout the United States to fly. He wanted to increase the standard of aviation by devoting more resources to its development, although with World War II looming, this program aided tremendously by training more pilots for potential use. Irma Story noted how the CPTP accepted more males than females, so she felt lucky to have been accepted.<sup>[19]</sup> She entered the CPTP at Antelope Valley Junior College in Lancaster, California.<sup>[20]</sup> Caro Bayley Bosca entered the CPTP at St. Mary's College in Columbus, Ohio, in 1941. After her training, she worked at Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio prior to applying to the WASP Program.<sup>[21]</sup> At the University of Missouri, Inez Woodward Woods entered the CPTP stationed at Lambert Field in St. Louis. She later filled out Jackie Cochran's survey and interviewed for the WASP Program.<sup>[22]</sup> The CPTP provided women with an opportunity to fly, so a majority of women in the CPTP felt unique and took their training very seriously. The CPTP proved to be vital for many women interested in flying. Since the program trained both men and women, essentially women received the same flight training and were held to the same standards as men. Thus, these women were equally qualified to fly all types of military aircraft.

Many other women obtained pilot's licenses privately. Jean Hascall Cole, for example, paid for flying lessons in Fairhaven, Vermont. She then moved to Richmond, Virginia, where she formed a flying club and bought a plane.<sup>[23]</sup> Soon after, she heard about the WASPs; she took her physical and headed to Avenger Field. Sara Chapin earned her pilot's license at the age of sixteen. She then worked at a small airport to build up her flight time while in college. She joined the WASP Program on her twenty-first birthday, just making the age requirement cutoff.<sup>[24]</sup> Obtaining a pilot's license privately proved to be another crucial way for many women to learn to fly. Women also worked at airports, not only to build up flight time, but also to learn the mechanical side of planes. For example,

Eleanor McLernon Brown obtained her private pilot's license at Duncan Field, Texas. Colonel I.W. Ott, Chief Engineering Officer at the Aircraft Repair Depot at Duncan Field, asked Brown if she could be a "guinea pig" to see if women could handle flight tests while she worked there as a mechanic.<sup>[25]</sup>

Some WASPs, like Jean Moore Soard, originally planned to join another female military division. After training at the CPTP at Hanover College, she left for Indianapolis to join the Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Services (WAVES). It was in Indianapolis that a recruiter told her that the WASP requirement flight time had been lowered to thirty-five hours and that she was now eligible to join.<sup>[26]</sup> Similarly, Alberta Paskvan Kinney went to Seattle to work for the Navy; however, once she heard about the WASP Program, she began private flying lessons in Washington.<sup>[27]</sup> This suggests that American women were specifically interested in military aviation.

Overall, there were several different avenues for women to become involved in aviation. The WASPs all had a love for flying that they had discovered at different ages and through different means. This led many of them to enroll in the Civilian Pilot Training Program at colleges across the United States where they were trained alongside men. Other women obtained pilot's licenses privately through one-on-one instruction or in aviation schools. This proved to be an equally valid way for women to learn to fly because many of these women became involved in local airports working on the mechanics of the plane as well. Ultimately, these women knew they wanted to fly and that the WASP Program was the only women's organization that would allow and train them to do so, unlike the WAACs or WAVES. Though the WASP Program was new and lacked sufficient provisions, it evolved to become a highly structured and militarily organized operation. It also opened up new possibilities for women that the other women's military divisions did not offer.

### **WASP Program Preparations**

Initially, the Women's Flying Training Detachment was stationed in Fort Worth before it was moved to Houston, Texas, while the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron was at New Castle in Delaware. However, once the programs merged to form the Women Airforce Service Pilots, training for all personnel was transitioned to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. In fact, the early WASP classes trained at Avenger Field while the last classes of male pilots finished their training there and graduated.<sup>[28]</sup> Avenger Field was a military base and thus equipped with all of the typical amenities such as barracks, hangars, mess (dining) and recreation halls, fields, and the like. Sara Chapin described the base to her family, "this is gonna be a tuff pull they aren't fooling and we really work... The field is brand new as are the barracks all built around a grass square and nice and clean."<sup>[29]</sup> For many of these women, Avenger Field was their first encounter with the military and army structure.

The living quarters for the WASPs were the barracks set up around the field. Chapin detailed the WASP living situation, "6 of us to a room and one john no mirror a closet 6 ft. tall and 1 ft. wide in sections, one to hang things and the other shelves... No lamps or pix on desks and only one pic on top of locker."<sup>[30]</sup> There was, however, an increase of trainees as WASP requirements were lowered continuously to thirty-five hours of flight time, so arrangements had to be made. Caro Bayley Bosca explained to her parents, "there are about 500 girls, 10 barracks with 7 compartments and 7 girls to a compartment, 7 chairs, 2 long desks, and a locker for each, one johnny, or a latrine as the army calls it, and a shower."<sup>[31]</sup> Though the United States Army Air Forces considered these women civilians, they were stationed at military bases, which continued to develop as the need for better facilities arose.

Despite the AAF providing adequate accommodations for WASP training, they failed to supply adequate uniforms. Anne Chisholm Dessert Oliver described how, initially, the AAF did not supply adequate uniforms for WASP trainees, but instead gave them left over mechanic's overalls.<sup>[32]</sup> Adaline Blank explicated further about these

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oversized suits, "Zoot Suits, we call them. They are GI coveralls which we inherited from the cadets who trained here before we Avengerettes took over... They come in three sizes Large, Larger and Largest. We hitch them up and pull them together making quite an effective front line drape."<sup>[33]</sup> The lack of adequate uniforms, though, is not surprising. Although the WASPs were not the first female (semi) military division, they were the first geared towards aviation. Because the AAF never before dealt with an organized group of female pilots, they were initially ill prepared for outfitting them.

Even though they did not have flying jumpsuits, the WASPs had other dress requirements. For example, Adaline Blank noted, "we have our dress uniforms, which are really very snappy. We wear them to classes and for dinner. Nicely tailored beige whipcord slacks worn with a white shirt, leather flying jacket, brown shoes, and an overseas type hat."<sup>[34]</sup> She resumed, "we are really an impressive looking group as we hut 2, 3, 4' around here. For drill, we have blue shorts and shirt so you see we aren't in those baggy zoot suits' all the time."<sup>[35]</sup> So although the Army Air Force lacked aviation attire, they were prepared to provide other needed uniforms for the WASPs such as formal dress and physical training clothes. Aviation attire required special tailoring for female pilots that the military had not yet done. The outfits of other women's military divisions inspired the designs for formal dress and physical training clothes; therefore, they were issued sooner than the jump suits.

They were issued dog tags, but, as Sara Chapin joked, "they issued us dog tags and we hafta wear them around our neck at all times plenty attractive in a dinner dress, but I doubt I'll be in one for the duration so won't worry. Of course they are no chains to be had in [Sweetwater] so mines on a piece of string most fetching."<sup>[36]</sup> Chapin viewed the dog tags and its symbolism lightheartedly, while Adaline Blank, on the other hand, noted that it gave her a "peculiar feeling to be wearing official identification around [her] neck; somehow it intensifies the significance of the whole thing. Now I think I really am part of this war."<sup>[37]</sup> This implies that these women viewed themselves as important figures in the war effort; because their lives were dominated by military structure, they perceived their role as contributors to the military and the United States. Blank also described how once they officially became Women Airforce Service Pilot, they received special uniforms upon graduation that included AAF insignia and lapel wings. To Blank, this suggested, "the Army Air Forces are beginning to have faith in their little protgs."<sup>[38]</sup> Again, because the military took the WASP Program so seriously, the women felt the pressure to perform at their peak and contribute to the war effort.

Aside from the barracks, Avenger Field had mess and recreation halls for the trainees. Caro Bayley Bosca explained, "there is an enormous recreation hall with 3 ping pong tables in one end, radio, jukebox, etc. in the other that adjoins the mess hall which and I'm not exaggerating has wonderful food ice cream and cake for every noon for instance."<sup>[39]</sup> Bosca continued, "the food is really wonderful. For lunch, for instance, we had meat I don't know what kind, salad, oh Lordy, I can't remember what all we ate so fast. We had ice cream and cake that ended up in the same compartment as my salad."<sup>[40]</sup> Bosca was not the only WASP to rave about the dining situation at Avenger Field. Sara Chapin agreed as she noted the use of metal trays instead of plates for cafeteria-like service at the mess hall.<sup>[41]</sup> Much like Chapin, Bosca emphasized the use of metal trays with partitions and the quality of the food, "the trays we eat on are one metal piece with about eight dips. The food is really wonderful and Mary C had been telling me about the wonderful steaks we have."<sup>[42]</sup> Providing sufficient meals showed that the AAF was ready for such an organization and was also able to provide them with not only a field, but also recreation and properly provisioned mess halls.

Lastly, though Avenger Field was outfitted for the WASPs, there were still certain aspects of the program that were incomplete. For example, insurance policies were often debated because the WASPs straddled the line between civilian and military standing. In her final report on the WASP Program, Jackie Cochran listed recommendations to



the AAF for any future female aviation programs. She endorsed, "the next of kin of WASPs who died in the service should receive compensation comparable to what would have been received if the WASP had been on military status with insurance privileges and benefits."<sup>[43]</sup> She also advocated that, "the WASP who finished the program in good standing should receive veterans' rights when veterans' rights are granted to any non-military group, and this would also require legislation."<sup>[44]</sup> These suggestions were then given to General Arnold. Another issue that was up for discussion was the pay rates for the WASPs; there was uncertainty regarding how much the WASPs should be paid. Inez Woodward Woods explained, "we are getting \$165 a month now and pay back about 30% for room and board. This leaves us about \$115 a [month] while training."<sup>[45]</sup> This pay was still substantially better than what most women would have made back home.

Because of the general state of preparedness of the Army Air Forces, the WASP Program was generally well equipped. The one major flaw was the lack of proper flying jumpsuits, which gave rise to the popular slang term for their oversized mechanic's coveralls zoot suits. Generally, however, Avenger Field housed several barracks and living quarters with room to expand as more WASP trainees entered the program. The food was always noted positively, which again suggested the military's readiness and concern for the WASPs' well being. The AAF was prepared in regards to food and living conditions, yet unprepared with jump suits because they never had to supply military grade female pilots with flight suits before the WASP Program. The military, with the insistence of Jackie Cochran, was also prepared to provide a strict military discipline for the WASPs.

### **Military Routine**

Adaline Blank wrote in a letter home, "Here we go. Flaps 20 degrees, rudder 3 degrees right. Trim for the climb trim for level trim for glide. Propeller in high pitch; propeller in low pitch. Open the hatch, close the hatch."<sup>[46]</sup> She continued, "switch gas tanks and change the mixture. Hit the wobble pump check cylinder head temperature, check carburetor heat; and last but not least, CALL THE TOWER."<sup>[47]</sup> Blank then joked, "only forty five things to check before take off and to continue checking while you're in the air."<sup>[48]</sup> The training aspect of the WASP Program lasted twenty-three weeks and consisted of military training, ground school, and flight training. Despite their civilian status, Jackie Cochran insisted on a strict military routine in order to combat discrimination and solidify their position as militarily qualified pilots.

Aviation was a highly technical and male dominated profession; these women were about to be judged by not only other male pilots, but also by the rest of the nation and the world. All eyes were on the WASPs to see if women could fly both physically massive and technologically complex aircraft. In an article for *Australian Women's Weekly*, Jackie Cochran addressed how although "they have Civil Service status, they live in barracks at the training field or in officers quarters at the USO bases and are subject to strict discipline."<sup>[49]</sup> Cochran explained further, "no one goes to a using agency with less than 200 hours' air time, which includes two-motor experience, night flying, and instrument flying, supplemented by many hours of ground schooling."<sup>[50]</sup> Eleanor McLernon Brown noted how they were in the air approximately four hours a day along with classes and home responsibilities.<sup>[51]</sup> Having the WASPs undergo military training would ensure their legitimacy as pilots, especially in regards to flying military aircraft.

Military training included traditions, drills and ceremonies, organization, and correspondence. There were male and female instructors for the WASPs who were graduates from the Army Air Forces and even the WASPs. Both Jackie Cochran and Nancy Harkness Love made stops at Avenger Field, though they never taught classes there. Adaline Blank noted how "the whole set-up and the very atmosphere is ARMY. We fall in' and march to everything; to the flight line, to classes, to drill, and to mess."<sup>[52]</sup> A very important aspect of Army life was rooted in drilling



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and formation, which the WASPs quickly became accustomed to. Mary Anna Martin Wyall agreed as she wrote how "rugged" army life was.<sup>[53]</sup> Blank described how "all traces of glamor are on the way out; Avenger Field fashion decrees no nail polish and minimum make-up everyone is sloppy, casual, sunburned, and shiny."<sup>[54]</sup> This suggests that these women had experienced thorough military training similar to the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps; but unlike the WAACs, the WASPs were not militarized and would never achieve that status.

Ground school included classes in mathematics, physics, navigation, code, mechanics, and first aid training. The WASPs even had final exams in their courses. Blank anecdotally shared in a letter home, "on top of all our troubles we started Code' this week. I'd like to choke the guy who thought that up; I'm half nuts trying to keep my dits' and dahs' from climbing on top of each other."<sup>[55]</sup> Despite the difficult coursework, the WASPs were determined to do well and they had a sense of humor about it. Mary Anna Martin Wyall explained her schedule: "This morning we were up at 6:00, cleaned up the bay, made our beds, dressed and were in formation for breakfast at 6:25. At seven [we are] sitting in class. Ground school was over at 10:00. 10:15 we went to drill."<sup>[56]</sup> However, the day had just begun for the WASPs; Wyall continued, "then we were free to read our mail from 11:45 12:00. We changed our clothes and reported for the flight line at 1:30. At 7:00 left the flight line and ate dinner at 7:30."<sup>[57]</sup> The WASP Program was not only teaching these women how to fly, but it was also teaching them the basics of aviation and military discipline.

Lastly, the WASPs underwent flight training, which included both civilian and army criteria. Inez Woodward Woods explained, "in flying, we are going to start instrument flying this week. They put a hood over the student's cockpit and you fly by instrument alone. The instructor is not under a hood. He acts as a safety pilot to keep us out of trouble."<sup>[58]</sup> General Paul Tibbets of the AAF worked as a WASP instructor for the B-29 airplane. He explained how impressed he was with two WASPs who flew the massive Boeing B-29 Superfortress, "Don't forget something. Those two girls ought to be given the credit because they deserve it. They did the job. And I don't know how we could have gotten people to fly B-29 airplanes without them."<sup>[59]</sup> It is important to note that at this time, the B-29 Superfortress was the most sophisticated type of aircraft in the world; thus, it was quite a feat for women to be flying it. Overall, the flight training was intensive and, according to Caro Bayley Bosca, "[It's] just plain hard work and the only satisfaction you get is still being here from check ride to check ride."<sup>[60]</sup> The notion of "washing out," or not finishing training, was a very real worry for many of the WASPs. There was extreme pressure to keep up in this military environment.

Despite a recommendation from General Arnold "that the women pilots, graduates and trainees, be militarized rather than left in a civilian status," the WASPs remained civilian.<sup>[61]</sup> At the same time, they were optimistic about their future; many of the WASPs felt they would eventually be incorporated into the Army, at the very least, mainly due to their extensive military training. Marjorie Osborne Nicol commented on an overheard conversation about the future of the WASPs, "from what she's heard from her WASP friends she's betting on the army taking over within the next month, with very little change except for uniforms and commission."<sup>[62]</sup> Overall, the WASP training and routine was highly militarized, which meant that the WASPs would continue to be in between civilian and military classification. Army structure dominated daily routine, but the women's leisure time was dominated by social norms of the period.

## **Leisure Activities**

Life at Avenger Field presented a multitude of experiences for the women. The town of Sweetwater was a small community that supported the WASPs and its program. Anne Chisholm Dessert Oliver considered Sweetwater to be "prim and proper" because it was located in the Bible belt area of the United States.<sup>[63]</sup> Negative portrayals of

the WASPs began circulating through the media calling these women morally and spiritually weak because of their participation in something that had always been considered a man's role. Both national and local media portrayed these women as dainty and glamorous. For example, an article from a Kansas newspaper devoted "four of the article's five paragraphs [to how] attractive' [these] women [were] while only the final paragraph mentions the actual pilot program, as well as the related duties and expectations."<sup>[64]</sup>

The town of Sweetwater remained supportive, however, and instituted "hospitality days" where a WASP could sign up at a specific church in the community and a family from the church would have her over for dinner on Sundays and even on some religious holidays.<sup>[65]</sup> Going to church not only served a religious purpose for the women, but it also offered the chance to fraternize with members of the community. Becoming a member of a church and participating in church-run gatherings provided the WASPs with an opportunity to socialize with other WASPs and the local residents, but more importantly with men. Social norms of the time dictated that young women were supposed to get married and have children, although, it seemed to some that the WASPs were abandoning these cherished American ideals. However, they did not forsake these customs and were able to meet men during this time.

Socializing under the auspices of churches gave legitimacy to the WASPs in the local community as proper young women. Eleanor McLernon Brown, for example, went to church picnics with fellow WASPs and often brought men back to show them around Avenger Field.<sup>[66]</sup> Many of these men were in the military, so they shared the commonality of military life. Brown shared in a letter home, "we went to church and lunch and then a movie then we spent the rest of the day showing him [Allen, her date] the field."<sup>[67]</sup> Anne Chisholm Dessert Oliver noted how a local rancher hosted a large barbeque and square dance for the WASPs and the Sweetwater community.<sup>[68]</sup>

The WASPs were not confined to the local vicinity of Sweetwater, so some WASPs traveled to bigger cities on their weekends off. Sara Chapin explained how she, along with other WASPs and service men, all took an Army bus to see a rodeo in Abilene. Inez Woodward Woods described a night out with her date, Bill Burkett:

We took a cab to town, ate dinner, went to a movie, stopped at the USO dance and then went out to a jelly' place to meet his instructor and some friends and dance some more. He is a good dancer and much to my surprise is 26. I checked back in at the post at 00:59 and 1:00 was the deadline. Pant, pant, puff, puff.<sup>[69]</sup>

She continued, "he asked me for a date this afternoon. He graduates and leaves here in ten days but he is fun while it lasts. Then I'll have to start from scratch again."<sup>[70]</sup> Because the WASPs were not following the traditional path for women in the 1940s, they had to utilize their unique situation to meet potential husbands. The WASPs often socialized with service men and understood many of them could be sent to fight in the war.

Initially, the local churches of Sweetwater provided a religious and social escape for many of the WASPs. The WASPs not only went to church services, but also church social events that allowed them to meet the Sweetwater community, especially young men of their age. Dating within these church-run events allowed the WASPs to socialize in a safe setting with chaperones. The 1940s was a very conservative time that held onto traditional values such as women as mother figures confined to the private realm of a household. The WASPs were different in their approach; however, they still valued these customs and aimed to eventually marry.

Churches and socials were not the only ways WASPs spent their leisure time; many of them stayed at Avenger Field during their time off. Dorothy Allen commented, "I didn't pay much attention to Sweetwater. I was too

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interested in what was going on in the Air Base and Avenger Field."<sup>[71]</sup> Similarly, Adaline Blank noted how the new Avengerette Club was "very attractive and comfortable. Fancy modernistic furniture, a snack bar and really good fun."<sup>[72]</sup> Also, many of the WASPs utilized their free time to write letters home to loved ones. The majority of these women were young and had never lived away from home. Writing letters home allowed them to stay connected to their families and friends. They meticulously detailed their undertakings, ranging from military to social experiences. Caro Bayley Bosca described her leisure time to her family, "Ah! A peaceful quiet Sunday afternoon. Am all settled, weeks washing hung up, closet straighter than it was, wastepaper basket emptied, bed made and since I still own an airmail stamp before I am completely broke I'd better write and keep it in the family."<sup>[73]</sup> The women maintained impressive amounts of correspondence both during the WASP Program and during their assignments at various Army bases. Overall, there were plenty of activities to do at Avenger Field. The relationships these women had with outside members of the community were just as important as the relationships these women had with their male instructors and counterparts.

### **Relationships with Male Instructors**

General Paul Tibbets, a bomber pilot and later WASP instructor, noted his first experience with the WASPs, "I couldn't see the pilot. And I all of a sudden I saw a movement of a little black head. I said, my God that's a little shorty in the airplane. I kept watching and pretty quick I see trim legs in a zoot suit coming down out of the hatch..."<sup>[74]</sup> He continued, "I thought maybe it was a girl, and sure enough when [she] moved out from underneath the airplane and straightened up, there she was, curly-headed little girl. And back at the line, she came over... I said, what's that? [Someone] said, that's a WASP pilot. A woman service pilot."<sup>[75]</sup> General Tibbets' response was typical for male pilots at this time, especially for pilots that had served overseas. The WASP Program only trained women pilots at one base, Avenger Field, in Texas. Thus, it was possible that few male pilots knew of such an operation, that is, until the WASPs were assigned, after graduation, to bases and airfields across the United States where they would work with male instructors and pilots.

For the most part, there was a sense of admiration among the WASPs at Avenger Field for their male instructors. Caro Bayley Bosca explained, "[Jackie] Cochran is not an instructor although she spends most of her time here. And there are about [three] women instructors but thank the lord I didn't get one. My instructor's name is Tischler, he is [nineteen] and a wonderful flier. I'm going to try and be just like him."<sup>[76]</sup> Expressing that she was thankful that she was not assigned a female instructor suggests that the WASPs themselves applied a double standard to male and female instructors and they accepted the women's lower status. It was not uncommon for the WASPs to prefer male instructors due to their expertise and experience as combat pilots. This professional camaraderie even persisted once the WASPs graduated and were sent to work at United States Army Air Force bases.

Like General Tibbets, many other male pilots had rarely heard of the organization and had never seen women fly military aircraft. WASP Sara Chapin explained the harmonious relationships at Biggs Field, El Paso Texas: "Everyone's nifty to us even the WACS in fact no one knows quite what to think of it. I had a Link period [type of training mechanism] and the instructor kept asking me questions while I was flying it he finally admitted it was such a novelty he just wanted to talk to me!"<sup>[77]</sup> The Women's Auxiliary Corps (WACs) were often assigned to the same bases as the WASPs, yet they performed different jobs. Caro Bayley Bosca furthers this notion, saying, "what amazes me is the fact that here we are and everybody is so nice to us. They don't seem to doubt the fact that we can fly and actually expect us to do all right. We are bending over backwards to try and make a good impression and with the grand bunch of girls here I think we will."<sup>[78]</sup> Generally, the relationships the WASPs had were extremely professional and good-natured.

There were also incidents where male instructors and pilots would treat the WASPs unfairly. Ethel Meyer Finley attributed jealousy to some of the male pilots she encountered because they did not want to instruct women.<sup>[79]</sup> Adaline Blank explained, "however, it appears that the superior powers are still somewhat dubious about this feminine flying. I will admit that it does take a great deal of physical stamina. Every night we just fall in bed; I have never been so literally and completely tired in all my life. It's a strenuous life but worth it."<sup>[80]</sup> The majority of the WASPs noted some discrimination, though they worked to overcome those obstacles. For example, Anne Chisholm Dessert Oliver observed how certain men did not just want to work with the WASPs, but they did not want women in the military at all; "So we did a little politicking....the head of MPs [Military Police] obviously didn't like us, obviously just couldn't stand women in the military. That was all there was too it, [because] he not only gave us a bad time but he was giving the WACs that were there a bad time there too."<sup>[81]</sup> This suggests that Oliver's assertions were correct; some men, including both military and civilian men, did not want women in the military because they considered it an encroachment on their domain.

The WASPs did note the intensity of training under male instructors. Caro Bayley Bosca explained, "I passed my Army check ride sighed a sigh of relief right in the check pilots face when he told me it was a satisfactory ride. They eliminated [ten] girls in the last [two] weeks out of our class and after all that I was slightly uneasy."<sup>[82]</sup> Alberta Paskvan Kinney furthered this sentiment when she wrote how her instructor said that they, WASPs, were there to eat, drink, and sleep flying.<sup>[83]</sup> Though, training was difficult, the women appreciated the respect and thorough training they received. Marjorie Osborne Nicol clarified, "he's teaching us in a strict way demanding accuracy up to an aggravating point, but with him continually pounding at us, we should make the checks all right. I'd rather have a rugged instructor who makes flying hell than one who barely or perhaps doesn't get you through the civilian army checks."<sup>[84]</sup> Eleanor McLernon Brown agreed, "my instructor is really swell even if he does scream bloody murder at us while we fly."<sup>[85]</sup> Generally, the WASPs were eager to fly and jumped at the opportunities presented to them.

The WASPs knew their position was unique and often enjoyed surprising male pilots whenever they landed at a new base. Adaline Blank explained, "the best fun out a cross country is landing at some strange air field and seeing the surprised expressions on the officers' faces when a mere girl climbs out of that plane. They just can't casually accept our being able to fly these army planes. Most of them are proud and very interested in what we are accomplishing."<sup>[86]</sup> She also detailed the opposite reactions from male pilots, "but occasionally you run into an officer who assumes an attitude of superiority and can't resist making a sarcastic remark. I really think they are jealous and innately resent our infringement upon masculine territory. There is your old double standard for the sexes again."<sup>[87]</sup> Ethel Meyer Finley, however, remarked how some males even preferred instructing women because "they tend to be more thorough, they are natural teachers, they have more patience, and they keep men on their toes."<sup>[88]</sup> This suggests a symbiotic relationship between the WASPs and their instructors despite reservations from many males in the military.

Thus, the relationships between WASPs and their instructors and male counterparts are complex and often contradictory. Some WASPs experienced harsh discrimination in the form of sarcastic remarks or bad reviews on their flying, while others had joyful experiences at their assigned base. A number of women were able to overcome the discrimination by slowly building up their reputations as excellent pilots. However, being the 1940s, many men just did not want to see women in the military, especially in aviation, both male dominated spheres. Caro Bayley Bosca described how, "we were over the top at 10,000 with the autopilot doing the flying and Sam [Sara Chapin] and I and Pilot and Copilot all arguing about women pilots. I flew the B-24 for two hours on the way to Dallas and he admitted that I could fly it straight and level better than he could but he said we still ought to be at home washing dishes."<sup>[89]</sup> The WASPs experiences and relationships varied from base to base, but overall they

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all expressed a sense of achievement from having been trained with the best pilots in the Army Air Force. The WASPs gained a sense of accomplishment despite these mixed reactions from the military establishment.

## **Post-Graduation Roles**

After the Women Airforce Service Pilots graduated, they were assigned to various Army bases and fields across the United States. Because Jackie Cochran developed a highly militarized training program, this opens an investigation into how well the WASPs transitioned to their roles at other bases. The WASPs were more than just ferry pilots; their tasks included towing targets, navigation practice, flight-testing, and aircraft repair. Alberta Paskvan Kinney noted that they were asked three things upon graduation: "1. Did we want to be stationed with a friend? 2. Did we want to be stationed at a particular location? 3. Did we want to fly a specific airplane?"<sup>[90]</sup> Essentially, the WASPs had some input in their future assignments; however, according to Inez Woodward Woods the assignments came straight from Washington, D.C. She explained, "the girls are assigned alphabetically to their bases... If they assign to the bases in the same order for our class as they did for W-3 I'll be sent to Wilmington, Del."<sup>[91]</sup> They had to make this transition to their new positions quickly as there was little delay from the date of graduation to when the women had to report to their new base.

One of the major jobs for WASP graduates was ferrying and many were assigned to ferry command posts across the United States. Inez Woodward Woods was assigned to Romulus Army Air Base in Romulus Michigan to join the Third Ferry Group.<sup>[92]</sup> Similarly, Joanne Wallace Orr joined the Ferry Command at New Castle Army Air Base in Wilmington, Delaware.<sup>[93]</sup> She also ferried planes at Fairfax Field in Kansas City, Missouri, Long Beach Army Air Base in Long Beach, California, and Love Field in Dallas, Texas.<sup>[94]</sup> Because the WASPs were originally created to relieve male pilots going on active duty, one of the major roles was to ferry aircraft. However, with such an intensive and all-encompassing training program, the WASPs were equipped for a multitude of tasks.

Towing targets for gunnery practices became another important role that the WASPs fulfilled. Alberta Paskvan Kinney flew AT-6 planes for the aerial gunnery program at Aloe Field in Victoria, Texas.<sup>[95]</sup> Anne Chisholm Dessert Oliver was stationed with the Seventh Tow Target Squadron at March Field in Riverside, California.<sup>[96]</sup> Sara Chapin was assigned to the Sixth Tow Target Squadron at Biggs Field in El Paso, Texas.<sup>[97]</sup> Instead of using AT-6's like Kinney to tow targets, Chapin flew B-34's and used AT-6's for reconnaissance training.<sup>[98]</sup> Caro Bayley Bosca also went to Biggs Field to tow targets for anti-aircraft trainees and for testing ground radar. Bosca explained her living situation at the base, "we're living in B.O.Q. [Bachelor Officer's Quarters] one to a room and Sammy [Sara Chapin] and I are in adjoining rooms. One cot, one chair, one sort of closet affair with one shelf and one wastepaper basket. Not much in it you can see. The twenty WASPs have the whole building with a community bath, etc."<sup>[99]</sup> Living conditions mirrored those of Avenger Field, thus, the WASPs transitioned seamlessly into life after graduation.

Caro Bayley Bosca also described a normal schedule at the Army bases: "We fly every other day. Eat breakfast at 5:30, flight line at 6:15 they issue us flashlights because [it's] still dark then. The day we don't fly we take link and study in the library."<sup>[100]</sup> The highly militarized structure of the WASP Program at Avenger Field prepared the WASPs for their future assignments on Army bases. The fact that these women came from military training and continued to live militarily on base contributed to the argument that the WASPs should have, in fact, been militarized.

Also, some WASPs were assigned to specific schools in order to master a certain airplane. The B-25 training school at Mather Army Air Base in Sacramento, California was popular for these types of assignments. Anne Chisholm

Dessert Oliver attended the B-25 school for some time before transferring to March Field to tow targets.<sup>[101]</sup> Caro Bayley Bosca described the curriculum for the B-25 training school, "the course is 105 hours. 65 pilot and 35 copilot. We have to have 15 hours before solo. 10 hours of night, 20 hours of instrument, 10 of formation flying. We also get to plan our own XC [cross country] trips."<sup>[102]</sup> She continued to express her excitement to her family about the training. "You can see I'm so tickled over the whole thing, I can hardly write. Its going to be hard and quite a grind but its worth it."<sup>[103]</sup> Similarly, the B-26 training school at Dodge City Army Air Base in Kansas proved to be popular as well. WASP Irma Story explained how Dodge City Army Air Base was "all geared to multi-engine and combat meteorology, navigation, code, aircraft and naval recognition, etc."<sup>[104]</sup> The curriculum at Avenger Field had thus prepared them in courses such as meteorology, navigation, and code.

The WASPs were delegated other responsibilities at bases. For example, Ethel Meyer Finley was assigned as a maintenance pilot at Shaw Field, South Carolina, to fly repaired planes, transport non-flying personnel, and fly planes to overhaul stations.<sup>[105]</sup> Eleanor McLernon Brown was assigned to Napier Field in Dothan, Alabama, where she flight-tested, repaired aircraft, had mail courier duty, and flew non-flying military personnel to various fields.<sup>[106]</sup> For the WASPs that joined later, their tenure at these bases was cut short. For example, the WASPs were deactivated just six weeks after Marjorie Osborne Nicol graduated. She, however, went on to join the United States Marine Corp Women's Reserve.<sup>[107]</sup>

Generally, the WASPs were assigned a multitude of duties post-graduation. At Avenger Field, Jackie Cochran created a program that consisted of classes, military training, and flight training. This curriculum, therefore, outfitted the WASPs for these responsibilities at Army bases across the United States. The WASPs ferried aircraft, towed targets, repaired aircraft, and some even instructed male cadets. In Jackie Cochran's final report, she elaborated:

Almost uniformly the WASP were reported eager to learn, willing to work, and well behaved. The WASPs did ferrying, target towing and searchlight missions, simulated strafing, smoke laying and other chemical missions, radio control flying, basic and instrument instruction, engineering test flying, administrative and utility flying.<sup>[108]</sup>

She continued to explain, "the WASPs flew during operational duties nearly every type of airplane used by the AAF, from the small primary trainer to the Superfortress (B-29), including the Mustang [P-51], Thunderbolt [P-47], B-17, B-26, and C-54."<sup>[109]</sup> Essentially, due to Jackie Cochran's strategy, the WASPs were effectively trained and prepared to take on the various missions assigned to them post-graduation. This allowed them to help the war effort in a multitude of ways. Because the WASPs had achieved so much, deactivation and disbandment was extremely disheartening.

### **Post-Disbandment Plans**

On October 1, 1944, General Henry Hap Arnold issued a statement that called for the deactivation of the WASP program. He began the memo, "the reduction in the flying training program and the changing war situation's bearing on availability and deployment of pilots make it evident that the WASP will soon become pilot material in excess of needs."<sup>[110]</sup> Because the Allies were winning, male pilots returned home as the military used fewer planes and pilots, but found WASPs in their place. General Arnold noted, "the WASPs have well met the situation for which the women pilot program was activated. They have ably and loyally supplemented our activities during a time when a pilot shortage would have impaired the Air Forces' performance of its mission."<sup>[111]</sup> He thanked the WASPs, saying that their contribution was appreciated and the WASP program was ending due to returning male



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pilots looking for work. General Arnold continued, "they are serving, however, to release male pilots for other work and not to replace them. The time has arrived to plan the program's deactivation."<sup>[112]</sup>

Jackie Cochran, the intended recipient of General Arnold's message, issued a full report on the WASP program, including her comments and suggestions. On June 1, 1945, Cochran incorporated facts such as, "the WASPs, according to medical surveys, had as much endurance and were no more subject to fatigue and flew as regularly and for as long hours as the male pilots in similar work...It is no longer a matter of speculation that graduate WASPs were adapted physically, mentally, and psychologically to the type of flying assigned."<sup>[113]</sup> A major controversy surrounding the WASP program and women in aviation, in general, was the skepticism that women could physically and mentally handle flying planes, especially technologically advanced military aircraft. This was an ongoing discussion that began once women started flying recreationally and continued even past WASP disbandment. Cochran, however, used various medical reports to prove that flying posed no threat to women physiologically and that, when properly trained, they would be able to handle aircraft just as male pilots did. She also listed several recommendations for any future programs similar to the WASPs. These included militarization from the beginning, compensation for the next of kin to any women that died while serving in the program, and other various training requirements and prerequisites.<sup>[114]</sup> This report was a way for Jackie Cochran to tell not only General Arnold, but also the military and the rest of society that the WASPs excelled and had fulfilled their duty exceptionally well.

The WASPs all had different paths following disbandment. Although most of the WASPs eventually married, the majority achieved this status immediately after deactivation. Some of the women also remained in parts of the military. For example, Majorie Osborne Nicol joined the Marine Corp Women's Reserve and Dorothy Allen joined the Air Force Reserve. This suggests that women did in fact have a desire to be a part of the military and that they were not just involved with the WASPs because it was their so-called "patriotic duty" during the war. During the war, Jackie Cochran wanted to ensure that the WASPs would meet the requirements for the Civilian Aeronautics Administration (CAA) so they could obtain their commercial pilots licenses post-disbandment.<sup>[115]</sup>

Although some WASPs continued flying in various aspects in aviation, many were incredibly heartbroken that the program was ending and that they had never been militarized. Caro Bayley Bosca described how:

there's an awfully big change of them disbanding the WASPs. Cochran either wants us in the WACs [Women's Army Corp] or disbanded completely. Don't know why we can't stay as is... [If we get commission,] the patriotic thing to do would be to resign now because it seems we're taking a job away from a man.<sup>[116]</sup>

The WASP program's original objectives were temporary to relieve male pilots of domestic flying duties so they could serve overseas in a military capacity during the war. If the WASPs were commissioned, that would mean that they were now an official and permanent program. Essentially, that meant that the WASP program would continue even when the war was over and men had returned home.

Mary Anna Martin Wyall was in the last class of WASP trainees and was allowed to graduate, although, she and others in her class were never assigned to a base for further ferrying or towing duties.<sup>[117]</sup> Eleanor McLernon Brown noted, "they are sending us away from here with a lot of very pleasant memories topped off with a huge parade this morning. Every officer, cadet, and enlisted man and WAC on the field were in it and passed us in review...Then they handed us each a letter of appreciation and everything was over."<sup>[118]</sup> Before disbandment, Sara Chapin wanted to be militarized and made a Second Lieutenant in the Army Air Force. This was similar to



Jackie Cochran's request; Cochran wanted the WASPs to be militarized under the Army Air Force rather than incorporated into the WAC. This did not happen, not for Sara Chapin or any of the others.

Some of the WASPs documented how important the organization was to them, yet few people outside of Sweetwater knew anything about the program. Mary Anna Martin Wyal described how WASP graduation meant more to her than any college degree could ever mean.<sup>[119]</sup> Marjorie Osborne Nicol explained, "most of the people on the train except our immediate neighbors have come to the conclusion that we're navy nurses, in spite of the air corps insignia, the WASP insignia, and the silver wings."<sup>[120]</sup> She continued, "no one seems to know anything about the WASP's except Air Corps personnel. We've been called at various times in various places everything from fire extinguisher inspectors to Wrens [Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS)] from England taking a vacation."<sup>[121]</sup>

Disbandment was a bittersweet event for most WASPs. They wanted to give men their jobs back, but they did not want to give up flying. Albert Paskvan Kinney recorded, "guess we will get our commercial licenses out of the deal but where in civilian life can we find a plane with 660 horses to drive???"<sup>[122]</sup> As the last class of trainees graduated at Avenger Field, WASPs graduates steadily left their positions at Army bases across the United States. Jackie Cochran worked with Arnold to allow WASP trainees to fulfill prerequisites in order to obtain their commercial pilots licenses. Many WASPs would continue flying, post-disbandment, in a civilian capacity, but many documented how they would never be able to fly the same aircraft as they did during the WASP program. Also, most of these women, including Jackie Cochran, wanted militarization of the WASPs because it created more cohesive organization with a singular command structure as opposed to being a female civilian program run by the military. Ultimately, the WASPs disbanded in December 1944 and very few people outside the organization knew anything about it.

### **WASP Perspective**

The WASP Program was kept somewhat of a secret; some men in the military were not even aware of its existence. Therefore, when the WASPs first came to Sweetwater, their days were spent filling out paperwork detailing the mission of the WASPs and specifying that confidentiality was required. Adaline Blank described, "the entire first day was taken up with filling out papers and standing in line. We may not literally be in the army but I surely felt like it the first night. We practically signed our lives away and such rules and regulations I have never seen."<sup>[123]</sup> Because of the seriousness the military expressed, the WASPs understood the gravity of their undertaking. Ethel Meyer Finley explained, "I have learned a long time ago that when you are in something like that you have to be extra careful of your own behavior."<sup>[124]</sup> These women not only had to adhere to military discipline, but also had to be mindful of the local Sweetwater community and the nation as a whole. They had the military watching them to make sure they performed well and that they were following army etiquette. Also, as more people became aware of the program through word of mouth and media attention (the WASPs were featured in *Life*), pressure mounted to observe societal norms for women in the 1940s.<sup>[125]</sup> The program was initially kept discreet because the AAF was unsure of the outcomes of a female pilot division.

To become a WASP meant overcoming physical and flight experience requirements, but it meant something more exceptional. The WASPs represented certain personality types. Anne Chisholm Dessert Oliver noted how, "there really are no Indians in the WASP, they're all chiefs."<sup>[126]</sup> This suggests that these women were trailblazers and rose to the challenge of establishing the WASP as a legitimate military and government program. Because there was a high "wash out"<sup>[127]</sup> rate, graduating the program meant esteem for the WASPs.<sup>[128]</sup> Adaline Blank described this fear. "I don't believe you are safe until you actually walk up and Major Urban [Major R. K. Urban was the commanding officer in Sweetwater] puts those wings in your hand."<sup>[129]</sup> The difficulties of army routine and

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training proved to be difficult, but the WASPs demonstrated their ability to handle such a demanding program. "I really enjoyed it... I don't have any real conscious memories of being overwhelmed by it or anything. I knew I was good at flying and didn't worry too much."<sup>[130]</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Women Airforce Service Pilot Program proved to be an incredibly successful program that aided the World War II effort by providing around one thousand female pilots to perform domestic flying duties, thus relieving men for military service. The conduction of the WASP program provides insight into the social norms of the period, military bureaucracy, and draws on relationships with women in all branches of the military past and present. The views of the women in the WASP program illustrate its legitimacy and tremendous effect on the war effort. They also highlight the cohesiveness of the organization. Despite some inadequate equipment, these women felt like they contributed to the war effort by flying planes domestically and relieving male pilots for military service.

When these women were not training, however, they did have leisure time and the way they spent their leisure time highlights how they viewed their roles as women in the military and as women in the 1940s. For example, many women became incredibly active in local churches in the Sweetwater community. Initially, these women were considered by the public as morally and spiritually negligent for leaving home to do men's work. The town of Sweetwater, though, remained supportive of these women and provided them with religious guidance and social events. Many churches hosted dances, rodeos, and parades for the women and community. Also, these women spent a great amount of time writing letters home to family and friends. Even though they endured negative gender stereotypes, they established relationships with male instructors and counterparts. This relationship shows how cohesive the program was and how males viewed women in aviation. Their letters and oral histories illuminate how they fit into a fundamentally all male institution. While operating outside of traditional gender roles of the period, the women had positive experiences as WASPs and thought the program trained them well to perform important military duties.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Nickname for Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, *Flygirls*, VHS, Produced and Directed by Laurel Ladevich, (Longmont, CO: Distributed by PBS Home Video, 1999).

- [2] Jacqueline "Jackie" Cochran, "American Women Pilots," *Australian Women's Weekly*, September 3, 1943, Box 14, Jacqueline Cochran Papers, WASP Series, The Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, [http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/Research/Digital\\_Documents/Jacqueline\\_Cochran/BinderJJ.pdf](http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/Research/Digital_Documents/Jacqueline_Cochran/BinderJJ.pdf), November 30, 2010, 1.
- [3] General Henry "Hap" Arnold, "Incorporation of Women Civilian Pilots and Trainees into Army Air Forces," June 18, 1943, Box 5, Jacqueline Cochran Papers, WASP Series, The Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, [http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/Research/Digital\\_Documents/Jacqueline\\_Cochran/JackieCochran.html](http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/Research/Digital_Documents/Jacqueline_Cochran/JackieCochran.html) October 19, 2010, 2.
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- [5] General Arnold, "Incorporation of Women Civilian Pilots and Trainees into Army Air Forces," 2.
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- [7] Major General Robert Olds, "To All Women Holders of Licenses," July 29, 1941, Box 2, Jacqueline Cochran Papers, WASP Series, The Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, [http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/Research/Digital\\_Documents/Jacqueline\\_Cochran/BinderA.pdf](http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/Research/Digital_Documents/Jacqueline_Cochran/BinderA.pdf), November 1, 2010.
- [8] Olds, "To All Women Holders of Licenses."
- [9] Jacqueline "Jackie" Cochran, "Final Report on Women Pilot Program," June 1, 1945, WASP Official Documents, [http://wingsacrossamerica.us/records\\_all/DOCUMENTS/final\\_report.htm](http://wingsacrossamerica.us/records_all/DOCUMENTS/final_report.htm), November 16, 2010, 1.
- [10] Cochran, "Final Report on Women Pilot Program," 1.
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] Ibid., 2.
- [14] General Arnold, "Incorporation of Women Civilian Pilots and Trainees into Army Air Forces."
- [15] Cochran, "Final Report on Women Pilot Program," 2.
- [16] Arnold, "Incorporation of Women Civilian Pilots and Trainees into Army Air Forces."
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