

Women Airforce Service Pilots: And when they died they were denied military recognition, honors, and burials because the men in the U. S. military would not accept female pilots, albeit there were not enough male pilots.

Jackie Cochran founded WASP, a 1943 program of volunteer female civilian pilots, designed to test and to declare safe, new and repaired aircraft before male pilots in the U.S. Air Force would be allowed to fly them. Twenty-five thousand women applied, 1,830 were accepted and 1,074 earned their pilot wings. Trainees, already experienced certified pilots, had to complete over 300 hours of academic studies in: math, physics, maps, navigation, principles of flight, engines and propellers, weather, code, instrument flying and communications, plus 137 hours in military training, twenty-four in advanced equipment, and 103 in PE and first aid.

They paid their own transportation costs to training sessions; wore uniforms cut for men; were housed in limited spaces on bases where they paid for, not only their quarters but, the privilege of buying meals in the Officer's Mess. The WASP received no promotions, pay increases, nor insurance benefits. Despite this gender abuse, they bravely participated in the war effort doing dangerous war work.

Aircraft technology was in its infancy, equipment was minimal, radio contact unreliable, there was no radar, nor GPS's. Seat belts with chest straps were not yet invented. WASP flew planes in need of repair in order to determine the repair needed. The safety of the aircraft was unknown until their testing in the air was complete. After a plane had been repaired, a WASP flew it before a male pilot flew it.

Virtually every type of aircraft (including early jets) flown by the USAAF men during WW II was first flown by women. These women pilots tested fighters and bombers; they ferried aircraft; flew weather-tracking flights; towed targets through the air during anti-air craft gunnery training; and conducted simulated bombing missions. Stationed at 120 air bases, they flew over 60 million miles from aircraft factories to military training bases and to ports of embarkation, delivering over 12,650 aircraft on which the women pilots then instructed the men. Testing aircraft was an amazing war effort of bravery and ability. But the women were warned to refrain from publicity, literally told to reserve the glamour and glory stories for their front-line brothers.

Julie Stege, remembering her days as a WASP said how the guys didn't like us at all. They were so humiliated that one of these women could fly a plane. Stege recalled that the guys even wrote their Congressmen to get rid of us. The WASP also wrote to Congress to appeal for military status, but failed in their bid. Congress not recognize their contributions, their qualifications, nor their and dedication to the war effort.

Despite gender limitations placed on them they were zealous. They did work the male pilots would not risk their lives doing. The mind set according to Stege was: If something went wrong, better to lose one of those dames than one of the guys. WASP casualties did occur. Burial boxes and transportation fees to take the body home were at the expense of her family and fellow WASP.

When the war was over, they were told to clean up after themselves and buy their own tickets home. They received no veterans benefits. And all records of the WASP were classified and sealed shut. Their contributions to their country were inaccessible to historians for the next thirty-five years. In 1975 Congress was appealed to recognize the WASP as Veterans of WW II entitled to serviceMEN's benefits. Stege herself testified before Congress. Ultimately, in 1977, with support of Senator Barry Goldwater (once a ferry pilot) President Jimmy Carter signed legislation granting the WASP full military status.

In 1984 each was awarded the Victory Medal, but not every WASP was alive to accept her award or receive her recognition. Thirty-eight WASP had lost their lives serving their country and more passed away as time passed. And when they died there was no furling of flag, no honor, no note of heroism for these war heroes of note.

Sources: Charles S. Abell, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, *Women Pioneering the Future*, Women's War Memorial, Washington, D.C., 3/20/03; *Skygirls*, Jenny Laird, Director; www.wasp-wwii.org;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_Airforce_Service_Pilots