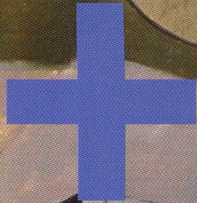


BAYLOR

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Women in the wings

The Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II were a nearly forgotten chapter of American history—until one Baylor alumna made it her mission to remember, honor and celebrate their legacy.

Women in the Wings



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WOMEN IN THE WINGS

AUTHOR

STACY TILLILIE

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SUBJECT

THE WOMEN AIRFORCE SERVICE PILOTS OF WORLD WAR II WERE A NEARLY FORGOTTEN CHAPTER OF AMERICAN HISTORY—UNTIL ONE BAYLOR ALUMNA MADE IT HER MISSION TO REMEMBER, HONOR AND CELEBRATE THEIR LEGACY.

BEGIN STORY

IT'S A STORY OF PATRIOTISM, HONOR, SACRIFICE AND THE BOUNDLESS AMERICAN SPIRIT. A STORY OF GRIT, GUTS AND HARD-FOUGHT, LONG-AWAITED GLORY. YET MOST AMERICANS HAVE NEVER HEARD OF THE GROUNDBREAKING HISTORY MADE BY THE WOMEN AIRFORCE SERVICE PILOTS (WASP) OF WORLD WAR II, THE FIRST WOMEN EVER TO GET BEHIND THE CONTROLS OF AMERICAN MILITARY AIRCRAFT AND FLY NONCOMBAT MISSIONS.

The year was 1942, and America was facing a dire shortage of combat pilots. To address the shortage, pilot Jacqueline Cochran, who later became the director of the WASP,

convinced General Hap Arnold, chief of the Army Air Forces, that women could fly military aircraft stateside. In a desperate measure, Arnold issued the order, and after paying their own

way and completing several months of full-fledged Army Air Forces flight training, 1,074 women earned their wings and reported for duty at 120 air bases across the country.

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For the next 26 months, the WASP collectively flew more than 60 million miles in every type of military aircraft on assignments running the gamut from test-flying aircraft, to flying targets for gunners to practice-shoot, to ferrying and transporting people and cargo (at times, that cargo consisting of parts for the atomic bomb). Then on December 20, 1944, with the war ratcheting down, the WASP were quietly sent home, their military records sealed for more than 30 years—a consequence of the cultural times.

It wasn't until 1977 that the WASP were granted veteran status—without ceremony—finally giving them the right to have the American flag draped on their coffins when they die. But that honor was too late for 38 WASP who

Parrish, who also married a World War II pilot, has never again piloted a plane to this day.

Parrish's daughter Nancy Parrish, MA '80, a self-described "Air Force brat," knew that her mom had served in World War II but never fathomed the compelling narrative that had yet to be told, virtually forgotten from history—that is, until she started digging into the past as part of a 1996 documentary that she was producing about her mom and the WASP for local PBS station KCFT (now KWBU).

"I wanted to do this documentary, but there was no information, nothing in the history textbooks and only footnotes in a few books. This was really troubling to me," says Parrish, who ultimately produced the documentary from her mom's stories but still felt as if "one documen-

information on the WASP—with more than 2,000 pages of resources—into Wings Across America (wingsacrossamerica.us), a nonprofit, all-volunteer digital history project that aims to preserve the history of the WASP and empower future generations through their stories. Nancy Parrish serves as the executive director, and her mom, Deanie, serves as the associate director.

Building a nest at Baylor

Thanks to the championing efforts of Baylor's late President Herbert H. Reynolds—whose memory is celebrated as the project's honorary chairman—the mother-daughter team set up a "home" for the project at Baylor University, where it has been operating since 1998. Even before meeting the Parrishes, Reynolds was

"I loved flying for my country, and I felt I was helping do my part to help America win World War II. The war wasn't over yet, and the WASP had all been promised to be made part of the military, but on December 20, 1944, I took off my parachute and hung it up for the last time."

sacrificed their lives in service, their bodies sent home in plain pine boxes at the expense of their families, who were not allowed to display a gold star in the window of their home (symbolizing the home of a military person killed in service). The surviving WASP waited another seven years to receive their service medals, arriving in their mailboxes in generic brown envelopes.

'Wings' takes flight

Waco resident Deanie Parrish was one of these pioneering pilots. Parrish completed training at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, and flew several types of aircraft—including the B-26 Martin Marauder, dubbed the Widow-maker and the Flying Coffin for its infamous reputation for crashing—on test-piloting, ferrying and air-to-air tow target missions.

"I loved flying for my country, and I felt I was helping do my part to help America win World War II," writes Parrish in her online WASP WWII scrapbook. "The war wasn't over yet, and the WASP had all been promised to be made part of the military, but on December 20, 1944 [the day the WASP were disbanded], I took off my parachute and hung it up for the last time."

tary didn't change anything."

What did change everything was an epiphany that Nancy Parrish experienced one day as she was weeding through her closet in search of an outfit to wear to a film audition. Suddenly she realized that there had to be more to life, she says. "At that moment, I asked God to use me for His purposes, not mine. This journey [to honor the WASP] started in that closet."

Since then, Nancy Parrish has made it her life's mission to honor the contributions of the WASP and to educate and inspire the public through their stories.

"Thirty-eight of these women sacrificed their lives, and they were all willing to do the same. All left families and jobs; some were married, and some left behind children," says Nancy Parrish. "Many of their families sacrificed so that the women could fly and get the hours necessary to even apply for WASP training. Several quit their jobs and went to work 'polishing and gassing up' other people's airplanes in exchange for flying time, just to get enough hours to serve their country."

Parrish's mission has evolved from "WASP on the Web," the world's largest collection of digital

familiar with the WASP. A retired Air Force officer, Reynolds grew up in the hometown of a young woman who became a WASP, and he was passionate about spreading the WASP story of service and dedication, especially in today's society in which such virtues are not always prevalent, says Nancy Parrish.

Baylor's Film and Digital Media Division, then directed by Dr. Michael Korpi, was also instrumental in the project, offering technical advice, providing office space, assisting with student interns, and occasionally loaning equipment, says Nancy Parrish. By aiming to capture the stories of every living WASP, she explains, "We are creating a virtual museum online. There are less than 300 surviving WASP, and many of their stories are yet to be told."

And time is running out, with the youngest WASP now octogenarians. To date, Wings Across America has interviewed 115 WASP—among them: Sister Teresa (Anita Paul), a cloistered Carmelite nun who received special dispensation from the Vatican to travel to Waco to be interviewed, and Baylor alumna Ruth Daily Helm, BA '37. Helm, who flew fighter planes and B-25 Bombers from Love Field in



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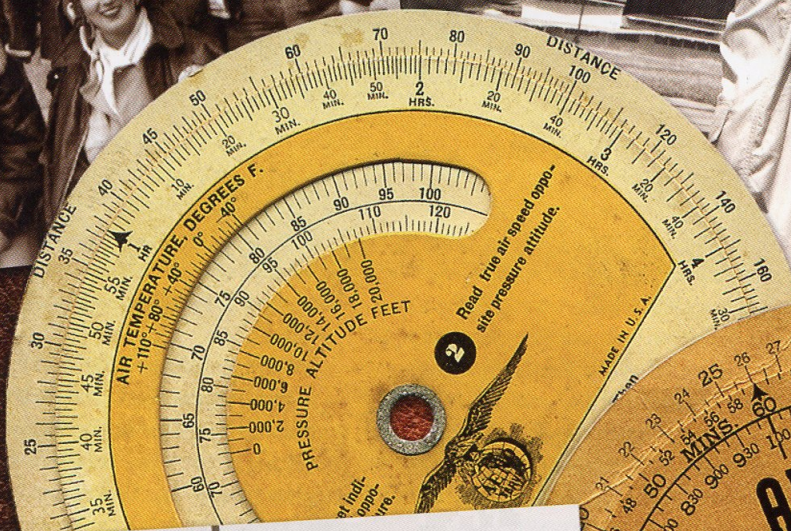
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A Bear with wings

► **RUTH DAILEY HELM**, BBA '37, came to Baylor in 1934 from Grapeland, Texas, about 130 miles east of Waco—but college wasn't her first choice. From an early age, she wanted to fly, only attending college after making a deal with her parents that after she graduated from Baylor, then she could attend flying school.

After earning her business degree in 1937, she went on to earn her private flying license, and in 1939, borrowed \$1,500 to buy her first plane. Three years later, she received a telegram inviting her to join the military's new program for female pilots.

"I went home and made arrangements to sell my airplane. And on December 15th, I reported to Houston to the second class of WASP," she recalled in a 1999 interview.

After six months of training, she reported to the 5th Ferrying Group in Dallas, flying brand-new planes from the factories to the training fields. Helm flew a variety of planes all across the U.S. until the group was disbanded in December 1944.

"Then I went back to Grapeland, back to my business," she said of her return to the family's auto dealership. Helm continued to fly in her spare time, including frequent trips back and forth to Wyoming where she and some WASP friends purchased a ranch. It was there that she met the man who would become her husband, Slats Helm. The couple went on to have two children, Sidney, BA '74, and Jay, BA '80, who each graduated from Baylor, and Helm was an honored guest in the 1999 Baylor Homecoming Parade. But she will forever be remembered for her military service.

"I think [our legacy] will be that we were a group of women who loved to fly and were willing to do whatever it took in the way of study and skill and character to accomplish that—and in a man's world," she said. "But we were accepted because of our ability and qualifications, and that was all that was necessary."

—JEFF BROWN

Dallas, was honored at Baylor's 1999 homecoming parade with a Wings Across America flyover of World War II AT-6 aircraft.

"Ruth was our first interview, and I was blown away by her testimony, her life, her spirit," says Nancy Parrish. "And it was not just about flying; it was bigger than that. The way she lived her life was inspirational to other people and inspired me."

That inspiration has also been accompanied by plenty of perspiration with the creation of the traveling exhibit "Flygirls of WWII," which premiered at Baylor's Mayborn Museum from November 2007 through April 2008 and is now on display at the Women in Military Service for America Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery through March 2010. Wings Across America also founded a WASP museum in 2003 at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, the site where more than 1,000 WASP trained during the war. Opened in 2005, the National WASP WWII Museum (waspmuseum.org), housed in Hangar One, is steeped in WASP history with everything from photos, posters and flags to planes, film strips and original uniforms.

Everyone who helped make these achievements happen have served as "good stewards of the information," says Nancy Parrish. "When you're doing something for all the right reasons, people want to help."

But still, something was missing: an official Congressional Gold Medal awarded to every WASP, or a surviving member of her family, in an official government ceremony. Of course, breaking through the bureaucracy of Washington,

D.C., was not going to be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is.

WASP history in the making

That's where John Truesdell, BA '63, comes in. Truesdell, who served as deputy assistant secretary of the Air Forces from 2002 to 2008 under the Bush administration, grew up with his father serving in the Air Force and had heard stories of the WASP. After meeting Deanie and Nancy Parrish during a visit to Baylor in 2002 and learning about their crusade, he offered to help them gain further attention and break through the government bureaucracy, including making key political introductions—a task at times that he describes as banging against a glass ceiling.

While the story of the WASP is now a happy one, the history of their quest for recognition is not, says Truesdell, pointing to the WASP as the female counterpart to the Tuskegee Airmen, the African American fighter pilots who served in the Army Air Corps during World War II. And like honoring the Tuskegee Airmen, "honoring the WASP is the right thing to do. Getting the history of their fight pleaded is so important to the Air Force's history of flight."

Uncovering this hidden history in modern-day textbooks is also crucial in reflecting America's true history, says Truesdell.

"The tremendous legacy of the WASP blazed the trail that put women on the national security team today," he says, adding that this is about the security of the country, not mere political correctness. "Today's balanced Air Force is largely due to the courage and



Nancy Parrish, MA '80,
and her mother,
Deanie Parrish



ARTIST'S RENDERING OF WASP MEDAL

skill of the WASP," who he says laid the way to bring up the most optimum force.

A member of that optimum force—whom Truesdell commends as one of the best—is Air Force Major Nicole Malachowski, the first woman Thunderbird pilot. With a father who served as an Air Force fighter pilot, Malachowski also grew up from the age of 5 knowing about the history and legacy of the WASP. So when she oftentimes signed autographs after air shows and members of the American public would comment that they were surprised to learn that she and dozens of women like her served as Air Force pilots, she'd use the opportunity to educate them about women in aviation, beginning with the quintessential American story of the WASP.

"Everything I've accomplished is because of these [WASP] trailblazers and pioneers," says Malachowski. "We're lucky enough to have inherited the legacy that these women gave to us."

But like Nancy and Deanie Parrish, Malachowski felt compelled to do more. It wasn't long before the three met at a WASP reunion—and that's where "our crusades collided," she says. With Malachowski on the inside of Washington with a White House fellowship, WASP history was about to be made once again.

"I was in a unique place with unique opportunities to meet high-level people," says Malachowski, pointing out the importance of having "boots on the ground in D.C." So she

drafted a bill (a.k.a. Senate Bill 614)—building from the foundation that Nancy and Deanie Parrish had formed through their vast endeavors—to award the Congressional Gold Medal to the WASP and proceeded to push the bill using what she describes as a shotgun approach.

"I called in favors from every person I knew, but no one was taking it up." While most officials didn't object to the idea—although a few laughed at the notion—it wasn't viewed as a priority, she explains.

But Malachowski wasn't ready to give up. When her fellowship class received the privilege of meeting General Colin Powell, former U.S. Secretary of State, she asked him, "How do you make great ideas a reality?" The General responded, "Great ideas need champions."

That quote reverberated in Malachowski's mind as she continued to refine the bill. Soon she and "team WASP" found their champion in Texas Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, who presented the bill on the floor in March 2009, with all 17 female Senators co-sponsoring it. Then on July 1, 2009, President Barack Obama signed the bill into law, recorded as Public Law 111-40.

The U.S. Mint will create one Congressional Gold Medal, which Nancy Parrish has been appointed by Hutchison and other members of Congress as their representative to work on with the Mint designers. The medal will be permanently displayed at the Smithsonian

Institution, and every WASP (or a family member of a deceased WASP) will be awarded a bronze medal replica at an official ceremony at the U.S.

Capitol.

"The WASP have done so much for our entire country. They represent everything that's good about America: patriotism, selflessness, integrity and determination," says Malachowski. "And these women are so humble. It's not about the medal; it's about telling an important American story."

And every day that story continues to unfold, inspiring the next generation of both women and men to dream it and do it, as Nancy and Deanie Parrish capture the history of the WASP "one step, one story, one WASP at a time." And so that the history is never again forgotten, Wings Across America is launching an endowment campaign to keep the story—and all of its digital resources—alive for future generations.

It's a labor of love that Nancy Parrish says will never make her any money, but it's a passion with purpose—something that she wishes for everyone.

"Meeting these WASP and hearing their testimonies that are so much larger than life, I am convinced that God has His hand on this project," she says. "This project has been blessed. It's been a miraculous journey; we've done this on a wing and a prayer." ☸