The New York Times

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THURSDAY, AUGUST 10, 2000

Sites Honor Women Pioneers in Aviation

By MICHAEL POLLAK

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT called them "a weapon waiting to be used."

Gen. Henry H. Arnold, chief of the Army Air Forces, who had said they served "no military purpose," changed his mind after Pearl Harbor and in 1944 told them: "You can fly wingtip to wingtip with your brothers."

They were the more than 1,000 women who flew warplanes in World War II, and it was not until long after the war that the country realized that these women, like those who went to work in the factories, were leading a revolution, not serving as an "auxiliary" of anything.

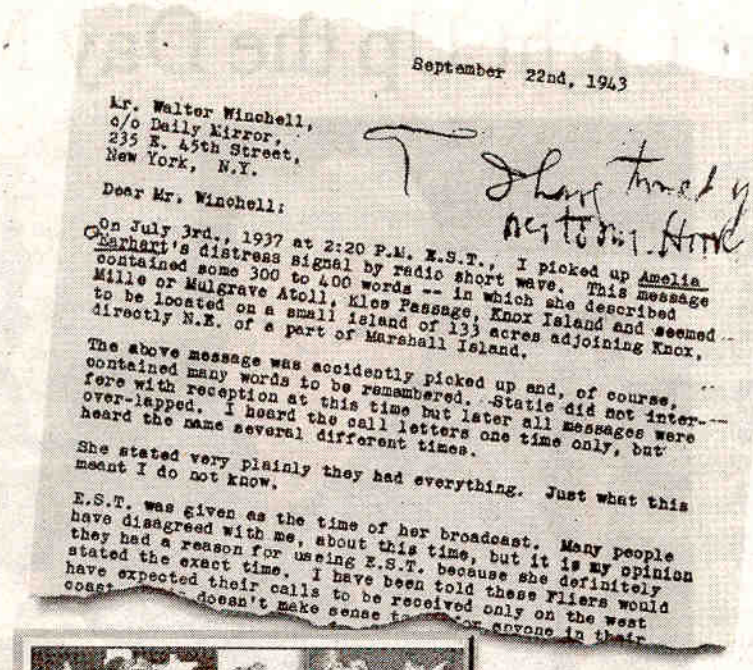
Today, when women pilot planes on aircraft carriers, it is easy to forget how little time has passed since women who flew were called aviatrixes. The Web is a good place to learn about these pioneers.

Of course, no survey would be complete without Amelia Earhart, the second person to fly the Atlantic solo after Charles A. Lindbergh.

At **www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq3-1.htm**, the Naval Historical Center has a Frequently Asked Questions page with a biography and a bibliography of Earhart, who was lost over the Pacific in 1937 while trying to fly around the world.

Perhaps the most interesting Earhart site is one by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, whose Electronic Reading Room posts declassified F.B.I. documents on many celebrated cases. The pages on Earhart **(http://foia.fbi.gov/earhart.htm)** offer a look at the letters sent to the bureau insisting that the writers had picked up radio messages or had been told about her by their Japanese captors.

The letters are less persuasive as evidence than as a demonstration of the emotional appeal of Earhart's daring, which influenced many female pilots who followed.



September 22nd, 1943

Mr. Walter Winchell,
c/o Daily Mirror,
235 E. 45th Street,
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Winchell:

On July 3rd., 1937 at 2:20 P.M. E.S.T., I picked up Amelia Earhart's distress signal by radio short wave. This message contained some 300 to 400 words -- in which she described Mille or Mulgrave Atoll, Kles Passage, Knox Island and seemed to be located on a small island of 133 acres adjoining Knox, directly N.E. of a part of Marshall Island.

The above message was accidently picked up and, of course, contained many words to be remembered. Static did not interfere with reception at this time but later all messages were over-lapped. I heard the call letters one time only, but heard the name several different times.

She stated very plainly they had everything. Just what this meant I do not know.

E.S.T. was given as the time of her broadcast. Many people have disagreed with me, about this time, but it is my opinion they had a reason for using E.S.T. because she definitely stated the exact time. I have been told these fliers would have expected their calls to be received only on the west coast. ... doesn't make sense ... anyone in their



Web sites about women pioneers in aviation include one by the F.B.I. that has letters about Amelia Earhart and another about women pilots in World War II.

In contrast, WASP on the Web **(www.wasp-wwii.org/)** has the story of the 1,074 Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II (of more than 25,000 who applied), who quit their jobs, went to Texas and passed the rigorous training to earn their wings. They were hired to ferry military planes in the United States, freeing male pilots to fly them overseas and in combat.

The founder and director of WASP, Jacqueline Cochran, who became the first woman to break the sound barrier, is well represented on the site and its links. The group was created in 1943 in a merger of Ms. Cochran's unit, the Women's Pilot Training Program, and the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, led by Nancy Harkness Love. (A biography of Ms. Love, reprinted from Aviation History magazine, is on the site.)

The site is full of memorabilia and respect. There are audio and video clips, World War II posters, diaries and photos that recalled the West Texas dust, the rattlesnakes and the two-holers. Women received the same training as men, except for some combat-related flying, and few extra comforts.

For teachers, the site has an interactive chat room that can set up student interviews with a WASP. There is a timeline and a display of uniforms and wings, some designed and paid for by Ms. Cochran, which were based in part on the shield of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and warfare.

The site is maintained by Nancy Parrish, the daughter of a WASP and director of Wings Across America, a nonprofit group at Baylor University in Waco, Tex., that is raising money to collect oral histories from the 600 surviving WASP members, and to create an interactive virtual museum. "We want to give every single WASP a chance to tell her story," Ms. Parrish said in a telephone interview.

Chuck Yeager, the first person to break the sound barrier, is quoted on the site: "They flew war-weary aircraft to repair depots; they instructed male pilots and flew military aircraft on navigational training flights. The WASP performed routine testing of military aircraft; flew administrative missions; towed targets for live gunnery practice, and, in total, flew every type mission except combat."

By the end of the war, the female pilots had delivered nearly 13,000 aircraft. Thirty-eight women had been killed. But because they had been hired as civilians, the women who were killed received no gold stars or military honors.

Their bodies were brought home at the expense of friends and relatives. The intention to make the women commissioned officers had been scuttled in Congress.

WASP records had been marked "classified" and sealed, so their contribution to winning the war has not been recognized by many historians.

Not until 1977 did President Jimmy Carter sign a bill giving the WASP veteran's status.