
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY: Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)

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As we honor the 80th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, I want to highlight a remarkable story not well known about Sunday, December 7, 1941. Early that morning, Cornelia Fort, a 22-year-old female civilian flight instructor, was in the air over Honolulu. She was flying an Interstate Cadet two-seater aircraft, painted blue and yellow to indicate it was a training aircraft. Her student was at the controls in front and she was sitting directly behind him. As they were preparing to land, the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii came under attack from Japanese naval and air forces. She grabbed the controls from her student to avoid being hit and landed safely, likely the first or one of the first to recognize Pearl Harbor was under attack. Cornelia eventually joined the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), precursor to the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), to ferry military planes within the United States. Cornelia was tragically killed in March 1943 when her plane crashed over Texas. She was the first female pilot killed while serving her country.

This amazing history informs our present day so it informs our future. I have a deep commitment to keeping this history alive for students of all ages. If anyone is interested in discussing these books, and many others about the World War II Home Front and World War II history, through an online book club, email me at jmiller@redwoodlearn.com and I will send you information.

Judy

The following books provide an excellent overview of the WAFS and the WASP. I like to say these women broke through the clouds to reach the stars. Women pilots today are following their footsteps into the cockpit.

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Miller, Erin. *Final Flight, Final Fight: My Grandmother, the WASP, and Arlington National Cemetery*. 4336 Press, 2019. (330 pages)

Erin Miller is Elaine Danforth Harmon's granddaughter. While Elaine was a student at the University of Maryland in College Park, Maryland in the late 1930s, she learned of the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP). The federal government program paid the costs of flying lessons for college students who qualified. Elaine earned her private pilot's license through the CPTP. After college, she married and in 1943, applied to become a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). More than 25,000 women applied, about 1,800 were accepted and 1,102 earned their wings, including Elaine. The WASP were disbanded in December 1944. It took until 1977 for the WASP to be granted veteran status. Elaine's final wish was to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Elaine passed away in April 2015. Just weeks before, the U.S. Army changed a rule and the family was denied the burial request. Erin launched a campaign to amend the 1977 bill. The book details her tireless lobbying effort, an exemplar of civic engagement proving without a doubt that one person and one family can make a difference. The amendment was signed into law on May 20, 2016. Elaine was interred at Arlington on Sept. 7, 2016. **NOTE:** I interviewed Erin (no relation) on May 12, 2021 at the College Park Aviation Museum in College Park, Maryland. Wilbur Wright trained the first U.S. Army pilots there in 1909 and it is the longest, continuously operating airport in the world.

Rickman, Sarah Byrn. *BJ Erickson: WASP Pilot*. Filter Press, Palmer Lake, Colorado, 2018. (132 pages)

BJ Erickson was a student at the University of Washington in the 1930s when she learned that the federal government would pay the cost of flying lessons for students. She was accepted into the program, called the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP). After the United States entered WWII in 1941, BJ and other female pilots ferried planes to destinations within the United States as members of the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS). In 1943, the WAFS became part of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) with the same task to ferry military planes. BJ rose to be a WASP squadron commander based in Long Beach, California. After the war, BJ tried returning to work at a department store in Seattle but she missed flying. She moved to Long Beach and spent the rest of her life involved in aviation. The WASP were finally granted veteran status in 1977 and awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in 2010. **NOTE:** I interviewed Sarah at the 2019 Ninety-Nines convention in Dayton, Ohio.

Rickman, Sarah Byrn. *Nancy Love: WASP Pilot*. Filter Press, 2019. (176 pages)

Nancy Harkness had her eyes to the skies even as a teenager. Although her mother did not think it was appropriate for "nice ladies" to fly, her father relented and allowed her to take flying lessons on two conditions: 1) that she remain in school and 2) that she do it well. Nancy stayed in school, became a pilot and distinguished herself as the leader of the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) that consisted of 28 female pilots, called "The Originals." They ferried military planes within the United States. In 1943, the WAFS became part of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). Nancy Harkness Love was certified to fly even the largest Army Air Corps planes, such as the C-47 and C-54 cargo planes. In 1945, the military asked Nancy to fly a secret mission to India. After the war ended, Nancy raised three daughters. This book is an excellent introduction to the WWII Home Front in regards to the rapid production of airplanes and the vital role women played in safely and efficiently

delivering military airplanes to bases and ports in the United States for the war overseas. **NOTE:** I interviewed Sarah at the 2019 Ninety-Nines convention in Dayton, Ohio.

Rickman, Sarah Byrn. *The Originals: The Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron of World War II*. Braughler Books, 2001, 2017. (399 pages)

In early September 1942, about 80 female pilots received a telegram from Nancy Love inviting them to immediately come to Wilmington, Delaware to be evaluated for a position within the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), a squadron of female pilots who would ferry military planes within the United States. All of these women already had their private pilot's license and experience. By mid December 1942, there were 25 WAFS, including Cornelia Fort, the first woman pilot to be killed while actively serving their country. Eventually, 28 women, who were the first female pilots within the U.S. Army Air Forces, came to be known as "The Originals." For her book, Sarah interviewed surviving WAFS who became part of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) in 1943. In addition, with excerpts from diaries kept by some of the WAFS/WASP, this book is a definitive account of the first woman pilots to serve the nation. **NOTE:** I interviewed Sarah at the 2019 Ninety-Nines convention in Dayton, Ohio.

Simbeck, Rob. *Daughter of the Air: The Brief Soaring Life of Cornelia Fort*. Grove Press, 1999. (239 pages)

Early in the morning of Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941 in Honolulu, Hawaii, Cornelia Fort was flying a civilian airplane as a flight instructor. Her blue and yellow Interstate Cadet airplane with two seats identified the plane as a training aircraft. Her student was sitting in the front and Cornelia was sitting behind him. As they were preparing to land, they came under attack from Japanese airplanes. Cornelia quickly grabbed the controls from her student and landed safely. There were a few other civilian aircraft in the skies over Pearl Harbor that morning but it is likely Cornelia was the first to recognize Pearl Harbor was under attack. Growing up on a family estate in Nashville, Tennessee, Cornelia was uncomfortable in the trappings of high society of the early 20th century. She charted her own destiny in the sky. Tragically, after joining the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), precursor to the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), Cornelia was killed in March 1943 in an airplane accident over Texas. She was the first WAFS/WASP to die in the line of duty to their country. This book is well researched and is a fascinating tale of Cornelia's brief life and her lasting legacy.

Ure, James W. *Seized by the Sun: The Life and Disappearance of World War II Pilot Gertrude Tompkins*. Chicago Review Press Incorporated, 2017. (162 pages)

The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) was formed in 1943 to train female pilots at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. More than 25,000 women applied to join the WASP to ferry military airplanes to destinations in the United States. About 1,800 women were accepted and 1,102 earned their wings. The women flew every type of military aircraft used by the U.S. Army Air Forces, precursor to the U.S Air Force, a separate branch of the military formed after the war. A total of 38 WASP lost their lives while serving. On Oct. 26, 1944, Gertrude Tompkins, a WASP, took off in a new P-51D from Los Angeles. She was never seen again nor has any wreckage ever been recovered. She is the only WASP of the 38 killed who is still missing. This book seamlessly weaves together the story of Gertrude's time as a WASP with her personal family story that provides a glimpse into the deep social impact World War II had on families and the bravery of the women who became WASP.