Jacqueline Cochran Encyclopedia Article

Jacqueline Cochran

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When World War II (1939–45) began in 1939, the United States began a special Lend-Lease program with Great Britain. Supplies and equipment, including airplanes, were transported by way of Canada to England. In order to free male pilots for combat, the Royal Air Force (RAF) began using women pilots to fly the arriving planes to airports near their fighting units.

In July 1941 Jacqueline Cochran (1906–1980) presented General H. "Hap" Arnold, commander of the Army Air Corps, with a plan for the Army Air Corps Ferry Command to use women pilots in the United States. At the time, Arnold was of the opinion that the United States was not ready for, nor did it need, women pilots. He suggested that Cochran take a group to England for duty and by August 1942 Cochran and twenty-four other American women pilots joined the RAF Air Transport Auxiliary.

Upon her return to the United States, Cochran met with Arnold and outlined a training program to augment the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) in the expanding war. The new group would be called the 319th Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) and would be stationed at the Municipal Airport in Houston, Texas. Jacqueline Cochran was director of this training group. She soon transferred her program to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas.

More than 25,000 women applied to the program; 1,830 were accepted for training and 1,074 would eventually win their wings. They followed the Air Corps cadet program of primary, basic, and advanced flight training and ground school.

Jacqueline Cochran. AP/Wide World Photos. *Reproduced by permission.*

Upon graduation the pilots were sent for active duty on one of the four Ferry Command bases. They were to not only ferry planes from factories to the airfields but also test-fly repaired aircraft and even tow gunnery targets for artillery practice. They performed many other noncombat flying duties on the home front in order to release male pilots for the overseas war effort.

By July 1943 the training program was a proven success. The WFTD and the WAFS were combined so that all women pilots were under the jurisdiction of the director of women pilots, Jacqueline Cochran. They were renamed WASPs (Women's Airforce Service Pilots) and worked together until Congress canceled the organization in December 1944. They would be the last women to fly for the U.S. military for more than thirty years.