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America's Women Pilots of World War II by Ken Libbey

Many Americans know the story of Amelia Earhart, but how many know about Jacqueline Cochran and Nancy Love, pioneers in aviation and women's progress at least as important as Earhart. How many know that thanks to these two, nearly 1,000 women flew for the Army during World War II? Love and Cochran were both remarkable pilots who sought personal gratification as well as social change. Both were glamorous and strategically married. There, the similarities ended. They could not have been more different in their personalities and approaches to promoting equality for women.

Nancy Harkness was the daughter of a physician, attending private schools and Vassar College. She got her pilot's license at age 16 and four years later became a charter pilot for a small Boston company. She worked for the federal government in the 1930s, finding buildings along the East Coast that could be marked as navigational aids for pilots. In 1936, she married Robert Love, owner of the Boston company and a reserve major in the Army Air Corps. Far from settling down as a housewife, Nancy took a job as a test pilot for another company.

Jackie Cochran was raised in poverty as a foster child in Florida. She managed to learn the beautician's trade and eventually to work at an exclusive salon in New York. Ambitious, aggressive, and fearless, she learned to fly as the result of a bet with a wealthy man who would later become her husband. With his support, she entered the cross-country Bendix air races, placing third in 1937 and winning in 1938.

Nancy Love was an opportunist, looking for situations to demonstrate what she (and women) could do. She shunned publicity and never directly challenged male opinions or male privileges. Instead, she used her charm and guided men gradually to recognize how useful women pilots could be. Had Love been the only player on the scene, women would have played a distinguished but much smaller role in wartime aviation.

Jackie Cochran loved publicity and had no patience with bureaucratic politics. Her husband's wealth and her own fame gave her access to the highest levels, and she was not shy about using it. In 1939, she wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt to propose a women's flying corps for domestic missions in case of war. The first result of this proposal was a suggestion that Cochran recruit American women to serve as ferry pilots in Britain. It was arranged for her to help take a bomber across the Atlantic, where she met with Pauline Gower, commander of women pilots for Britain's Air Transport Auxiliary.

As war approached, Nancy Love and Jackie Cochran became rivals without realizing it. Love gathered information on the most experienced women pilots in the U.S. and suggested that a ferry squadron could be formed if the U.S. joined the war. The Ferry Command was interested, but General Hap Arnold, commander of the Army Air Corps, was unconvinced of the need. In 1942, Nancy and Robert Love both went to work for the Air Transport Command in Washington. Quietly, they promoted the idea of using experienced women pilots to ferry planes.

By September, with deliveries backing up, ATC was ready to try Love's idea. To make it easy for them, Nancy proposed a trial program under which women would be civilian employees, flying only light trainers and receiving less pay than men. She also agreed to tougher requirements than those for male ferry pilots and consequently was able to recruit only 25 women. The decision to begin as civilians was a logical tactic, but would turn out to be a fateful one. Nancy believed she had a commitment to commission the pilots after 90 days, but a technicality was used to defer the move. Unfortunately, the Air Corps had found a way to use women pilots without opening its ranks to them.

When Jackie Cochran heard about the formation of the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), she was furious. She marched into Gen. Arnold's office and berated him until he agreed that she could start a training program for women. Arnold did not want Cochran going over his head, and in any case, ATC was desperate for pilots. Had it not been for the pressing need, it is questionable whether Jackie would have gotten her way.

Cochran's training program, first at an airport in Houston and then on the Texas prairie at Sweetwater, looked a lot like Army flight training, but it was still a civilian program. When it began graduating pilots in early 1943, they were assigned to the WAFS under Love's command. By then, the WAFS were delivering advanced trainers and Nancy herself had been one of the first pilots to check out in a P-51 Mustang, the hottest plane of the war. Others among the original group were quietly working their way into P-39s and P-47s. Under Love's guidance, the WAFS had proved their worth and ATC was begging for more. The new pilots from Sweetwater were well trained and were soon flying a variety of the army's planes.

Under the pressure of wartime demands, many of the restrictions that the WAFS started under were dropped. They were allowed to copilot bombers with male pilots and hitch rides on military planes. Some restrictions remained, however unnecessary they seemed. The WAFS who flew P-39s bound for Russia were allowed to take them as far as Great Falls, Montana, where they were turned over to male pilots for the trip to Alaska. The reason: the base commander for these women thought they would be unsafe among the men stationed in frontier Alaska!

Women were never allowed to ferry planes outside North America, although ATC wanted to use them for trips to Britain. While General Arnold was in England, the Ferry

Division assigned Nancy Love and Betty Gillies to fly a B-17 "across the pond." As they prepared to take off after a weather delay in Labrador, an urgent message arrived from Arnold, directing them to turn the plane over to a male crew. He was afraid that if they encountered German fighters, the entire WAFS program might be shot down.

As successive classes graduated in Texas, Cochran pushed for missions outside the Ferry Division, and in the stress of 1943 and 1944, the Army was willing to oblige. Women began hauling cargo and personnel, testing repaired aircraft, and towing muslin sheets for anti-aircraft target practice. In essence, the Army recognized that women were so eager to fly that they would take unpopular missions without complaint.

Some aircraft, like the P-39, B-26, and B-29, had bad reputations among pilots, so the Army used women to demonstrate that they could be flown safely. On one occasion, the male pilots at a bomber training base were assembled on the field to watch two B-26 Marauders put on an air show. When the planes landed and parked in front of the men, two women climbed out of each. Later, the army was having difficulty finding pilots to fly the B-29. The officer in charge of the program trained two WASPs and had them make a tour of bases in a Superfortress, taking male pilots up for rides.

In July 1943, Cochran achieved the formation of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) and absorbed the WAFS under her overall direction. She designed a smart new uniform with fitted jacket and beret, using a beautiful shade of blue. Cochran continued to press for military status for the WASP and Arnold supported her before Congress, but trouble was on the horizon. Pilot losses in Europe were far less than expected and the Army began to dismiss civilian flight instructors. They complained bitterly to the press and Congress about the women being trained at Sweetwater for jobs they themselves could do. In this environment, Congress voted down military status for the women and recommended closing the training program. Stung by the defeat, Cochran proposed that the WASP be disbanded and Arnold, weary of the struggle, issued the orders for termination. On December 20, 1944, WASPs ceased their intense flight schedules and turned in their gear.

The Army's official reports on the "experiment" stated that women had performed as well, if not better, than men on every mission assigned them. Women delivered 12,650 aircraft, including half of the high-performance fighter planes. Thirty-eight lost their lives, including Cornelia Fort, the instructor who found herself in the midst of Japanese planes attacking Pearl Harbor. Fort was killed by a male ferry pilot who hit her plane while trying to show off.

What was the result of all this? Women had extraordinary opportunities during World War II and then experienced backlash after the war. None felt it earlier or more completely than women pilots. They had dispelled for all time the notion that women could not perform like men in aviation. Since it was no longer possible to tell a woman that she could not handle a plane, other excuses had to be found. The most common,

used by the airlines, was that the public was not ready and would not be comfortable with a woman pilot. No airline hired a woman pilot until 1973.

The military and political establishments solved the problem by forgetting that the WAFS and WASP ever existed. The Air Force did not accept a woman into pilot training until 1976, the year that Nancy Love died of cancer at age 64. Congress did not grant the WASPs veteran status until 1977. The women pilots of World War II were ahead of their time, and they were probably disappointed that so little progress followed their efforts. But they wrote a remarkable chapter in women's history and, by all accounts, had a helluva time doing it.