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WASP served for love of flight

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1/16/2009 - **SWEETWATER, Texas (AFNS)** -- When Betty Jo Reed was introduced to flying, it was love at first sight.

She was 6 years old and her father paid \$1 for her to take a ride in a Ford tri-motor airplane at a local fair in 1929. Once airborne, Ms. Reed was hooked.

"I remember feeling free and happy, and loving the whole experience," she said. "From that point on, I knew that I wanted to fly."

It was a good time to be infatuated with flying. Flight was still new and romantic. Airplanes were starting to roll off production floors at a steady rate and pilots were stretching the limits of flight and teasing the imaginations of children and adults on a regular basis.

Some of these pilots even made an impression on a young Betty Jo.

"Charles Lindbergh was trying to make the first trans-Atlantic flight, and every time I heard an airplane flying over our house I would run outside, waving and yelling, 'Hi Lindbergh,'" Ms. Reed said.

She doesn't do much running these days. And, at 85, her flying days are also behind her. But while time may have taken her ability to move fast or sit in the cockpit, one thing it left untouched is her love affair with flight -- a love affair that drove her to become one of the first women to fly a military aircraft.

Betty Jo, whose last name then was Streff, was a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, a unique corps of women pilots who were trained by the Army Air Forces to fly military aircraft during World War II. The training took place at a small airfield called Avenger Field in Sweetwater.

"I was part of the seventh class of 1944," Ms. Reed said. "We were a tight knit group of girls, too."

In all 1,074 women graduated from this training and earned the WASP title -- a title that carried considerably less weight in those days than it does now.

"I was assigned to a unit in Mississippi," she said. "Right from the start, the boys there made it pretty clear we weren't wanted."

This didn't bother Ms. Reed too much, though. As far as she was concerned, every day she was able to climb into the cockpit and take off was a good one.

"Flying was freedom and I loved flying," she said. "I loved my job and I wouldn't have wanted to do anything else."

She spent her time in Mississippi performing maintenance flights. Once an airplane was repaired, she would take it up and make sure the plane worked the way it should.

It was a great time and she was happy.

Then, just as fast as the program was started, the program was deactivated and the WASPs were told to go home in December of 1944.

"That was so disappointing," Ms. Reed said. "Some of the men were returning from the war and the Army decided it didn't need us anymore."



Betty Jo Streff-Reed recalls her days as a female pilot at the National WASP World War II Museum Jan. 8 in Sweetwater, Texas. Ms. Streff-Reed was a WASP from January to December 1944. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Desiree N. Palacios)

But the service couldn't deny the fact that these women had performed tremendously. During the war, WASP pilots flew more than 60 million miles of operational flights from aircraft factories to ports of embarkation and military bases, towing targets for live anti-aircraft artillery practice, simulating strafing missions and transporting cargo. Between September of 1942 and December of 1944, more than 50 percent of the ferrying of high-speed pursuit aircraft in the continental United States was carried out by WASP pilots. The women also flew all 77 aircraft in the Army Air Force arsenal, either in training or while in service.

Few people know these statistics; fewer still how important the WASPs were to the military at that time. Still, the WASP program showed the world that women could sit in the cockpit and fly just as well as their male counterparts -- war or no war. And in a career in which the door was typically slammed shut on women, a crack had suddenly appeared. The WASP program had opened the eyes and hearts of people across the country, and women everywhere began idolizing WASP pilots and looking to them as heroes.

Ms. Reed doesn't see it that way, though.

"Oh, they call us pioneers and heroes, but I don't feel like either," she said. "We were just doing what we loved to do and jumped at the opportunity to do it. We weren't thinking how we would impact the world, just that we'd be flying some real fun aircraft. We didn't feel like heroes at all."

History disagrees with her though. History books tell the tale of Ms. Reed and her WASP sisters, painting them as pioneers, even legends. Air Force officials, too, recognize their contributions to the service and even include a section about them in the Professional Development Guide, a book used by enlisted Airmen to prepare them for promotion.

But aside from a few words scattered across the pages of history books and the personal accounts of these women, there was little recognition. No shrine to honor them, no place where the WASP pilots were immortalized, no building that housed their memory so reverently sought to keep their legacy alive.

Then, in 2005, that all changed.

Nancy Parrish, daughter of WASP Deanie Parrish, set out to create a museum dedicated to her mother and all the other WASPs. With the help of local residents and city government officials, the National WASP World War II Museum was officially opened in May of 2005. Fittingly, the museum was housed where it all began -- at Avenger Field.

Located in a 1929-style hangar, the museum is full of WASP memorabilia. Old uniforms, model aircraft, a recreation of the women's living quarters and training equipment used by the women are all on display, surrounded by hundreds of photos and memories so real they almost seem to come alive.

This is fine, though. Keeping memories alive is the main reason the museum exists.

"The museum seeks to educate and inspire every generation with the history of the WASP, the first women in history to fly American's military aircraft, and who forever changed the role of women in aviation," said Marianne Wood, the museum's director.

So now Ms. Reed and her fellow WASPs have a shrine, a place to honor them and to keep their spirit, their dedication and their accomplishments alive forever.

Ms. Reed can't run these days, but if she could, she would run through the museum, from photo to photo, and reminisce about "the good ol' days."

Time may have taken her legs, but it has not touched her heart -- and her heart belongs to flight.

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