

Hawaii Reporter

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Cornelia Fort: Trailblazer, Patriot, Pilot

Women of World War II Hawaii Series

By Dorothea 'Dee' Buckingham, 4/27/2009 1:04:30 PM



Cornelia Fort was a young civilian flight instructor from Tennessee living in Honolulu. On December 7, 1941 Cornelia Fort and her regular Sunday-morning student took off from John Rodgers Airport (Honolulu International Airport).



Cornelia Fort, second from left, and Fellow Pilots Barbara Towne, Evelyn Sharp (also killed on duty), Barbara Erickson and Bernice Batten, beside Vultee Basic Trainer plane. March 7, 1943, two weeks before her crash.

Fort's student was advanced enough to fly regular take-offs and landings and this was to have been his last lesson before going solo. With her student at the controls, Fort watches as a military aircraft approached from the ocean. At first it didn't strike her as unusual; Army planes were a common sight. But, this plane was different —and as she watched it, she realized that the plane was set on a collision course with hers.

Fort wrenched the controls from her student's grasp and managed to pull the plane up just in time to avoid a mid-air crash. As she looked back she saw the red sun symbol on the wings of the disappearing plane and in the distance, probably not more than a quarter mile away, she saw black smoke over Pearl Harbor. (This incident is portrayed in the movie *Tora! Tora! Tora!*)

Fort would become among the first women to join the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron. She flew for the army for just a few months because on March 21, 1943, she was killed in crash.

Nancy Love, Fort's commanding officer wrote a letter to the young pilot's mother: "My feeling about the loss of Cornelia is hard to put into words -- I can only say that I miss her terribly, and loved her...If there can be any comforting thought, it is that she died as she wanted to -- in an Army airplane, and in the service of her country."

Cornelia Fort's own words best describe her love of country, of flying, and her sense of duty. A few months before she died, she wrote, "At the Twilight's Last Gleaming." It was published in the July 1943 issue of *Ladies Home Companion*.

I knew I was going to join the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron before the organization was a reality, before it had a name, before it was anything but a radical idea in the minds of a few men who believed that women could fly airplanes. But I never knew it so surely as I did in Honolulu on December 7, 1941.

At dawn that morning I drove from Waikiki to the John Rodgers civilian airport right next to Pearl Harbor where I was a pilot instructor. Shortly after six-thirty I began landing and take-off practice with my regular student. Coming in just before the last landing, I looked casually around and saw a military plane coming directly toward me. I jerked the controls away from my student and jammed the throttle wide open to pull above the oncoming plane. He passed so close under us that our celluloid windows rattled violently and I looked down to see what kind of plane it was.

The painted red balls on the tops of the wings shone brightly in the sun. I looked again with complete and utter disbelief. Honolulu was familiar with the emblem of the Rising Sun on passenger ships but not on airplanes. I looked quickly at Pearl Harbor and my spine tingled when I saw billowing black smoke. Still I thought hollowly it might be some kind of coincidence or maneuvers, it might be, it must be. For surely, dear God ...



Cornelia Fort

Then I looked way up and saw the formations of silver bombers riding in. Something detached itself from an airplane and came glistening down. My eyes followed it down, down and even with knowledge pounding in my mind, my heart turned convulsively when the bomb exploded in the middles of the harbor. I knew the air was not the place for my little baby airplane and I set about landing as quickly as ever I could. A few seconds later a shadow passed over me and simultaneously bullets spattered all around me.

Suddenly that little wedge of sky above Hickam Field and Pearl Harbor was the busiest fullest pieces of sky I ever saw. We counted anxiously as our little civilian planes came flying home to roost. Two never came back. They were washed ashore weeks later on the windward side of the island, bullet-riddled. Not a pretty way for the brave little yellow Cubs and their pilots to go down to death.

The rest of December seventh has been described by too many in too much detail for me to reiterate. I remained on the island until three months later when I returned by convoy to the United States. None of the

pilots wanted to leave but there was no civilian flying in the islands after the attack. And each of us had some indication of what brought murder and destruction to our islands.

When I returned, the only way I could fly at all was to instruct in the Civilian Pilot Training program. Weeks passed. Then, out of the blue, came a telegram from the War Department announcing the organization of the WAFS (Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron) and the order to report within twenty-four hours if interested. I left at once.

Mrs. Nancy Love was appointed Senior Squadron Leader of the WAFS by the Secretary of War. No better choice could have been made. First and most important she is a good pilot, has tremendous enthusiasm and belief in women pilots and did a wonderful job in helping us to be accepted on an equal status with men.

Because there were and are so many disbelievers in women pilots, especially in their place in the army, officials wanted the best possible qualifications to go with the first experimental group. All of us realized what a spot we were on. We had to deliver the goods or else. Or else there wouldn't ever be another chance for women pilots in any part of the service.

We have no hopes of replacing men pilots. But we can each release a man to combat, to faster ships, to overseas work. Delivering a trainer to Texas may be as important as delivering a bomber to Africa if you take the long view. We are beginning to prove that women can be trusted to deliver airplanes safely and in the doing serve the country which is our country too.

I have yet to have a feeling which approaches in satisfaction that of having signed, sealed and delivered an airplane for the United States Army. The attitude that most non flyers have about pilots is distressing and often acutely embarrassing. They chatter about the glamour of flying. Well, any pilot can tell you how glamorous it is. We get up in the cold dark in order to get to the airport by daylight. We wear heavy cumbersome flying clothes and a thirty-pound parachute. You are either cold or hot. If you are female your lipstick wears off and your hair gets straighter and straighter. You look forward all afternoon to the bath you will have and the steak. Well, we get the bath but seldom the steak. Sometimes we are too tired to eat and fall wearily into bed.

None of us can put into words why we fly. It is something different for each of us. I can't say exactly why I fly but I know why as I've never known anything in my life. I knew it when I saw my plane silhouetted against the clouds framed by a circular rainbow. I knew it when I flew up into the extinct volcano Haleakala on the island of Maui and saw the gray-green pineapple fields slope down to the cloud-dappled blueness of the Pacific. But I know it otherwise than in beauty. I know it in dignity and self-sufficiency and in the pride of skill. I know it in the satisfaction of usefulness.

For all the girls in the WAFS, I think the most concrete moment of happiness came at our first review. Suddenly and for the first time we felt a part of something larger. Because of our uniforms which we had earned, we were marching with the men, marching with all the freedom-loving people in the world.

And then while we were standing at attention a bomber took off followed by four fighters. We knew the bomber was headed across the ocean and that the fighters were going to escort it part way. As they circled over us I could hardly see them for the tears in my eyes. It was striking symbolism and I think all of us felt it. As long as our planes fly overhead the skies of America are free and that's what all of us everywhere are fighting for. And that we, in a very small way, are being allowed to help keep that sky free is the most beautiful thing I have ever known.

I, for one, am profoundly grateful that my one talent, my only knowledge, flying, happens to be of use to my country when it is needed. That's all the luck I ever hope to have.

The WAFS suffered their first fatal accident when Cornelia Fort's BT-13A had a mid-air collision with another plane being flown by a male pilot. The other plane clipped the landing gear of Fort's plane, sending it plummeting to earth. Fort didn't have the time to parachute to safety. The other pilot was unhurt.

At the time of the accident, Cornelia Fort had over 1100 hours of logged flight time.

Some historians consider Cornelia Fort as the first American woman to die in military service. But the definition of active military service is not a firm one. The Army defined Fort, as well as the other 37 female WAFS pilots who died, as civilians. The army did not pay for their burial expenses, nor did they receive any military recognition.

There is an airpark in Historic East Nashville, Tennessee that is named after her. The park was built in 1945 near her family farm. Her own words are carved into the historical: "I am grateful that my one talent, flying, was useful to my country."

PHOTOS: All photos are from the Department of the Army.

"Note: The most comprehensive account of the story of Cornelia Fort is by Rob Simbeck, Daughter of the Air: The Brief Soaring Life of Cornelia Fort by Rob Simbeck, in the Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999. Information about Fort and other World War II female pilots could be found at FLY GIRLS, a PBS documentary. The website is: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/flygirls/>"

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