

# Wings over WWII

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(Photo: Submitted)

Doris Brinker Tanner remembers the feeling of speeding along the ground, then watching the earth fall away as she pulled her plane into the skies.

Sitting in her Union City living room, Tanner, 96, reminisced on her days as a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP).

When the United States entered World War II, women like Tanner had their first chance to fly for the Army.

They flew generals, nurses and others across the United States, allowing male pilots to go overseas for combat.

"We had to be able to do everything a man could do in a plane, and we did," Tanner said.

Tanner had only been married to her husband William W. Tanner (Bill) for about eight months when he was deployed.



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VIDEO: 2016 Sterling Award Recipient Doris Brinker Tanner.mpg

(<http://www.jacksonsun.com/videos/news/local/2016/05/27/85066418/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>)

The two hardly knew each other, she said, when she headed to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, for training with WASP.



**Fifinella, a gremlin designed by Walt Disney, served as the official emblem of the Women Airforce Service Pilots** (Photo: Submitted)

"No field of endeavor during that time was more tradition-shattering than women's roles in the military services — and none of these was more revolutionary than women flying aircraft for the Army Air Forces," Tanner wrote in her book "Zoot-Suits and Parachutes."

Training was grueling, with irregular meals, 12 girls sharing a bathroom, early starts and hours of flight practice.

Tanner loved it.

"I fly because that's who I am," Tanner said. "I had two years and I just adored it."

At Sweetwater, Tanner worked alongside the "dynamic, gutsy gals of World War II," according to her book.

Out of the 25,000 women who had applied to fly, only 1,830 were accepted, according to "Zoot-Suits and Parachutes."

Tanner said she remembered 12 women dying in training accidents.

In her book, she writes about the deaths of Mary Howson and Elizabeth Erickson. She knew Howson as a "deliberate, careful person." Howson was finishing a cross country flight as Erickson took off on her first solo flight. The planes collided and both women were killed.



**Doris Brinker Tanner looks out of a plane cockpit during her time with the Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II. (Photo: Submitted)**

Tanner had her own close call when a seat belt failed, ejecting her from the plane.

Her instructor yelled at her, "Pull your ring, pull your ring."

Tanner pulled the ring to her parachute and floated safely to the ground, she said.

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In training, the women learned everything from mathematics to how to care for the engine.

They formed "wonderful friendships" — and surprised the men who thought women were too delicate to do a man's job, Tanner said.

The WASP flew 60 million noncombat miles before the end of the war.

"It was a different time, different age, different atmosphere," Tanner said. "The whole United States was united in the war effort, because we had been attacked by the Japanese. It wasn't just something you stepped into and stepped out of. We fought hard for the war to be over."

When the war ended, Tanner reunited with her husband, who was injured near the end of the war.

The couple moved back to Tennessee, settling in Obion County.

There, Tanner tried to adjust to normal life, spiraling into depression as she found herself faced with nothing to do except play bridge and tennis.



**Doris Brinker Tanner flew with the Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II.** (Photo: Submitted)

“People don’t usually die of boredom, but I think I nearly died,” Tanner said. “It’s pretty sad to just wake up every morning with nothing to do.”

Eventually, Tanner became adjusted to life on the ground. She received a master’s degree and did advanced graduate work, eventually becoming a professor at the University of Tennessee Martin. She had two children and now has three grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

As for the couple that hardly knew each other at the start of the war, Doris and Bill Tanner were married for 74 years, before he passed away this February.

Today, Tanner has her medals and her wings in a glass box in her living room. A bear wearing pilot goggles sits on a table not far from copies of her books “Zoot-Suits” and “Up in the Air,” an illustrated book about training at Avenger Field. She continues to write stories of her time in the WASP, and received the Sterling Award for Outstanding Woman Military Veteran in 2016.



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(<http://www.jacksonsun.com/picture-gallery/news/local/2016/04/12/photo-gallery-2016-sterling-awards/82960450/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>)

“She’s pretty fearless,” said Debbie Bowlin, Tanner’s daughter. “She’ll tackle anything head on.”

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