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## Women at war

### Odessan recalls days as WASP pilot

*By Melissa Sattley  
Odessa American*

In 1943, fellow pilots called Ruth Florey "Tex" when she towed targets behind an A-25 Helldiver so that anti-aircraft gun operators could practice their aim.

In the two years that Florey served — from January 1943 to December 1944 — 38 female pilots lost their lives supporting the U.S. war effort. Three of them were friends of Florey.

Today, Florey says, most people don't even know about the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), or its predecessor, the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS).

"I have to show people photographs of me in uniform flying before they'll believe me," laughed Florey. "I'm used to it."

Even the U.S. government ignored the contribution of the women pilots. They weren't recognized as World War II veterans until 1977.

But they fulfilled countless tasks in support of the U.S. war effort such as towing targets and ferrying warplanes to and from bases in the United States.

During the four years of the program, 1941 to 1944, 1,830 women were trained to fly — 1,500 made the final cut — while their male counterparts flew bombing missions above Europe.

Flight training was conducted in Sweetwater at Avenger Field.

In 1941, Ruth Florey was a college student in Brownwood, taking flying lessons on a lark.

Then Pearl Harbor was bombed.

"Suddenly there weren't any boys left," said Florey. "They were on their way to war."

Florey's husband joined the Army Air Corps, and her brother was training to fly B-25s. She thought about joining a typing pool to help the war effort.



Ruth Florey, 77, was a member of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) in World War II. Florey entered the service when she was 21 and left two years later when the war ended. The female pilots trained in Texas at Avenger Field in Sweetwater. They never saw action as pilots, but were used in other duties, including pulling targets behind them while anti-aircraft batteries took target practice. (Darwin Weigel/OA)

Then one day she received a surprising letter from Jackie Cochran, director of the Women's Flying Training Detachment, asking if she'd like to train to become a pilot.

"I couldn't believe it," she said. "I jumped at the chance."

Florey took her physical at Carswell Air Force Base in Fort Worth.

"It was nerve-wracking. My blood pressure was out the window from the stress," she said. "Here I was — a girl from the country — with 5,000 men, male doctors, male nurses," she laughed, remembering. "They hadn't heard about the WASP program — they didn't know what to do with me. They thought it was a big joke."

She passed her physical and after five months training was sent to North Carolina.



Florey has several photographs and mementos from her military flying days, including this picture of herself flying in the background and fellow pilot June Ellington, who died last year. (Darwin Weigel/OA)

There she was told she would tow targets so that anti-aircraft gunners could sharpen their shooting skills.

"You were scared to death, but you did it anyway," said Florey.

Conditions at the swampy airstrip were primitive at best. Every morning she and the other pilots had to clear alligators and wild hogs from the airstrip before takeoff, she said.

Once, during a routine target practice, the anti-aircraft radar picked up the steel cable connecting the target to Florey's plane, she said.

"They shot my tail off," said Florey, "and I was cursing them out over the radio."

After she crash-landed, Army Air Corps. commander Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold marched her off to headquarters.

"He said, 'We can't allow that kind of profanity over the airwaves,' " Florey said with a mischievous grin. "He grounded me for a week."

Even though the female pilots never saw combat overseas, they still experienced numerous dangers.

One friend of Florey's, Hazel Ying Lee, a Chinese-American from Portland, crash-landed in a farmer's field in West Texas.

"He thought the Japanese were invading from Mexico, and he marched her down to the sheriff's office as a prisoner of war," recalled Florey, who laughed at the memory. "And when Hazel got mad, she'd start cussing in Chinese, which didn't help."

Lee was killed in a collision above an airfield in Great Falls, Montana, on Nov. 23, 1944 — less than one month before the WASP program was concluded.

"I wish she had lived," said Florey. "She was so funny — a wonderful lady."

In the two years that Florey served with the WASPs, she was allowed to go home once for Christmas.

"My parents had no idea what I was doing. All that time I think they thought I was typing."

When Florey wasn't flying, she was dodging prejudice, she said.

"Some men made snide remarks about our ability to fly, and some were bitter because they had to go overseas," she said. "I guess I couldn't blame them."

Being a WASP was hard, but Florey said she wouldn't trade her experiences.

She still recalls the beauty of skimming above wide-open sections of West Texas, not more than 500 feet from the ground.

"Sometimes I followed the railroads, and every town had a water tower with a sextant on top of it so that you knew what direction you were flying in."

But mostly, Florey said, she flew in circles towing targets.

By 1944, many of the men who flew bombing missions above Europe were returning home and the WASPs were disbanded.

When Florey returned home, she got a job working for her father, an accountant.

"Things were pretty dull," she said. "I'd hang out the window every time a plane flew over. My daddy said I busted out nearly all of the screens from the windows."

Her husband returned from the front and Florey said meeting him again after three years of absence "was like meeting a stranger."

They divorced soon after.

Eventually she married a Navy man, moved to Galveston and had four children.

These days Florey said her feet are firmly on the ground.

"I'd rather play golf than get my pilot license renewed," she said.

Only recently have the WASPs received much recognition.

Books have been written, a documentary titled "Fly Girls" recently aired on PBS, and a Web site ([www.wasp-wwII.org](http://www.wasp-wwII.org)) has been created to keep the memory alive.

Each year Florey said she receives more and more requests to share her memories with local school children.



Ruth Florey has the original wings she received while flying for the WASPs in World War II. (Darwin Weigel/OA)

At first they don't believe her, and so she takes out the old, worn photographs that show a young woman pretty enough to be a starlet in flight gear and aviation goggles — just to prove that she was there.

"World War II was a different time," she said. "We were fighting the Fascists, Hitler. We were scared but we prayed a lot, got in our airplanes and life went on."

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