

WASP Status – Recognition Long Overdue

“As author of the 1977 law, I know what it means....If women...[had been considered] “persons” under the law, they would have been eligible to be commissioned as officers during World War II. This is the error Congress knowingly overturned by enacting PL 95-202....”

[Senator Barry Goldwater, 1981]

WAFS and WASP* graduates' service should be recognized for what it truly was: service as AAF commissioned officers. Present Defense Department guidelines specify that active duty designees (under PL 95-202) will not be assigned status or rank, but will have “not applicable” entered on discharge papers where rank would normally go.

This should be corrected and the record should be set straight.

The WASP efforts to see that legislation was passed were successful in 1977, however, PL 95-202 did not result in recognition that WASP* graduates served in officer status. Despite powerful supporting documentation, the Department of Defense elected to record status as “not applicable.”

The WASP were virtually indistinguishable from their male AAF pilot counterparts who were commissioned AAF officers. Three major differences between the groups were: the WASP were all women while the AAF pilots were all men; the male pilots were commissioned AAF officers while the WASP were civilians; and, the men could be sent into combat.

What's changed since the law was passed?

Many of the World War II records were classified until the 1980s and were simply not available. Sometimes portions of the records could be released, but the result was a document that was so heavily censored that it was essentially useless.

The declassification of correspondence provides an important new source of information. In some cases issues and intent are clarified. For example, General Arnold's personal papers are now available. Many Air Transport Command and Air Training Command documents are in the public domain. Aircraft accident reports are also available.

The oath of office is another area. The oath given to newly arrived trainees was the same oath given to officers, but it was also the same oath given to all civilians. We feel that the WASP graduates' duties provided a defining difference supporting their status as officers.

In 1941 Congress gave President Roosevelt the authority to appoint "persons" as commissioned officers in the Army of the United States (PL 252); however, it was ruled that the definition of persons didn't include women. This ruling had profound effect on the WASP and on all women in the military. Women have been included in the military only when required by manpower limitations, and generally only after special legislation (such as for nurses, Waacs, WAVES, etc.)

In looking at the reasons why women weren't considered persons, it's necessary to look at the court cases that deal with questions of citizenship and women's rights. While women have historically been considered citizens, their rights and responsibilities have not equaled those of men. Women's citizenship has not always given them the right to vote, serve on a jury, practice law, or serve in the military.

We're taking the information we've found and are preparing a report that we plan to send to the Secretary of the Air Force and the Department of Defense asking that WASP status as commissioned officers be recognized. Favorable consideration would finally recognize WASP service on a par with that of World War II commissioned AAF pilots.

Since the Defense Department made the determination not to assign status (or rank) to persons covered by PL 95-202, we believe the Air Force and the DOD have the authority to change this ruling.

No monetary benefit would result from this approval. The only tangible benefit would be full military honors (if requested) for those who elect to be inurned at Arlington National Cemetery.

Mary Anne Richey (44-9) summed it up shortly after she was appointed to the federal bench. She said: "I don't want anything just because I'm a woman. I just want to be equal" (from A Courtroom of Her Own, Barbara Ann Atwood). We think this applies to the WASP who "...flew wingtip to wingtip..." with their male counterparts, but who have been denied this recognition "just because" they are women.

* WASP graduates refers to those women who served as WAFS as well as those who

graduated from the 319th and 318th AAFTD.

[WASP reunion, Williamsburg, VA, Sep 28 – Oct 3, 2004]

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