

Mozark Moments: Harriet Call becomes a WASP and a Tuffy

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When Harriet Call arrived in Texas for her training in Women Airforce Service Pilots, she was determined to make good. But the very first day, while being drilled in the hot Texas heat, she passed out and spent the remainder of the day in the infirmary. She was mortified, and later called it "one of life's most embarrassing moments." But the next day, she was right back at it.

Harriet was already in rarefied company. During the two years WASP was operational, some 25,000 women applied to become members. Of those, only 1,830 were accepted. And of those, only 1,074 would be awarded their wings.

The WASPs were subjected to the same basic training and advanced military training as the male Army Air Corps pilots. In Harriet's class there were 101 women trainees. Only 49 of them would make it to graduation.

Harriet was then sent to Kelly Field in San Antonio where she was a staff pilot. Kelly Field became a repair depot for B-17s and B-20s and after they were repaired she would take them up to check them out.

Harriet and the other WASP pilots were awarded silver wings, which they wore on a 'Santiago blue' uniform—thus the name for Janet Dailey's novel.

Wearing that uniform was a variety of women. Like Evelyn Sharp who had been the youngest person in the U.S. to receive a commercial pilots license, Marge Hurlburt, who would go on to hold the women's international airspeed record, and Gerry Nyman, who would become an Alaskan bush pilot after the war.

Among the WASP pilots was Mildred (Tuttle) Axton who had been the only female in her flight class at Coffeyville Junior College in Kansas. She resigned from WASP in April of 1944, became a flight test engineer for Boeing, and became the first woman to fly a B-29 Superfortress.

There was an Oglala Sioux woman from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota and two Chinese-Americans. One of them, Hazel Ying Lee was killed in a runway collision. She was not the only WASP fatality.

When classes started, the trainees were flying a motley collection of aircraft. There were 23 different models of planes and none of them were new or in the best of condition. There was also no fire truck, no crash truck and only an on-loan ambulance.

On March 7, 1943, the training classes in Houston suffered its first fatalities when one of the training planes crashed, killing a trainee and her male flight instructor. Ten other trainees would die in training accidents before the war was over.

During operations, the women delivered 12,650 aircraft of 78 different types and makes and flew a combined total of 60 million air miles. In addition to ferrying planes, they also did jobs like towing targets for fighter pilots to shoot at. An additional 27 WASP pilots died during the course of all these operations.

When a WASP was killed, the remains had to be shipped home at the family's expense. There were no military honors during the funeral. They were not even allowed to have a U.S. flag draped over the coffin during the service. Apparently it was thought that allowing to do would cheapen the effect for the 'real' pilots—the men.

The women were also treated as second-class citizens in life. They had no life insurance, minimal medical care, no military benefits and no medals.

When the war began winding down, the WASP pilots received a letter stating they were being deactivated effective Dec. 20, 1944. They had to pay their own way home.

To add insult to injury, all records for WASP were classified and sealed for the next 35 years. Their immense contributions to the war effort and their sacrifices were forgotten.

Harriet went to work at the training command headquarters in Fort Worth as an aircraft accident analyst. When there were fatalities among the Chinese pilots being trained at Luke Field in Arizona, she began firing off letters to the commander there. Apparently, he felt like he was being harassed, so he flew to Fort Worth to find out who was causing all the trouble.

When Col. Lance Call walked into her office, he said, "Oh, come on, Toughie, let's go have a cup of coffee." From then on, she was known as "Tuffy." She later married Lance Call, who would become a general. When he retired, they moved to Ozark where Lance operated Air Park South, a small airport northwest of town.

It wasn't until 1977 that the WASP records were unsealed. It happened after an Air Force press release stated they were training the first women to fly military aircraft for the U.S. Obviously, this wasn't true and the outcry by those who knew the truth forced the military to unseal those records. Later that year the WASP pilots were granted full military status.

In 1984, the year Janet Dailey's novel came out, the WASP women were each awarded a World War II Victory Medal.

Harriet "Tuffy" Call was most proud of her honorable discharge that she so belatedly received from her country. Harriet died in 1994 and so she did not live to see the day in 2009 when President Obama awarded the WASP units a Congressional Gold Medal.