



Minnesota woman flew planes to help war effort

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by Joni Astrup

Associate editor

From the time she was a little girl, Virginia Mae Hope set her sights on being a pilot.

Many discouraged her, telling her only boys could be pilots. Girls were to be nurses and teachers, she was told.



Virginia Mae Hope in the cockpit of an airplane. She flew planes during WWII as a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society



Virginia Mae Hope Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

But Hope, known as Ginny Mae to her friends, was determined.

Her dream led her to become a pilot with the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) during World War II. After training in Texas, she was sent to Ohio, where she flew supplies and Army officers all across the United States.

Her dream had come true.

Hope's story was told Tuesday, Sept. 14, during a Minnesota Historical Society program at the Elk River Library presented by Tami Moehring.

She liked to drive fast, ride bareback, hunt

Born in 1921, Hope grew up in the Great Depression on a farm near Winnebago, Minn.

She liked to ride bareback, go pheasant hunting with her dad and scare the daylights out of her cousin, Lyle, when she took him on high-speed Sunday drives.

She was mechanically inclined. If the car broke down, Hope could take the engine apart and put it back together again.

She also learned the more traditional skills for young women of her era: cooking, baking, sewing and cleaning.

An only child, Hope had parents who were very supportive of anything that she wanted to do, Moehring said. She also was influenced by an aunt who owned her own business in the Twin Cities, which was unusual for the times.

After high school Hope went to college, first at Gustavus Adolphus in St. Peter and then at Northwestern in Illinois. It was while she was at Northwestern that the government-sponsored Civilian Pilots Training (CPT) program began. Its purpose was to train pilots so they would be ready in case of war.

The CPT program admitted one woman for every 10 men. Northwestern allowed two women into the program and Hope was one of them.

In 1941, Hope obtained her private and commercial pilot licenses.

Then on Dec. 7, 1941, life changed. Japanese planes attacked the naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Nearly 2,000 men died, and the United States was suddenly at war.

Like other Americans, Hope wanted to do her part to help, Moehring said. She got a job as an air traffic control pilot at the Minneapolis airport. The job had never been held by a woman before, but thousands of men were going off to war, leaving behind jobs to be filled.

Hope liked her job except for one thing: she wasn't flying. She was on the ground telling pilots when to take off and land.

But then the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program began. Its purpose was to allow women pilots to fly planes from factories to military bases and perform other aviation duties to free up male pilots to fight in the war.

Hope applied to the WASP program and on May 23, 1943, she received a telegram telling her she was accepted and should report to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas.

The telegram was signed by Jackie Cochran, a famous woman pilot in charge of the WASP program.

Hope packed her belongings, put on her best dress and white gloves and took the train to Texas.

There she spent six months training with a class of WASPs. They spent half the day in class, studying geometry, weather and how a plane's engine worked. In the afternoon, they went flying.

Hope loved it.

Their gear included leftover flight suits from the men, typically much too large. They also had goggles, gloves, an aviator jacket, a helmet, a parachute and a turban. The turban kept their hair out of the way and was also thought to make the women less of a distraction to the men, Moehring said.



Audrey Waggoner modeled a flight suit and helmet worn by WASP pilots during WWII during a program at the Elk River Library. Photo by Joni Astrup

Hope graduated on Nov. 13, 1943. Her parents traveled from Winnebago to Texas for the big day.

Upon graduation, the young WASPs were given new uniforms. They were designed by Cochran and Nieman Marcus and made from a special color of fabric called Santiago Blue. The uniforms included a jacket, beret, skirt and sometimes pants.

After graduation the WASPs were sent throughout the United States. Hope was assigned to the Army Air Forces Weather Wing, at Patterson Field, Ohio. Her job was to fly Weather Service personnel and planes on military missions.

Hope loved her job. Her favorite place to fly into was Minneapolis, because it was close to home. Flight plans were less rigid then and sometimes Hope would take a detour and fly over Winnebago, buzzing Main Street. She flew so low that walls shook, picture frames fell off the walls and people ran into the street as Hope flew over.

The WASP program came to an end in late 1944.

Hope was upset, but decided no matter what, she was going to be a pilot, Moehring said.

She applied for a number of pilot jobs, including at airlines, but was only offered stewardess jobs, Moehring said.

Undaunted, Hope eventually landed a job as a pilot with the Reconstruction Salvage Co., flying planes to the junk yard.

But tragedy was just around the corner. On Dec. 7, 1944, Hope, two other WASPs and seven men were flying from Omaha to Oklahoma City. Hope was a passenger.

She and the others were killed when the plane crashed shortly after take-off. Hope was 25.

That same day, back in Winnebago, her parents got a letter from Hope. In it she told them she would be home for Christmas that year — the first time in two years. They were overjoyed.

They later learned of the plane crash and the death of their daughter.

Her name, however, lived on. Hope's cousin, Lyle, named his first daughter Virginia Mae, after the cousin who took him on many wild Sunday drives.

In time, the WASPs received more recognition for their service.

In 1977, Congress recognized the WASPs as military pilots and granted them veteran status, and in 2009 they were given the Congressional Gold Medal.

About the WASP

- The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) was a pioneering organization of civilian female pilots employed to fly military aircraft under the direction of the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II.
- Twenty-five thousand women applied to join the WASP, but only 1,830 were accepted and took the oath, and out of those only 1,074 women passed the training and joined.
- After training, the WASPs were stationed at 120 air bases across the United States. They assumed numerous flight-related missions, relieving male pilots for combat duty.
- Thirty-eight WASP fliers lost their lives while serving during the war — 11 in training and 27 on active duty, all in accidents.
- In all, WASPs flew 60 million miles of operational flights.

Source: *Wikipedia.com*

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