

How the WASP Achieved Success

In the early 1900s gender roles were very strict. Women were expected to get married and have children while their husbands would bring home income. Outside of caring for children, work was limited to nursing, teaching, or domestic jobs. Advocates and campaigns for women's suffrage spread as early as the 1840s, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton who preached the "Declaration of Sentiments¹," but women were only given the right to vote in 1920. Most opportunities continued to be restricted due to social expectations and norms.

World War II was a game-changer for work opportunities. Over seven million unemployed women joined the workforce to take positions that were previously closed to them. Many even moved out of their hometowns to take advantage of jobs elsewhere. A lot of these women filled the need for aircraft production. Women made up 65% of the U.S. aircraft industry during the war. In 1942, the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) and the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) were enacted. This enabled women to fly aircraft for military purposes. In 1943, the WFTD and the WAFS merged to form the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs).

Over 25,000 women applied to join the WASPs, but only 1,074 were able to graduate from the extensive military training program. Their main mission in the squadron was to ferry aircraft overseas where combat would take place. The WASPs delivered over 12,000 airplanes. These women would also perform maintenance and support infantry training by towing target

¹ Declaration of Sentiments is a document outlining the rights that American women should be entitled to as citizens that emerged from the Seneca Falls Convention in New York in July 1848.

aircraft to perform simulated attacks. Flying was not easy. Mechanical issues were common when ferrying new and repaired aircraft. Thirty-eight women lost their lives serving in WASPs.

The WASPs were successful because they never allowed gender norms to dictate their lives. They believed in themselves and pushed forward despite their dangerous job. Margaret Phelan Taylor, a former WASP pilot, was just out of college when she saw an article on WASP in Life magazine. Her brother was training to fly in the military, so she decided she wanted to as well. She aimed high and convinced her dad to pay for her pilot's license. "I told him I had to do it," Taylor stated, "and so he let me have the money." The job was dangerous. Margaret Taylor always tried to use her head. One time Taylor was ferrying an aircraft cross-country when she saw smoke in the cockpit. She had been trained to bail out if anything went wrong, "But the parachutes were way too big. They weren't fitted to us," she says. "The force of that air and that speed and everything, why that just rips stuff off you. You'd slip right out." Despite the stressful situation, Taylor flew the plane to its destination thinking, "You know what? I'm not going until I see flame. When I see actual fire, why, then I'll jump." She was brave and never quit trying.

The WASPs program ended in 1944. Most women found it difficult to continue their flying careers, but their efforts laid a solid foundation for both women in aviation, and women's rights as a whole. Nicole Malachowski, the first female Thunderbird Demonstration Team pilot, has stated, "The WASP service to our nation at a critical time in the history of the entire free world is not remarkable because they were women, but is remarkable in its own right." The WASPs continued to fight for recognition, and in 1977, the WASPs were recognized as a military organization.

Citations

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