

The Silent Ascension

Ikksha Das
AP U.S. History
June 2, 2025

“You and more than 900 of your sisters have shown that you can fly wingtip to wingtip with your brothers. If ever there was any doubt in anyone’s mind that women can become skillful pilots, the WASP have dispelled that doubt,” declared General H. H. Arnold in a 1944 letter to the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP).¹ During World War II, the urgent need for pilots and aircraft support opened new opportunities for women, who had long been excluded from such roles and confined to the traditional gender roles. The WASP program, formed in 1942 and led by renowned pilot Jacqueline Cochran, trained women as military aviators at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. These women flew over 60 million miles in 78 types of aircraft, handling crucial non-combat missions such as moving planes, testing repaired aircraft, and towing targets for live ammunition practice. However, they were considered as civilian volunteers and did not receive any military benefits. Despite their courage and skill, these women were denied military recognition and benefits, and were largely forgotten for decades. The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) deserve to be honored and memorialized in public memory because they demonstrated equal skill and courage as men, yet were dismissed and forgotten in history. A national monument should preserve their legacy, celebrate women’s unified contributions , and correct a long-standing historical injustice.

During World War 2, the United States military faced a serious lack of male pilots, as most were deployed for combat overseas, leaving a gap in domestic aviation roles. To help this, pilot Jacqueline Cochran proposed the formation of a women’s aviation corps, which led to the creation of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) in 1942. These women were civilians, not officially military personnel, but they trained and served under rigorous conditions that were equal to, if not harsher than male pilots. Training at the Avenger Field in Sweetwater Texas, WASP recruits completed over 560 hours of classroom learning and 210 hours of flight instruction. Just like male soldiers, they flew 78 different aircrafts, including the B-29 bomber and were expected to meet the same standards as men, if not held to a higher standard in most cases. Their missions included flying planes from factories to bases, towing targets for ammunition practice, and test-flying repaired aircraft. Violet Cowden, who commented on this dangerous task, said, “We learned to fly everything they put in front of us, and we did it without question.”² Over the course of the war, WASPs flew more than 60 million miles and transported over 12,650 aircraft, yet their contributions were never recognized or honored. Only 1,704 women graduated from the program out of 25,000 applicants, and when 38 WASPs died during service, they received no military honors or benefits. Their families even had to cover funeral costs and no flags were draped over their coffins, even though they died serving their country. One pilot’s testimony stated, “If a man died, they wrapped his body in a flag. If a woman died,

¹ 1. Henry Harley Arnold, "Letter from H. H. Arnold to all WASP, October 1, 1944," *Portal to Texas History*, last modified October 1, 1944, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1010632/>.

² 2. Owen Chapel, "Interview with Violet Cowden [08/15/2003]," audio, library of congress.

they sent her home at her family's expense."³ The WASPs were dismissed when the program disbanded in December 1944 as male pilots returned, and eventually WASP's contributions were forgotten from much of history. Despite General Henry H. Arnold stating in a letter to WASP members that "we would have been in a tough spot without you,"⁴ these women were not granted veterans' status until 1977 (30 years after their service.) These women clearly proved that there was no doubt in the capability of women to become skilled pilots and match every standard just like men, yet they were denied the dignity and recognition they had earned.

The story of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) deserves to be honored and permanently memorialized because it highlights a long-ignored chapter of American military history where courage, sacrifice, and equality were met with silence and erasure. These women challenged gender barriers when female involvement in military operations were still considered taboo, yet their accomplishments continued to be overlooked for decades. As Jacqueline Cochran wrote in her 1945 WASP Report, "We were never in the military, we were simply told to serve like soldiers and accept what came,"⁵ exposing the irony of their civilian status despite their soldier-like duties which they conducted without any honor or status given to them. WASPs risked their lives flying dangerous missions, like towing targets with live ammunition and yet were officially kept out of the very military they benefited so greatly. Violet Cowden, a WASP veteran, said in a 2003 interview, "When we got back, nobody even said thank you. We just faded away."⁶ This dismissal ultimately caused lasting emotional pain and not only showed that women's wartime work was temporary but left a long-lasting legacy of making the female gender a minority or leaving a stigma of incapability. Unfortunately, it wasn't until 1977 that Congress finally gave WASPs veteran status, and even then, full honors were not guaranteed. Up until 2009, WASPs weren't even allowed to have their ashes buried at Arlington National Cemetery, something that male military pilots were guaranteed no matter their contributions. General Henry H. Arnold's October 1944 letter admitted that, "the whole WASP program has been of great value to the country,"⁷ but public recognition has been extremely slow. Currently, only two memorials specifically dedicated to the WASP exist, both only at their main training center in Sweetwater, Texas. This limited recognition looks over the extensive missions these women flew across the country, which further highlights how their vital contributions beyond training were undervalued greatly. By preserving their story through memorials, we are able to

³ 3. "WASP: Women Airforce Service Pilots," The National WWII Museum, last modified May 7, 2025, accessed May 23, 2025, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/wasp-women-airforce-service-pilots>.

⁴ 4. Henry Harley Arnold, "Letter from H. H. Arnold to all WASP, October 1, 1944," *Portal to Texas History*, last modified October 1, 1944, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1010632/>.

⁵ 5. Jacqueline Cochran, "WASP Report," *Eisen Hower Library*, last modified June 1, 1945, https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/file/cochran_BinderN.pdf.

⁶ 6. Owen Chapel, "Interview with Violet Cowden [08/15/2003]," audio, library of congress.

⁷ 7. Henry Harley Arnold, "Letter from H. H. Arnold to all WASP, October 1, 1944," *Portal to Texas History*, last modified October 1, 1944, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1010632/>.

enlighten many more people and educate them to have this awareness, so that the WASPs finally have a long-lasting legacy. Memorializing the WASP is crucial because it provides an opportunity to formally acknowledge and educate people on the importance of their service and sacrifice. It also corrects a significant oversight in historical representation and allows the truth to be brought to light, where women are highlighted on the same standard as men for their war efforts. By memorializing them, we can establish a precedent for inclusivity, ensuring that future generations understand that capability is not constrained to gender and showcase the complete story of American war heroism including the efforts of these women.

The WASPs deserve a national monument that not only celebrates their skill and bravery but one that addresses the historical injustice of their denied recognition. This memorial design includes elements that are deeply symbolic in order to showcase the correct historical truth in wartime efforts and create a legacy for these WASPs to be honored with. Our monument, called The Silent Ascension and located in Minter Field, CA (another WASP base), centers around its cracked runway base, which immediately showcases the WASP's fractured legacy and the division of their recognition. The base is intentionally split as it shows the struggle in the program gaining the recognition it offers and honors the WASPs by etching the names of every WASP pilot like Elizabeth Maxine Chambers or Violet Cowden, while the crack and gaping hole in the middle signifies a symbol for the absence of honor and the decades of denied recognition that the WASPs faced. To further embed historical truth and amplify the WASP's voices, powerful statements from primary sources will also be integrated throughout the monument, particularly around the border of the base. The monument will feature Cochran's reflections which highlight the civilian status of the WASP, despite their military-level duties. "We were simply told to serve like soldiers and accept what came,"⁸ stated Cochran. Additionally, the quote, "You flew wingtip to wingtip with your brothers."⁹ General H. H. Arnold shows the hypocrisy of the government as they make inclusion statements equalizing both men and women, but never actually grant them the benefits and honor they deserve. Surrounding the base, multicolored pebbles represent the challenging and often painful journey endured by the WASPs. Each stone represents the heavyweight and the rocky journey that symbolizes the WASP's extraordinary resilience, as they also "paved" the way despite being a largely overlooked part of history. On top of the split runway is our clay plane in flight that is a metaphor for hope and transcendence which highlights the slow but steady rise of recognition for these forgotten heroes. The plane lifting off from the cracked base essentially signifies the idea that the WASP's legacy is finally "taking off" and ascending into its rightful place in history. Also, the hollow portion of the memorial, aka under the runway, will be turned into a Tunnel of Forgotten history which

⁸ 8. Jacqueline Cochran, "WASP Report," *Eisen Hower Library*, last modified June 1, 1945, https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/file/cochran_BinderN.pdf.

⁹ 9. Arnold, Gen. Henry H. "Address by Gen. Henry H. Arnold, Commanding General to WASP Graduate Class, December 7, 1944 #1." Speech. The Portal to Texas History.

holds symbolic artifacts that signify the WASPs achievements. This could include a copy of the original “Acceptance Telegram to Elizabeth Chambers” from Henry H. Arnold in 1943, original flight logs, or retired pieces of WASP gear. These items could be used as an educational experience to bring light to the true scale of these WASPs contributions and finally honor them to the scale they deserve. This design for “The Silent Ascension” is meant to achieve truth and unity in its symbolism. By showcasing the untold stories of the WASP’s service through voices from the WASPs themselves and their accounts, the monument can bring justice to the historical record and allow WASPs to finally have a long-lasting legacy.

In conclusion, the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) represent a pivotal, yet long-overlooked chapter in the history of America’s wartime. They stepped forward to make vital contributions to aviation and proved themselves capable and worthy of military standards, exactly like men. However, despite their invaluable service, they were unjustly denied military status and benefits leading to decades of their contributions being forgotten in history. The Silent Ascension monument with the cracked runway, ascending plane, tunnel below to showcase artifacts, and quotes and names engraved tries to correct this injustice by educating its visitors. The monument will finally allow the authentic voices of the WASPs themselves to be heard through interview audio clips, telegrams, and reflections of their times to retaliate against the gender bias. Memorializing the WASP isn’t just about reflecting on the past, but establishing a precedent and legacy for inclusivity without gender bias in the future generations.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Arnold, Henry Harley. "Acceptance Telegram to Elizabeth Chambers." 1943.
[https://military.wikia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Chambers_\(pilot\)?file=WASP_Elizabeth_Maxine_Chambers_WesternUnion.jpg](https://military.wikia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Chambers_(pilot)?file=WASP_Elizabeth_Maxine_Chambers_WesternUnion.jpg) . Retrieved December 19, 2019.

This telegram, a direct communication to a WASP recruit, is included as a symbolic “artifact” within our Tunnel beneath the monument. It signified the initial invitation that actually disguised the deeper discrimination the WASPs face as it highlights the contrast between the promise of service vs. the denial of military benefits and honor. This allows visitors to connect with the personal beginnings of the WASP’s journey that became forgotten in history.

Arnold, Gen. Henry H. "Address by Gen. Henry H. Arnold, Commanding General to WASP Graduate Class, December 7, 1944 #1." Speech. The Portal to Texas History.

A specific quote from this address, "The whole WASP program has been of great value to the country," is planned to be engraved on the monument's base. This inclusion directly juxtaposes General Arnold's high praise for their contributions with the program's disbandment and the lack of military status granted, signifying the contradiction and betrayal that the WASP experienced. It serves as a crucial reminder that even official spoken honor by the government did not translate into deserved recognition or benefits.

Arnold, Henry Harley. "Letter from H. H. Arnold to all WASP, October 1, 1944." *Portal to Texas History*. Last modified October 1, 1944.
<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1010632/>.

The statement from this letter, "You flew wingtip to wingtip with your brothers," is also designated to be engraved on the monument's base. This quote directly addresses the theme of unity and equality in skill between male and female pilots, making Arnold's words a testament to the WASP's capabilities. Its placement highlights the hypocrisy of the government's words versus their actions, emphasizing that despite acknowledging their equal performance, the women were denied equal status and benefits.

Chapel, Owen. "Interview with Violet Cowden [08/15/2003]." Audio. library of congress.

Violet Cowden's reflection from her interview, “When we got back, nobody even said thank you. We just faded away,” is also intended for engraving on the monument's base. This quote is crucial for signifying the emotional pain and abandonment experienced by the WASP veterans post-war, directly illustrating the lasting impact of their dismissal and the lack of truth in the public retelling of wartime efforts. It humanizes their story, allowing visitors to feel the weight of their unappreciated sacrifice and the need for overdue reconciliation.

Cochran, Jacqueline. "WASP Report." *Eisen Hower Library*. Last modified June 1, 1945.
https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/file/cochran_BinderN.pdf.

A key quote from Jacqueline Cochran's report, "We were simply told to serve like soldiers and accept what came," is also chosen for engraving on the monument's base. This statement illuminates the nature of the WASP's service, performing military duties without military protections or honor and exposes the government that facilitated their exploitation and dismissal. As a foundational document from their leader, its presence signifies a direct, untold account of their experiences and the core injustice of their civilian status.

Secondary Sources

Bullock Museum. "Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)." *The Story of Texas*. Accessed May 21, 2025. <https://www.thestoryoftexas.com/discover/campfire-stories/wasp>.

This source, being from a prominent Texas museum, provides regional context to the WASP's story, particularly given their training at Sweetwater, Texas. It provided the information for the digital components of the monument, ensuring accuracy regarding the specific training environment and daily life at Avenger Field. Its inclusion highlights the deep roots the WASP program had in Texas, adding a layer of geographical significance to their national story which we connect to the location of our monument due to both being training centers.

Curran, Jonathan. "Women Air Service Pilots (WASP)." *National Museum United States Army*. Accessed May 23, 2025. <https://www.thenmusa.org/articles/women-air-service-pilots-wasp/>

As an article from the National Museum of the United States Army, this source is vital for contextualizing the WASP within the broader military history of World War II. It helped us understand the specific roles the WASP filled in supporting Army Air Forces operations and the official military perspective (or lack of) on their service. This source ensures the monument accurately portrays their unofficial integration into military support roles, emphasizing the critical need they addressed for the armed forces.

Janda, Lance. "Women's Airforce Service Pilots." *EBSCO*. EBSCO.

This article has in-depth historical analysis and scholarly perspectives on the WASP program. It provides comprehensive background information on the political and social climate surrounding the WASP's formation and disbandment, the internal debates within the military, and the long fight for veteran status. This detailed research ensures the monument's narrative is accurate and reflects the complex factors that shaped the WASP's experience and the decades of struggle for recognition.

"WASP: Women Airforce Service Pilots." *The National WWII Museum*. Last modified May 7, 2025. Accessed May 23, 2025. <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/wasp-women-airforce-service-pilots>.

From an institution dedicated to World War II history, this source provides a broader historical overview of the WASP's role within the context of the entire war effort. It gave us the information to add the monument's ability to communicate the WASP's significance to a general audience, explaining their missions and contributions in relation to the overall war aims. This source helps to position the WASP's story as an integral, though often omitted, part of the larger World War II narrative, reinforcing the monument's purpose of correcting historical representation.

"Women Air Service Pilots (WASP)." The National Museum US Army. Accessed May 23, 2025.
<https://www.thenmusa.org/articles/women-air-service-pilots-wasp/>.

Similar to the other museum sources, this article provides accurate information on the WASP from a military history perspective. It was used to verify facts about their training, types of aircraft flown, and the specific duties they performed for the Army Air Forces. This factual data ensures that the monument's visual storytelling and interpretive elements are consistently accurate, which upholds the monument's commitment to portraying the truth of the WASP's service.