

# DISCOVERING MOM

In answer to the "Why Wings Across America" question. By Nancy Parrish, Director

## In the Beginning was Dad.

My father passed away in 1993. He was the pilot in our family. He was the hero, the one we all were proud



of. An Air Force officer for 25 years, he was a LT. Colonel with a gentle spirit and hazel eyes that sparkled when he laughed. I can still remember being with dad on an air base at sunset, having to stop the car and get out as the flag came down. He'd salute, I'd put my hand over my heart, then he'd wipe his eyes. Then I'd wipe my eyes. My father's daughter, I was very proud to be an Air force brat—I still am. I was very proud of my

father—I still am.

He passed away in 1993 never telling me his story. Never telling me about how he was shot down over Yugoslavia ... how it took him months to walk out... about the Partisans who helped him and about how cold it was there in February. He never talked about how he left the Georgia farm, volunteered, joined up as a private and retired an officer and a gentleman. And believe me, dad was a true gentleman. Over the years, I only heard little bits and pieces of his story, but only when I would ask. Most of the time, I was too busy to ask. I thought we had time. I thought that, as he was recovering from surgery, we'd put the computer my sister gave him to good use, and I'd help Dad write the great American history of his life. And then, suddenly, it was too late, and that's a shame. It's a shame on me, because I could have ... should have... would have.

God closed that door, but when He did, He opened another huge chapter for me, because when dad died, that's when I truly started discovering mom!

## And then there was Mom

Although I've never seen her fly, Mom was 'the other pilot' in our family. She gave up flying when she married dad, the career Air Force pilot. She gave up flying because she wanted to raise a family and so that she could always 'be there,' for both my sister and me. For all of our childhoods, every button and every stitch on every Easter outfit, Sunday dress or costume was designed, fitted and made from scratch by mom, including the flannel Christmas gowns and the matching purple organdy outfits with the ridiculous hats (of course, those made the front page of the local style

section). She kept us both on the best-dressed list most of our childhood, and is always willing to do it now for her grandchildren, when one of them needs a one-of-a-kind costume from scratch.

When asked, she would always say, yes, she served in World War II, but dad was the hero, his service was the most important...after all, he was the one who put his life on the line for his country. But now dad was gone, and more and more, my questions began to be about her. This time, I didn't want to wait until it was too late.

My mother is a WASP. I'd say 'was,' but I don't think any woman who ever was one considers it a past tense kind of thing. Once a WASP, always a WASP. I had grown up knowing my mom was a WASP, but I guess I took what she did during World War II for granted. I didn't really realize how unique and special her story was until I started asking questions!

As a producer for PBS, it made perfect sense for me to do a documentary about mom and about the WASP.

So, I began researching. I found a few autobiographies and a few minor references at the library, but nothing in the official histories of World War II and nothing in the official jr. high and high school history textbooks. So I began asking everyone I'd bump into, "Do you know what WASP means?" In line for my driver's license renewal, the grocery store, the library, the movie, I'd ask and I'd get those typical 'white Anglo Saxon Protestant' stares. NO ONE knew what it really meant, not even an associate Dean with a double Masters' Degree in History and Women's Studies. Not even the Presidents of two major universities.



## A few words about the WASP

Just in case you don't know, WASP is an acronym for Women Airforce Service Pilot. According to the one line describing them in the Encyclopedia :

***"WASP: a group of women pilots formed by Jacqueline Cochran during World War II."***

But the WASP were so much more than that! The very least it should say is that the WASP were the first women in history to fly American military aircraft.

How extraordinary was it back in the 1940's, for a young girl not only to want to learn how to fly, but to really do it? How extraordinary was it for a young girl to pay her own way to go serve her country, to put her life



on the line and to do it without expecting anything in return. The WASP did...and they did it with honor, with patriotism, with sacrifice and with commitment. Why? Because they wanted to 'do their part' to help win a war...and because they all loved to fly.

What were you doing when you were 21? These incredible

young pilots were flying bombers and fighters, towing targets, ferrying planes, equipment and personnel, flight testing redlined aircraft, instructing male cadets, flying radar tracking and night strafing missions, doing their best to help win a war. These women are role models! They are pioneers. They mowed down the tall grass so that women pilots today can see the mountains. They are heroes. Yet most of America doesn't have a clue that they ever existed! The best the Encyclopedia can do is not enough, not by a long shot!



I know I can't rewrite history and I know that one documentary, even two or three, is not going to change the fact that lesson plans on WASP are not part of the 'History of World War II'

curriculum. They should be. Their history is a missing part of the history of World War II, the history of American military aviation and the history of women. The history of this inspirational group of women should be instantly available to any teacher and any student in any classroom anywhere in the world.

### And so Wings Across America was born!

What began as questions to discover more about mom turned into my mission: to make sure that the history of the WASP is not forgotten and to make sure that generations from now, kids are inspired by the courage and sacrifice of this incredible group of women. Dad's computer, the one we were going to write his story on, became a tool that allowed me to explore the exciting possibilities of creating a virtual museum and digital library. Beginning 3 years ago with just one web page of mom's story, this project now includes almost 100 megabytes of digital information on the WASP. That's just the beginning.

With the help of a network of PBS stations, Baylor University and Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the

Shoah Visual History Foundation, Wings Across America will give every single surviving WASP the opportunity to tell her own story on broadcast quality video tape and on her own web page.

**Wings Across America** is way beyond a documentary. Once we have the digital stories of the WASP,

*Wings  
Across  
America*

EVERYTHING is possible! Can you imagine anything better than having one of these incredible women actually speak to a class of 5th graders...telling them that they can do anything, and do it fifty years from now!

For most of my life, mom was the engine who drove our family. It was her spark, her determination that continually pushed all of us way beyond where we thought we could go...higher and higher up the mountains. After all, she flew in World War II. To her, there is no such word as impossible! Sometimes, her ideas were a little outrageous, but we'd always give it a try and, usually, mom was right...until dad passed away, and I began my journey to discover mom.

In an instant, I am no longer my father's daughter, but I'm the one with the outrageous idea, pushing everyone on toward this mountain. I know that, with God's help, nothing is impossible, and I'm bound and determined that we will succeed. Wings Across America will put the WASP into the digital classrooms of the future, and if we have to, we'll do it one WASP at a time.

Sounds like something mom might say!

Perhaps I'm not my father's daughter at all. In discovering mom, I may have discovered me!



For more information on Wings Across America, visit the website: <http://www.wingsacrossamerica.org>

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