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Staff photos — Rod Aydelotte

Members of the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority at Baylor University take a break from recording the marching songs of the Women Airforce Service Pilots on Wednesday night.

LYRICAL HISTORY

Baylor sorority records songs of WW II female pilots

By CINDY VAN AUKEN
Tribune-Herald staff writer

An organization dedicated to preserving the history of World War II's female pilots has enlisted the help of a Baylor University sorority for its latest project.

About 60 members of the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority spent two nights this week recording the marching songs of the Women Airforce Service Pilots. That was the name of the all-female service unit the pilots served in during the war. Although the pilots were not allowed in combat, they were the first women to fly American military aircraft.



Waco resident Deanie Parrish, who flew planes as a WASP during World War II, videotapes the students as part of a local group's project dedicated to preserving the history of the war's female pilots.

The sorority recorded about a dozen of the songs, which were sung by the pilots during their training. Wings Across America, the Waco-based organization behind the project, hopes the songs will eventually be included as part of an interactive digital video disc. The DVD will be sent to

schools across the country to educate students about the role of the WASPs.

"These songs are just little gems," said Nancy Parrish, director of Wings Across America. "They kept up their spirits. They made them feel more like one. It's a very unique part of their his-

PILOTS

Songs provide inspiration

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tory. I'm not sure other women service units had them."

Many of the a capella songs describe the female pilots' love of flying, their desire to serve their country and the equality of women. They follow the melodies of songs that were well-known during the 1940s, but some of the songs have refrains that would make the original songwriters blush.

For example, one song begins, "I'm a flying a wreck a riskin' my neck and a ----uva pilot too," while another song says, "If you have a daughter teach her how to fly, if you have a son put the ----rd in the sky."

Parrish said she found out about the songs from talking to surviving WASP pilots, some of whom had kept the original lyric sheets. Since music was such an important part of the culture during World War II and remains so today, Parrish said she thought the songs would be a fun way to educate new generations about the WASPs.

The organization wanted young women to record the songs since most of the WASPs were in their 20s during the war, Parrish said. So a few months ago Parrish asked the sorority to consider taking on the recording as a service project. Although the sorority won first place in this year's All-University Sing event, it was the group's attitude, not its singing talent, that prompted her to recruit them, she said.

"When you look at this group of young women you can see the can-do spirit the WASPs had," Parrish said.

It also didn't hurt that one of the sorority's members, Brook Williams, is the granddaughter of Waco resident Deanie Parrish, who was a WASP and is Nancy Parrish's mother. But Williams is not the only student who is excited about the project.

Rebecca Cutbirth, public relations chair for the sorority, said she did not learn about the WASPs in any of her history classes. In fact, when she first heard of the project, she thought the acronym stood for the traditional meaning, "white Anglo-Saxon Protestants," she said.

Cutbirth said she has enjoyed learning how the female pilots helped their country, especially since they served in a time when women did not have much power. Their stories have been an inspiration to her, she said.

The project also had meaning for sorority member Amanda Coleman. Since Coleman has her pilot's license, she said the songs really hit home.

"I think (the songs) probably capture the spirit pretty well," Coleman said. "I think I can feel a little of what it was like."

Parrish said reactions like those are why she started Wings Across America three years ago. Most people do not know about the WASPs' heroic role, including the fact that 38 of them died while serving their country, she said.

Since fewer than 600 of the 1,074 WASP pilots are alive and most are over

the age of 75, it's crucial that their stories be recorded now, Parrish said. Not only did the women play an important part in World War II, but they also are important to the history of women, aviation and the military, she said.

"These are incredible role models for young people," Parrish said. " But they've been sort of relegated to the footnotes of history, if they're in the books at all."

Parrish said she is not sure what project Wings Across America will tackle next, but it will likely be something that will be included as part of the DVD, she said. The group is currently trying to raise about \$55,000, which Parrish said will pay for the production and shipping of 10,000 DVDs to be sent to schools nationwide.

Although the organization is housed at Baylor, the university does not provide its funding. The group relies on private donations and grants, Parrish said,

Once the group has received the majority of the funding, it can fully take advantage of partnerships it has already forged with other organizations, Parrish said. The partnerships should help the organization produce some of the other segments that will be on the DVD.

So far independent PBS stations across the country and the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which was started by movie director Steven Spielberg to record the stories of Holocaust victims, have pledged their support, Parrish said.

Anyone interested in learning more about the WASPs or contributing to the efforts of Wings Across America can visit the organization's Website at:

<http://www.wingsacrossamerica.org>.

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