



Celebrating WWII's Winged Women

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Women's History Month is approaching, and it's a time to celebrate the contributions of extraordinary individuals who overcame incredible odds to accomplish what others thought impossible.

by Donna Teresa

As a girl, I remember my grandmother telling me stories about the Great Depression and living through World War II. She always made sure to emphasize that men were not the only ones contributing to the war effort, but

also women, on the home front and in the air.

Of course, I would laugh and tell her, "But grandma, girls don't fly," which made her a little angry at me. "Oh, yes they did, and women still fly because of them," she told me. Then she continued on with the story of the WASPs, an acronym for "Women Air Force Service Pilots."

There begins my inspiration about an exceptional group of ladies from our nation's history.

The WASPs were a group of women pilots formed in the 1940s by Jacqueline Cochran. You can relive their history by going to www.wingsacrossamerica.org or www.wasp-wwii.org and by visiting the museum in Sweet Water, Texas...

Nancy Parrish, executive director of "Wings Across America" and founder of the "National WASP WWII Museum," encourages Americans to celebrate these great pioneers of the air.

"Celebrate is a wonderful word. Celebrate we should! Remember we must! The WASP is the very best kind of hero. They paid their own way to serve their country. They put their lives on the line because we needed them. The WASP history is more than that, it is women's history, American history, aviation history, and it is a history that shines a light on values that should inspire us all: honor, courage, integrity, service, sacrifice, faith and patriotism."

For young people, especially young girls who are learning about women from our nation's history, significant contributions and lessons are in abundance.

"Do you remember the comment about Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers? She was as good a dancer as he was; only she did it in high heels, going backwards!" said Parrish. "For WASPs, it had to be perfect, they couldn't mess up, they had to keep their mouths shut and let their flying do their talking for them, and their flying had to be their best. They were ordered not to talk about their missions, because America didn't want our enemies to know how hard up we were. WASPs were truly the best kept secret of WWII. And unfortunately, they still are."

Military women are not always remembered or honored as often as military men. One WASP, Barbara London, received an Air Medal for the number of aircraft she ferried and miles flown. A change that America can make is to make sure our children learn about these women in school.

"This part of history is missing from most American history books about World War II," Parrish said. "We need to make sure this part of history is in the textbooks."

The struggle for equality for women has come a long way, but it is far from over. Thanks to the WASPs and all our military women past and present, who have given wings to future generations and will keep dreams flying for years to come.



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