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FLY GIRL!

YOU WANT TOUGH? MEET DEANIE PARRISH AND THE WOMEN AIRFORCE SERVICE PILOTS.

BY MARK LINDEMANN

Your first clue: When you get your orders and they assign you to fly a warplane everyone calls "*The Widowmaker*," that's when you know this isn't going to be easy. And then they tell you that if you die trying, your survivors are going to have to come get your body and pay for your burial out of their own pockets.

Life is harsh in 1944. The country's at war. Some people take the easy way out. Some step up to the plate and do their best. And some go above and beyond, without ever asking for more than the right to have a flag draped over their casket.

But there are a few, 1102 to be exact, who did much, much more. They served their country. They were bellwethers of the women's movement before it even had a name. They were successful in a world where few men succeeded. They were the Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II, better known as the WASP, and Deanie Parrish was one of them.

Time for a history lesson: In 1943, the United States was fighting a war on two fronts, in the Pacific and in North Africa. The government was training pilots as fast as they could, but pilot losses, especially over North Africa, were high. Jacqueline Cochran was a woman who raced airplanes, and who was probably the best female pilot of her time (she later became the first woman to fly faster than the speed of sound). She knew that there were plenty of other women out there like her who had the right stuff—who could fly aircraft well. And, more important, who wanted to contribute to the war effort as much as she did.

Cochran contacted General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold and together the two formed a plan which eventually resulted in the creation of the WASP. At its basis, the idea was simple: every WASP flying military aircraft in the U.S. freed up a male military pilot to fly overseas. But the hurdles the WASP had to overcome before they pinned on their government wings were high—in many cases much higher than what their male counterparts faced.

First, they had to already hold their private pilot's license. They had to pass the standard Army physical too. During their training, they had to pass the same flight tests as a male military pilot—only fair because they were going to be flying the same front-line military aircraft. They had to pay their own way to their training. And when their service was completed, they had to pay their way home too. They had no insurance benefits, no GI benefits. And though they didn't know it at the time, they wouldn't even be acknowledged as veterans for 35 years.

Twenty-five thousand applied.

Now You Know.

Deanie Parrish (at the time, Odean Bishop) was a young woman living in Avon Park, Florida and working at a bank. There was a lot of pilot training going on at the nearby airfield, and one day when one of the flight instructors came in to cash his check Deanie struck up a conversation. Could she learn to fly? Why not?

A fine measure of Deanie's mettle as a pilot came right at the start. On June 13, 1942, Deanie was taking only her second day of solo flight training in a Piper J-3 Cub, a small plane with tandem seating (the pilot sits in the rear seat while the passenger sits in front). Her task for the day was to practice landings, and her instructor was on the ground watching her. Deanie was over the field at about 500 feet when the unthinkable happened—the control stick came off in her hands.

Deanie tried to get the stick back into the socket, but no luck. Meanwhile, the J-3 was starting to climb into a stall. At this altitude, that was a death sentence. She had to do something fast, but at this time she had only about eight hours of total flight experience, and there was no radio communication with the ground or her flight instructor.

For most young pilots, the story—and their lives—would end here in the form of a smoking hole. But not Deanie Parrish. Showing amazing coolness, she unbuckled her seat belt, stood up, leaned forward, and grasped the stick in the forward cockpit. Fine—now

the plane was level, but she had no rudder control, and couldn't very well land in this position. What next? Parrish climbed over into the front cockpit. The gymnastics of this are challenging on the ground, much less in flight. And even though she managed it, she was still a long way from safe--a solo pilot sitting in the front cockpit of a J-3 poses its own problems, as the aircraft's center of gravity moves forward to an unacceptable degree.

Parrish got the plane back on the ground, and her instructor came walking towards her, furious. Just what in hell was she thinking, pulling a stunt like that? Deanie pointed to the back seat, with the joystick lying on top of the seat cushion. The instructor went white.

Earlier in her training, Deanie had asked the instructor if he thought she had what it took to be a pilot. The instructor reminded her of that question. "Now you know," he said.

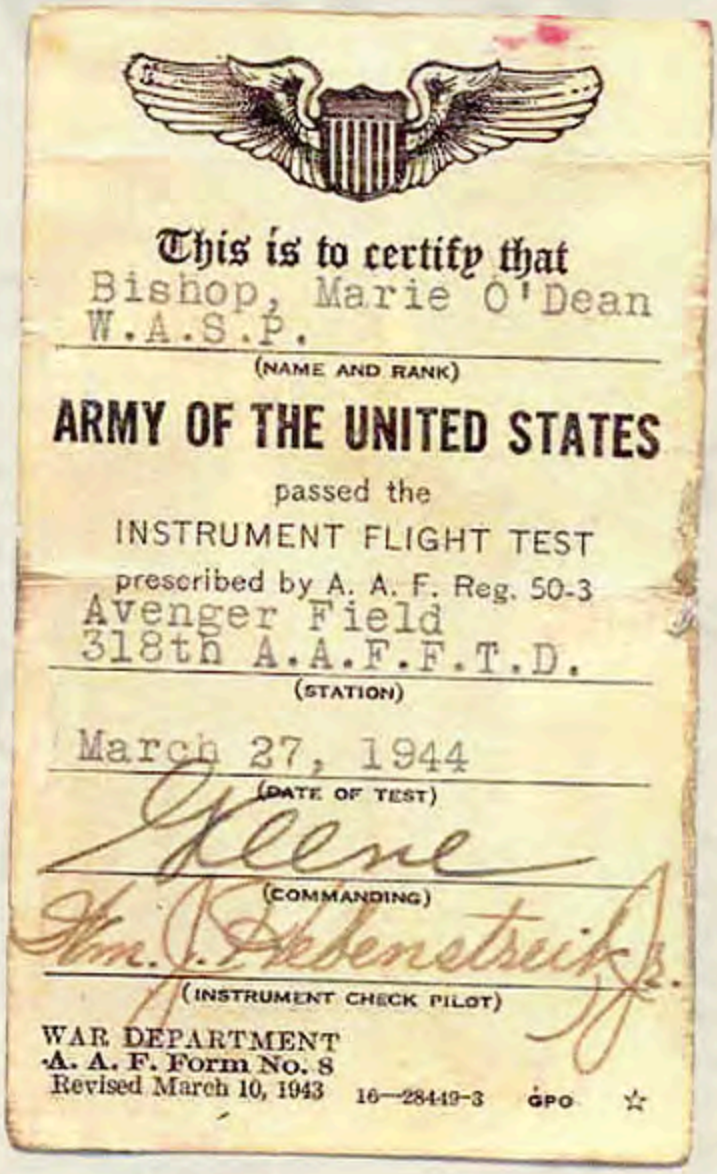
Flying the Baltimore Prostitute.

Of the 25,000 women who applied to the WASP program, just 1,830 were accepted, and fewer still, just 1,074, made it through flight training. Deanie was class 44-W-4, the fourth group to be trained in 1944. She would have been in earlier, but the women had to be 21 years old to enlist in the WASP program. ("I didn't know you could lie" says an embarrassed Deanie today. Only she's still too honest to deceive anyone intentionally.) Like all WASP after the first class, her flight training took place at Avenger Field, near Sweetwater, Texas. There she went through primary training in the Fairchild PT-19 and then the Boeing PT-17 Stearman. From there it was straight to advanced flight training in the venerable North American AT-6, a plane she loved. "Sure, I liked it. The Stearman only had about 220 horsepower, and the AT-6 had about 650. It was a great plane to fly." Spoken like a true gearhead.

At every step of the way, though, Deanie and her fellow WASP had to struggle. Not against flying—that they could do quite well. But against the bureaucracy. Flight gear? They were issued men's used mechanic's coveralls, size 44 L, even though Deanie had to stretch to make the five-foot-two-and-a-half height limit. Transport? The Army Air Force shuttled them around in converted cattle-hauling trucks like so much livestock. Uniforms? They had to buy their own white blouses and khaki slacks.

Jackie Cochran knew the WASP needed something better for a dress uniform. The Quartermaster Corps offered 40,000 yards of olive-drab wool material. Cochran hated it, and knew how to kill that idea. She had the fashion designers at Bergdorf Goodman in New York work up her idea of a uniform, and had two samples made: One in the government's OD and the other in Santiago blue wool gabardine. Cochran dressed a Quartermaster Corps clerk in the olive-drab version and hired a French model to walk the Santiago blue sample down the runway in front of General Arnold and General George Marshal. Guess which one they picked? Neiman Marcus fashion coordinators flew out from Dallas to personally fit every WASP for her uniform.

Like any piece of government property—and to the government all pilots in the service, be they male or female, are government property—Deanie received her orders after graduation and was sent packing. While Army Air Force pilots might be sent overseas, the WASP were stationed outside of combat. Deanie was sent to Greenville, Mississippi as an engineering test pilot. Such an innocent-sounding title. Here's what it really means: after some other pilot has wrecked an airplane, and after that 18-year-old mechanic has "repaired" it, you get to be the first one to fly it and see if everything's back in order. For Deanie, this meant flying mostly BT-13 trainers (the infamous "Vultee Vibrator") which (male) pilot candidates had balled up. A short stint flying the Cessna UC78 "Bamboo Bomber" gave her a twin-engine endorsement to her pilot's ticket. And then she received orders to report to Tyndall AFB in Panama, Florida and an assignment to an aircraft many pilots dreaded: the Martin B-26 Marauder.



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(NAME AND RANK)

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Avenger Field
318th A.A.F.F.T.D.
(STATION)

March 27, 1944
(DATE OF TEST)

(COMMANDING)

(INSTRUMENT CHECK PILOT)

WAR DEPARTMENT
A. A. F. Form No. 8
Revised March 10, 1943 16—28449-3 GPO ☆

The Marauder had plenty of nicknames: "The Widowmaker." "The Flying Coffin." "The Baltimore Prostitute" (the latter because the aircraft was built in Baltimore, MD, and "had no visible means of support," a reference to the aircraft's small wing area and consequent dangerously high wing loading). Names aside, the aircraft had a terrifying habit of killing young pilots. "One day in Tampa Bay," was what they said about the B-26 training in Florida. And they weren't far off the mark; fifteen went down in one 30-day period. When then-senator Harry Truman went to investigate, he was greeted with the still-burning wreckage of two crashed B-26s on the field...So, we're going to let a girl fly this thing? No. We're going to let a WASP fly this thing.

To this day, Deanie loves the B-26. "It's my favorite, absolutely," she says. "You had to really fly that airplane. It was challenging and totally engaging. There was no sitting back and looking around when you were at the controls." To be fair, it wracked up an admirable record in combat. But its record among young pilots is just as clear, and the "Widowmaker" name is not misapplied. With nearly 2000 horsepower on each wing, the B-26 is a genuine thoroughbred combat aircraft, no doubt about it. It's temperamental and high-strung as most front-line combat aircraft are. It's fast and complicated and a handful, capable of nearly 300 miles per hour and landing at 114.

SCENIC HIGHLANDS SUN

AVON PARK, FLORIDA, FRIDAY JUNE 19, 1942

Stick Comes Loose, But Girl Flyer Climbs Over Seat and Lands Plane

Odean Bishop figures she is pretty lucky. Her instructor says she is one in a million. And everybody at the airport is wondering how she did it.

It happened last Saturday afternoon on her second day to solo. She was practicing landings, under the watchful eye of her instructor, Fred Jackson. She had made two landings, and started up for another try. But just as she got the Cub in the air and started to level off, a most unusual thing happened. The stick came off in her lap.

Veteran pilots will bet you 1000 to 1 that the average pilot would crash in such circumstances—but let Odean tell how she managed it:

"The ship started to climb. I was only 50 feet off the ground, and I knew I was headed for a stall, and the works," said Miss Bishop. "I tried to get the stick back in the socket, but it wouldn't work. I tried to reach across the front cockpit to the other stick, but my safety belt held me down. So, I loosened the belt and leaned over and grabbed the other stick. Standing in the rear cockpit, I eased the nose down and leveled the ship while I climbed into the front seat. Everything was all right then, except I had never flown with the front controls. Anyway, I circled the field and came down with a better landing than before."

The next day, Odean went back and flew some more, and will keep right on flying, she says, until she gets her commercial license. She wants to become an instructor or enter the ferry service for Uncle Sam. She hopes to make the grade before Christmas.


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The Army Air Force knew exactly what it was doing when they handed Deanie the keys to her B-26. Because, like other WASP, she was smart and capable. And like the best pilots anywhere, rather than being intimidated by the speed and power, she loved it. They also knew when the male Army Air Force pilots saw this five-foot-two woman climbing out of a B-26 as Pilot in Command that maybe they'd quit complaining about their duty assignment.

Flying a B-26 would have been bad enough for many of them, but Deanie's job was even more hairball: aerial gunnery training. In short, she flew her B-26 while towing a "sleeve" target behind her while gunnery students in other aircraft took turns shooting at it with .50-caliber Browning machine guns. Or, at Deanie's B-26, as the case may be, since it came home more than once perforated by a student with poor aim, a nervous trigger finger, or both.

Recognition At Last.

Lest you think this was some kind of holiday for the girls, remember that during the war, 38 WASP were killed while flying. When one of Deanie's friends was killed in a mid-air collision, the government sent her family a two-sentence telegram: "Your daughter was killed this morning. Where do you want us to ship the body?" (Deanie and her colleagues took up a collection to send the remains home accompanied by one of their classmates.) And then, as quick as a crash, it was over: On December 20, the military decided they didn't need the WASP any more. D-Day had been a success and overall the U.S. wasn't losing as many pilots as they had been. Deanie was in B-29 school and stayed on the flight line working in base operations at Tyndall. As for the other WASP, most of them hung up their parachutes and paid their own way home—no GI bill or parades for them.

Deanie isn't bitter about any of it. She got married (to a career Air Force pilot) and raised a wonderful family. Like many WWII pilots, she never flew again. But then, in 1977, something happened that really ticked her and her fellow WASP off. And that's one thing you really, really don't want to do.

"The Air Force released a statement saying that they were graduating the first woman pilots in history to fly America's military aircraft. The Air Force didn't even remember us! That made us mad. We wrote letters, we made phone calls, we lobbied congress. Most of all, we wanted Veteran's status—we wanted to be buried with the flag on our coffins."

Deanie and her fellow WASP eventually got their wish. And last July, the administration decided to strike a Congressional Gold Medal honoring the WASP's contribution to the war effort.

Two things, though, say more about Deanie Parrish's character (and the WASP spirit) than any other. "I believe I speak for everyone when I say it was an honor and a privilege to serve this country during some of the darkest days we faced," she says. "And I believe that the WASP proved that with God's help, nothing is impossible."

Today there are fewer than 300 WASP still alive, and we lose more and more with each year. Every one is over eighty years old now. By war's end, WASP had flown more than 60 million miles in two years, in every aircraft available to the U.S. military, including the fastest fighters and the heaviest bombers. This country owes them a debt of gratitude, not only for their wartime service, but for showing that when a woman puts her mind to it, she can do anything.

For more WASP information, go to ***www.wingsacrossamerica.us***