Molly Merryman

CLIPPED WINGS

The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II
Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPS) of World War II, Molly Merryman, NYU Press, 2001, 0814755682, 9780814755686, 252 pages. During World War II, all branches of the military had women’s auxiliaries. Only the Women Airforce Service Pilot (WASP) program, however, was comprised entirely of women who flew dangerous missions more commonly associated with and desired by men. Within military hierarchies, the World War II pilot was projected as the most dashing and desirable of servicemen. “Flyboys” were the daring elite of the United States military. More than the WACs (Army), WAVES (Navy), SPARS (Coast Guard), or Women Marines, the WASPs directly challenged these assumptions of male supremacy in wartime culture. WASPs flew the fastest fighter planes and heaviest bombers; they test-piloted experimental models and worked in the development of weapons systems. Yet the WASPs were the only women’s auxiliary within the armed services of World War II that was not militarized. In Clipped Wings, Molly Merryman draws upon military documents (many of which were declassified only in the 1980s), congressional records, and interviews with the women who served as WASPs during World War II, to trace the history of the over 1,000 pilots who served their country as the first women to fly military planes. She examines the social pressures which culminated in their disbandment in 1944—even though a wartime need for their services still existed—and documents their struggles and eventual success, in 1977, to gain military status and receive veterans benefits.

Wings, Wasp, & Warriors , Travis Monday, 2005, History, 212 pages. True stories for aviation history buffs. Topics include WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots); National WWII WASP Museum in Sweetwater; RAF (Royal Air Force) in Texas; Avenger ....


Flight 100 years of aviation, R. G. Grant, National Air and Space Museum, Aug 20, 2002, Technology & Engineering, 440 pages. A stunning, visual history of the past one hundred years of aviation utilizes thousands of dramatic images, accompanied by an informative text and captions, to capture ....

Dear Mother and Daddy World War II Letters Home from a WASP : an Autobiography, Marie Mountain Clark, Aug 30, 2005, Biography & Autobiography, 284 pages. Letters from a WWII WASP pilot home to her family during the period of her service, and autobiographical memoir.

Simple Fountains 20 Step-By-Step Projects for Indoors and Out, Dorcas Adkins, Oct 1, 2003, Gardening, 149 pages. What's more soothing than the sound of moving water? Redirecting a stream to run through your home or office may not be practical, but tiny, reliable electric pumps make it ....

Sultana's Dream And Padmarag : Two Feminist Utopias, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 2005, Social Science, 196 pages. Short story and a novel, novel Sultana's dream is originally in English, short story Padmarag is translated from Bengali into English; both are based on the status of women in ....

Silent wings at war combat gliders in World War II, John L. Lowden, May 1, 1992, History, 187 pages. The pilots were known as "suicide jockeys" and the aircraft they flew were called "flak bait." Attached to hemp or nylon ropes and towed aloft by modified bombers or transport ....

The originals the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron of World War II, Sarah Byrn Rickman, Jun 1, 2001, History, 413 pages. History of the original women air pilots the U.S. government used to ferry and test planes during World War II. The Squadron was later incorporated into the Women Airforce...

They also served American women in World War II, Olga Gruhzit-Hoyt, 1995, History, 279 pages. WASPs, WACs, WAVEs, Marines, Army and Navy nurses, cooks, clerks, OSS intelligence gatherers, and other service women--forty in all--offer intimate, first-hand accounts of ....
Within military hierarchies, the World War II pilot was projected as the most dashing and desirable of servicemen. "Flyboys" were the daring elite of the United States military. More than the WACs (Army), WAVES (Navy), SPARS (Coast Guard), or Women Marines, the WASPs directly challenged these assumptions of male supremacy in wartime culture. WASPs flew the fastest fighter planes and heaviest bombers; they test-piloted experimental models and worked in the development of weapons systems. Yet the WASPs were the only women's auxiliary within the armed services of World War II that was not militarized.

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Of special importance is its amplification of feminist military critiques to an actual branch of the military, proving what before had been strictly theory. The best chapters are those that include numerous examples of media sexism and the ridiculous thought patterns of Congress--two elements of culture that unfortunately still impact women who enter male-dominated fields.

*Clipped Wings* is a history of the disbanding of the U.S. Army Air Force Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II. Unfortunately, *Clipped Wings* is dull reading, academic in the bad sense, which obscures the truth in two or three places in an effort to emphasize the sexism that existed in the 1940's.

*Clipped Wings* fails to point out that two women members of Congress, Clare Booth Luce and Margaret Chase Smith, voted to kill the WASPs in 1944. *Clipped Wings* also fails to say, as Marianne Verges demonstrates, that WASP leader Jacky Cochran did not do the best possible job of prolonging the existence of the WASP organization.

I purchased this book for my daughter who is in high school. She was writing a paper on the WASPS of WWII. She said that it was an excellent source of information for her paper - easy to read and well organized. This book was recommended to her by a former WASP and contains a wealth of information on this group of brave and determined women.
During the Second World War, women flew military aircrafts for many nations: the Soviet Union, Great Britain, Poland, Germany, Romania, and the United States. The thousand Americans who served with the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) are today the best-known of these women aviators. Even so, no scholarly history has yet been published on the WASP.

In Clipped Wings, author Molly Merryman takes a theoretical approach to WASP history via feminist theory and the concept of gender construction. Merryman seeks to explain what the public reaction to the WASP--particularly the defeat of the militarization bill--can tell us about how Americans constructed gender roles in wartime. Her thesis is that "the issue was very clearly not about the WASPs as pilots, but about women who were going beyond culturally constructed normative boundaries of how women were expected to behave, and who were serving in what were constructed to be male roles" (p. 175).

Two separate organizations formed in 1942 were later merged to create the WASP. In September 1942, Nancy Love was named director of the Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron (WAFS) of the Air Transport Command of the Army Air Forces (AAF). Love's plan was to hire women already qualified to fly the sort of missions required by the Ferrying Division. The original WAFS was comprised of only Twenty-five elite female pilots with an average of 1,100 flying hours.[1] A few days later Jacqueline Cochran implemented a much broader plan and gained command of a second organization, the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD). The WFTD's task was to training women pilots with fewer flying hours to provide an ongoing supply of noncombat pilots. In November 1942, a directive from General Hap Arnold stated that the AAF sought "to provide at the earliest possible date a sufficient number of women pilots to replace men in every noncombatant flying duty in which it is feasible."[2]

In August 1943 Cochran achieved control of both programs, when the WAFS and WFTD were merged into the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP. In all, more than 25,000 American women offered to join the WASP in order to free male pilots for combat duties. A total of 1,830 women were admitted and 1,074 became operational over the duration of the program.[2] WASP duties eventually included ferrying and testing military aircraft, towing targets, and administrative and liaison flying.

Initially, both Love and Cochran thought the women should be given military rank, but there was no provision for this within the AAF. It was later suggested that the women be militarized as part of the Women's Army Corps (directed by Oveta Culp Hobby). Cochran rejected this idea because it would place the women pilots under WAC jurisdiction. In September 1943, a WASP militarization bill was introduced into Congress. At the same time, casualties among combat aviators had proven much lighter than originally estimated. Some male pilots and trainees were transferred to the ground forces, where heavy casualties were still expected in the final months of the war. In 1944, Congress and the media became increasingly antagonistic toward the WASP. Rather than being regarded as patriotic women who were doing their best for the war effort, they were now seen as selfishly hoarding jobs that should be filled by men. The militarization bill failed, and the program was deactivated on 20 Dec 1944.

Merryman believes the WASP are unique among women who served in the military. The WASP record was impressive. In twenty-seven total months of service, women pilots in the Ferrying Division flew 12,650 ferrying missions in seventy-seven different types of aircraft, including pursuit fighters and heavy bombers.[3] In all, the WASP flew nearly sixty million miles with a lower accident
rate than male pilots. Why then were they so abruptly disbanded? And why did Congress reject militarization in 1944 but grant military status to WASP veterans in 1977? Molly Merryman attempts to answer these questions.

The other women's auxiliaries achieved militarization during the war, while the WASP did not. Were the WASP singled out? Merryman thinks they were. She believes the WASP were a direct threat to society's "assumptions of male supremacy in wartime culture." The majority of women in the WAC, WAVES, etc. served in administration, support, and clerical roles that were untraditional mainly because they were performed in military uniform. No one imagined WACs and WAVES on the front lines carrying packs and rifles; they did not present a challenge to the masculinized definition of "soldier." The WASP, on the other hand, were the first women to hold high status military positions--jobs highly prized by men (pp. 2-3).

The usual explanations for WASP disbandment are that the women pilots had become superfluous, and that personality conflicts between Cochran and others doomed the program. Merryman rejects these explanations, arguing that "there is no substantiation" for the supposed rivalry between Cochran and Love, which is a "counterproductive construction" of historians; "these adversarial constructions only represent the negative cultural images of powerful women at that time" (p. 11). She also claims that while Cochran and Hobby may have disliked one another, it did not affect their professional relationship, and that most accounts follow a "mythic cat-fighting construction" (p. 30).

Merryman devotes a great deal of time to public perceptions of the WASP, particularly those of the media. This is the real strength of her book: it is the first systematic examination of the changing ways the WASP public image was constructed during and after the war. For example, Merryman notes the media concern about women's uniforms; male uniforms were rarely of interest (p. 50). Similarly, Merryman finds that many media portrayals emphasized the details of the women's physical appearance (hair color, eye color, prettiness), something rarely done when writing about men (p. 61). She delineates the time frames in which coverage was positive or negative, in which the images shown in the media focused on "feminine" or superficial aspects as opposed to portraying the WASP as hard-working professionals.

Merryman makes a strong case for the focus on "a return to prewar standards" that by 1944 affected media and Congressional attitudes toward military women (pp. 52-54; 106ff). Media coverage of military women dropped dramatically after the midpoint of the war. Especially valuable is Merryman's examination of the inaccuracies that were promulgated in the media during the militarization battle, when the public seemed to turn against the women pilots (pp. 62-74). The titles of these articles were inflammatory ("Army Passes up Jobless Pilots to Train Wasps," p. 63), and often presented false information. At the same time, the WASP themselves were prohibited from speaking to press (p. 66).

Merryman's coverage of the battle to prevent passage of the WASP militarization bill is another fresh contribution (Chapter Five). She examines the Congressional hearings in which opponents of the bill claimed the WASP were taking up positions that could easily be filled by male pilots. General Hap Arnold's testimony that the WASP met higher standards than the male pilots in question had little impact. Merryman provides a thorough analysis of the Ramspeck Report (pp. 82-92) which sought to discredit the WASP. For example, the report included a heading, "Standards Lowered," that showed how the WASP program lowered its age and flight hour requirements after its inception; the report failed to mention that the standards were always higher than those required of male trainees. The report gave high figures for the cost of training each WASP, but did not include figures for male pilots (which were equivalent), or mention that WASP had a higher graduation rate (p. 85). What is particularly interesting is that the AAF fought hard in support of WASP militarization, and presented strong statistical evidence proving their value; Merryman shows that Congress was more influenced by the media and public opinion than by military necessity. Another useful piece of analysis is Merryman's demonstration that disbanding the WASP program in 1944 actually cost the military time and money. The assessment of the AAF itself showed that replacing the 850 WASP in active service in late 1944 would cost the military close to eight million dollars (pp. 118-22).
Once the WASP were disbanded, Merryman shows there was a sudden turnaround in media coverage, applauding their wartime efforts and omitting any mention of the fierce battles in which the WASP had been portrayed as greedy and unpatriotic (pp 126-30). She also details the thirty-year struggle that finally resulted in a 1977 bill granting the WASP status as military veterans. In effect, the WASP were finally militarized, decades after the war ended.

Merryman devotes Chapter Eight to a discussion of how the rejection of WASP militarization during the war, and their subsequent disbandment, can be explained within the framework of feminist theory and cultural studies. Performance was irrelevant; no matter how well the WASP did their job, the real battle was on the field of cultural values. The WASP held jobs that men wanted; there was no way they could win in a patriarchal society. Merryman brings in Gramsci's theories of cultural hegemony, along with feminist concepts of gender construction, to create a framework that explains the "fall" of the WASP. She is rather hard on previous historians, who "overlook this hegemonic enforcement" and thus are unable to explain why the WASP were disbanded.[4] "The WASPs' missions and their success in fulfilling them was not the issue. What was being contested was the notion and reality of women serving in roles that cultural standards had deemed beyond what was normative and allowable for women" (p. 175).

In viewing WASP history under the bright light of theory, issues become black or white; Merryman falls into dichotomous explanations. For example, she dismisses the conflicts between Jacqueline Cochran, Nancy Love and others as inconsequential, and castigates historians for exaggerating the disputes. Yet it is quite clear in the contemporary documents, and in memoirs, that there was a great deal of conflict. Cochran herself wrote that she "broke with Colonel Olds" over his support of Nancy Love.[5] She calls Oveta Culp Hobby "the woman I loved to hate," says "we had knock-down, drag-out fights," and writes that she told Hap Arnold, "[the WASP] will become part of the Women's Army Corps over my dead body ... Hobby has bitched up her program and she's not going to bitch up mine." She also notes that she was reminded to refer to Hobby as "Colonel Hobby" but thereafter writes about "Mrs. Hobby" with the word "Mrs." in italics.[6] In any program as controversial as the WASP, it was natural for conflict to occur, even between the women themselves. Most WASP memoirs discuss the conflicts, and they must be treated as something more than an imposed construction.

A question Merryman fails to answer is how the military, which eventually became the strongest proponent of the WASP, was able to escape the cultural constructions of gender that bound society, the media, and Congress. Very little attention is devoted to attitudes within the military itself; in fact, Merryman dismisses the military as a "fixed variable" (p. 177). She also does not analyze the attitudes of the WASP pilots; how many of them were complicit in society's constructions? In what ways did some WASP accept hegemony? How did others manage to break free?

The chronological flow of the book is sometimes confusing. For example, in Chapter Four, "From Praise to Rancor," Merryman traces Life magazine's coverage of military women. She discusses the first article on military women in June 1942, followed by another piece in September; in the next paragraph, she jumps back to January 1942, when the first cover photo of a military woman appeared (p. 49). After examining Life articles all the way through 1945, she then jumps back to 1942-43 in the next section (p. 55ff). Although Life may deserve special attention as "a portal into changing public opinion," (p. 45) the impact of Life coverage would be better handled in chronological context with the rest of the media.

Some of Merryman's arguments aren't as well-documented as they should be. She refers several times to a lobby organized by male pilots to defeat WASP militarization (pp. 44, 75, 82ff) but presents few citations to document the activities of this group. There are subjective opinions that would be better supported with some statistical evidence. Merryman frequently characterizes media coverage with phrases like "a more common response was" (p. 61; see also 112-14, 174). It leaves the reader wondering just how common were these responses? The book would be stronger if the author had provided some charts quantifying the number of stories that appeared in various publications, and broken them down into categories of coverage. Such a chart would be even more significant if it also traced media coverage of men in the military for comparison.
Merryman sometimes reveals a lack of familiarity with military history; for example, when she refers to "several battalions" of Soviet women combat pilots (p. 10; in fact, they were regiments). She sees the distinction between combat and non-combat roles as an artificial construction designed to segregate military women (p. 178), but this distinction goes back to the creation of professional military organizations. Merryman also discusses the omission of women's stories from traditional military history; WASP histories and memoirs are usually categorized as "women's history" rather than "military history" (p. 178). But when Merryman discusses this omission (pp. 176, 178) she does not provide citations. (Most official histories, such as the one by Craven and Cate cited below, do discuss the WASP, albeit in separate chapters.) Merryman fails to note that these histories often focus on combat units and marginalize support roles; not just the WASP, but the male ferry and support pilots too are neglected in official histories.

Merryman also misses an opportunity to draw comparisons between race and gender. She notes that Cochran discriminated against black women, but that it was consistent with attitudes of the time. She mentions that "both groups suffered from documented discrimination, controversy, undue and unfair attention, and bad publicity, despite the pilots distinguishing themselves" but takes the comparison no further (pp. 16-17). An examination of similarity and disparity in racial and gender integration in the military is a ripe field for future research.

The strength of Clipped Wings, is its feminist theoretical perspective; this is also a weakness. In Merryman's view, the cultural construction of gender roles is the *only* explanation for the treatment of the WASP. Perhaps in the broadest sense this is true, but the WASP story is a complex one. Factors like personalities and military attitudes should not be neglected. Many individuals, female and male, *were* able to revise their personal concepts of gender roles as a direct result of the WASP experience. Change at the micro level enables larger shifts in society; surely this was one reason for the 1977 militarization victory.

Clipped Wings *is* an important contribution to military, aviation, and women's history, as well as to American Studies. It provides fresh and penetrating analysis from the viewpoint of feminist theory into the experience of gender integration in the military. It establishes a new standard of theoretical analysis, and should pave the way for additional scholarly work incorporating a deeper analysis of military attitudes and factors, and a broader comparative dimension of the experience of gender integration in military institutions in other cultures.

[4]. Although most histories and memoirs accept the "women were no longer needed" argument, they also recognize the powerful role of social attitudes. For example, Adela Riek Scharr notes that "politics in the armed forces and in Congress are factors over which the WASPs had little influence," Sisters in the Sky. Gerald, MO: Patrice Press, 1986, vol. I, 531.

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