

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Deborah G. Douglas. *American Women and Flight since 1940*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004. xi + 359 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8131-9073-0.

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## Ceiling Unlimited: What A Day to Fly!

*United States Women in Aviation, 1940-1985*, the seminal 1991 monograph by Deborah G. Douglas (one in a four-part series published by Smithsonian Institution Press), was a hearty appetizer for the full course of *American Women and Flight Since 1940*. Although much of the material and photos are duplicative, Douglas's recent book provides a wealth of new information, illustrations, chapter notes, and a comprehensive bibliography. The initial read is slowed with these very details, yet grows to an interesting and compelling read about awe-inspiring women who pursued their passion against imposing odds and often with extreme sacrifice. Douglas, curator of science and technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Museum, competently incorporates "insights gained since the original [1991] manuscript was ... written" (p.4).

The focus is largely commercial and military aviation and perhaps rightly so for these records and history are more readily available and chronicled. The complicated interface of the roles of the "visible women" (stewardess/flight attendant, pilot, astronaut) and the "invisibles" (mechanic, engineer, air traffic controller, administrator) is fully detailed. Many of the early barriers today seem ludicrous; all contemporary women in aviation owe a debt of gratitude to those who preceded us with their moxie and air-mindedness. Barbara Erikson, for example, was awarded the Army Air Force medal and a Presidential Commendation in 1944 for her marathon mission of four 2,000-mile flights in three different aircraft within a five-day period.

American culture has somehow associated machines with masculinity. Therefore, women who choose to fly are expected to find ways to neither harm their identity as women nor the profession they aspire to follow—the proverbial "anatomy is destiny" quandary. In 1911, an Austrian university professor noted that a woman could run an airship better than a man because she had retained the primitive faculty of seeing with full retina as a result of enforced modesty and flirting. Braniff required that its flight hostesses be "attractive ... of perfect physical condition ... with no disfigurements" (pp. 31, 32) and other airline executives stated, "use them until their smiles wear out then get another bunch" (p. 159).

In 1942, female pilot applicants for the Ferrying Division of the Air Transport Command faced more stringent standards than did male applicants. Men, aged nineteen to forty-five, needed three years of high school and 200 flight hours. Women, aged twenty-one to thirty-five, must have graduated high school and logged 500 flight hours with a minimum of fifty in the previous year. The fifty-hour requirement for women only was next to impossible to achieve since much civil aviation (where these hours were generally accrued by women) had been banned from the onset of the war. Sadly the war's most "visible" female aviators, the Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs) who numbered 1,074 and flew 60,000,000 miles in almost every Army Air Force plane, were forgotten for over three decades after the war.

Some of the strongest opposition to women taking an active role in aviation came from women them-

selves. Having read extensively on the life of Jacqueline Cochran, (1910-1980, aviation pioneer and record holder, director of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots) this reviewer was surprised to read of the roadblocks Cochran created for female flyers. She also opposed opening the service academies to women and testified before Congress that "the proper and primary role for women in American society was mother and housewife" (p. 191). Imagine the progress and open doors if Cochran had promoted "Each one, reach one!", the mantra of Women in Aviation, International, an organization begun in 1990.

Despite a plethora of hurdles, World War II did begin to change the course of aviation history for American women. The WASPs received veterans' status in 1977. Three years earlier, the Army and the Navy began to accept women into their aviation ranks. The Army's first woman aviator, Lt. Sally Murphy, one of twenty-five members of the Officer Rotary Wing Class at Fort Rucker, Alabama, received her wings in 1974.

In 1970, there were 29,832 licensed women pilots in the United States; most were general aviation pilots. Nine years later, the ranks grew by 80 percent. The women of general (civilian) aviation (GA) remain largely unsung in this edition. Conspicuous by her absence is Evelyn Johnson (a pilot and flight instructor from Tennessee), the female world record holder for total flight hours with approximately 58,000 hours logged at last accounting.

In the early seventies, a scientific study to determine

the personality characteristics of GA pilots (and the first to include women) found the "pilot personality" transcended gender. The "personality" was marked by physicality, courage, adventure, orientation toward demonstrating competency, skill, and achievement, and mastery of complex tasks. These traits served aviation pioneers well and continue to serve those who choose to "break the surly bonds of earth." This research also served to collect data on women aviators as part of an aviation safety program. This, too, demonstrated no scientific evidence of dramatic gender differences in pilots. Perhaps not objectively linked and quantifiable, this data contributed to further eroding the myths that served to keep women grounded.

The craft cares not about the gender of the person at the controls, nor the engineer, nor the mechanic. In the pursuit of flight, biology is not an end all. Douglas has not only highlighted major events and key persons; she explores critical dimensions of women involved in aviation and the metamorphosis of that involvement over sixty years. Some changes are slow in coming; many good things take time and patience. Douglas's detailed account is educational and motivational for a wide audience of history, aviation, and women's studies devotees. She presents obstacles and solutions objectively with nary a hint of strident feminism that can generally belabor all constructive intent. Douglas (and this reviewer) concludes that now is an extraordinary time for women in aviation. Today is not just another day; what, on earth, are you waiting for?

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