

H-Net Reviews

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Molly Merryman. *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II*. New York: New York University Press, 1997. 237 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5567-9.

Reviewed by Reina Pennington (Department of History, University of South Carolina)

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DECONSTRUCTING THE WASP

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).

—A brief history of the WASP—

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's new perspective —

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, ap-

plauding 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).

— Room for improvement —

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 catego-

rized 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 book is nicely produced, with thoroughly cited notes and a useful bibliography and index. One frustration is that many individual interviews are not listed, but cited only under “Women Who Flew, unedited interview tapes, author’s collection.”

— Summary —

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.

Molly Merryman’s *Clipped Wings* is not a complete history of the WASP; for that, readers must still await a scholarly treatment and rely meanwhile on the best of the existing popular works:

* Keil, Sally van Wagenen. *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines*. New York: Rawson, Wade Publishers, 1979.

* Scharr, Adela Riek. *Sisters in the Sky*. Gerald, MO: Patrice Press, 1986.

* Verges, Marianne. *On Silver Wings: The Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II, 1942-1944*. New York: Ballantine, 1991.

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.

Notes:

[1]. Craven, Wesley Frank and James Lea Cate, Eds. *The Army Air Forces in World War II*. 7 vols. Vol. 7. Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1958, 30.

[2]. Boom, Kathleen M. “Women in the A.A.F.” *The Army Air Forces in World War II*. Eds. Craven, Wesley Frank and James Lea Cate. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. Vol. 7: 530.

[3]. Craven & Cate 31, Boom 532-533.

[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.

[5]. Cochran, Jacqueline. *The Stars at Noon*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1954, 118.

[6]. Cochran, Jacqueline and Maryann Bucknum Brinley. *Jackie Cochran: The Autobiography of the Greatest Woman Pilot in Aviation History*. New York: Bantam, 1987, 198, 204-207.

Reviewed for H-Minerva by Reina Pennington <RPennington@InfoAve.net>, Dept. of History, University of South Carolina

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