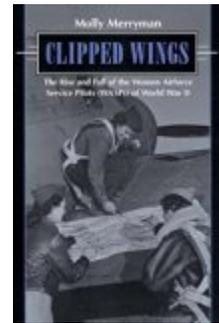


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Molly Merryman. *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II*. New York: New York University Press, 1997. 237 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5567-9.

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Published on H-Minerva (November, 2001)



Women Airforce Service Pilots and the Gender Issue

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When the United States entered World War II, its military service and its industry faced the need to find and train workers and servicemen to meet the unprecedented demands of mobilizing the American economy and fighting a two front war. One way of meeting these demands was to hire, enlist, and train women for jobs once deemed “men’s work.” Millions of women left home for work in factories, hospitals, and military bases. Another 350,000 either enlisted in the Army or Navy or joined a military auxiliary service. Of these 350,000, 1,104 were women who flew military aircraft for the Women’s Air Service Pilots (WASPs). These women delivered airplanes, helped train gunnery recruits, taxied officials, and tested aircraft. They put on men’s flying coveralls, and learned to fly the army way. In 1942, over 25,000 women applied to the new women’s pilot training program, 1,830 were accepted and 1100 graduated.

The WASP program has inspired several books including Sally Van Wagner Keil’s *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines*, Jean Hascall Cole’s *Women Pilots of World War II*, and, Byrd Howell Granger’s *On Final Approach*. Most of the works on the WASPs are either memoirs or popular histories and, even fiction. Janet Dailley’s *Silver Wings, Santiago Blue* is a fictionalized account of the WASP program, written in the romance genre. One of the more scholarly books on the WASPs is Molly Merryman’s *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II*.

Clipped Wings examines the WASP program from its development in September 1942 through its disbandment in December, 1944. Merryman analyzes the role of women pilots and their contribution to World War II. As Merryman pointed out the WASPs “performed an essential role” in America’s war effort. They flew every type of airplane the Army Air Corps possessed and released hundreds of men for combat. Despite their success, however, the WASPs were unappreciated and their contributions unrecognized. A civilian organization, the WASPs were not considered military personnel. After disbandment, WASPs were not recognized as veterans and could not receive benefits. The thirty-eight women pilots killed during service to their country, were ineligible for military funerals. Their next of kin could not even display the gold stars that indicated the loss of a love one who had served his or her country. Merryman discusses the WASPs’ post war fight for military status and veterans benefits, both of which were granted thirty years after World War II.

Merryman concentrates on why the WASP program was disbanded. She rejects previous theories that asserted women pilots were no longer needed or blamed WASP Director Jacqueline Cochran for bungling the program. Instead, Merryman contends that social pressure was the major reason why the program ended. According to Merryman, the WASPs were disbanded “because the culture in which they existed was not prepared for women to succeed in roles that were associated with and desired by men” (p. 157)

Clipped Wings is essentially a gender study of the Women Airforce Service Pilots. As Merryman pointed out, “by taking on roles and missions previously associated with the masculine, WASPs challenged assumptions of male supremacy in wartime culture” (p. 3.) For WASPs, flying military aircraft was not as difficult as being accepted as a woman doing a man’s job. By working directly with military equipment, the WASPs were perceived as more threatening than women who served as nurses or office personnel in the Army or Navy. This threat to traditional male roles led to the program’s demise.

Merryman’s work has been hailed as a fresh, astute, analysis of the WASP program. The book is well written and draws on a variety of primary source material including, military documents, interviews with former WASPs,

newspapers and articles and Jacqueline Cochran’s private papers. While *Clipped Wings* is more scholarly than previous WASP histories, it does not draw any new conclusions. Gender constraints on the WASPs have been previously examined in other books on the program. Where Merryman’s work differs is her concentration on gender, devoting several pages to theories linking manhood to military service. This final section deviates from WASP history and presents a sociological analysis on combat and gender roles.

Still, the book adds to the continuing study of women pilots in World War II. *Clipped Wings* provides a better understanding of why the WASPs were disbanded and chronicles the long struggle of women serving in the military.

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Citation: Rhonda L. Smith. Review of Merryman, Molly, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. November, 2001.

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