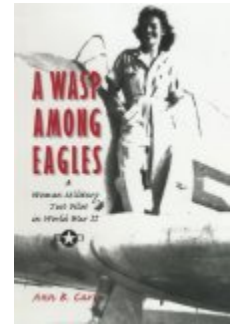


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Ann B. Carl. *A WASP among Eagles: A Woman Military Test Pilot in World War II.* Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999. 132 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56098-870-0.

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A Time to Remember

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A WASP among Eagles: A Woman Military Test Pilot in World War II is Ann Baumgartner Carl's autobiographical account of her experiences as an aviator with the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPS) and as the only woman among the WASPS to serve as a test pilot at Wright Field Air Force Base during World War II. Carl's engaging memoir aids in illuminating the hitherto overlooked contributions to aviation made by women during the Second World War. Readers looking for an extensive study of the WASPS will not find it here, however. The book does not detail the activities and accomplishments of the WASPS, nor does Carl impart new information about these extraordinary women who ferried planes and towed targets. Rather, the memoir presents a slice of history which includes an insider's view of the women of the WASPS and a more extended account of the author's singular experience among the test-pilots at Wright Field.

In explaining how she became a woman aviator, the author reaches back into her childhood recounting early, formative experiences and recalling an inspirational teacher who awakened her interest in science. Notwithstanding fears instilled by her father, that smart women, especially those who excelled in science, would not be attractive as marriage partners (p. 17), Carl (then Baumgartner) pursued a course of study in science focusing on medicine. Her interest in medicine, combined with a longing for adventure, induced her to seek flying lessons so that she might fly an air ambulance. A strong desire to become part of the war effort gave a further

stimulus to her desire to learn to fly. As a trained pilot, Carl then eagerly responded to the call for women pilots and she became one of about a thousand women selected from among 25,000 applicants to join the WASPS headed by Jacqueline Cochran.

Women from all walks of life joined together for the WASP training program in Houston, (and later Sweetwater) Texas. They endured seedy accommodations and bad food as well as the hostility of the male instructors. According to Carl, the intervention of a young lieutenant in the supply depot next to the WASPS hanger lifted the women's spirits and enabled them to surmount the discouragement they initially felt. This Lt. Fleishman convince the women that they could take whatever the army dished out (p. 44) and his challenge to "take it" strengthened the resolve of the women.

Carl was assigned to the artillery base at Camp Davis where the WASPS towed targets for artillery practice. This was dangerous work and some airplanes, as Carl explains, "came back with bullet holes in them" (p. 52). In addition, the women confronted continued hostility from male personnel and commanders. Carl and one other woman were assigned to Camp Davis to replace two women who had been killed in notoriously suspicious crashes that remain controversial. One crashed plane, piloted by a WASP, was found to have sugar in the fuel. This apparent act of sabotage was hushed up, however. The other WASP killed in a seemingly avoidable accident was unable to escape her burning aircraft because of a canopy latch that would not open. The defective latch

had not been fixed despite the unfortunate pilots previous efforts to have the problem repaired. Because the WASPs were Civil Service employees rather than military personnel, there was no Air Force money available for funerals or for the transportation of the remains of WASPs to their homes. Rather, the women themselves contributed money for the transportation of their dead associates (and for the flag to accompany them) (p. 54). Thirty-eight WASPs gave their lives while in service.

It is evident that the most satisfying part of Carl's WASP experience was her subsequent assignment to Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio as a test pilot in 1943. It was here that experimental aircraft were tested before being accepted by the Air Force. Carl was the only woman test pilot at Wright Field during the Second World War and became the first woman to fly a jet aircraft. She recounts conversations with the then septuagenarian Orville Wright who visited the air field to view the incredible advances being made in the field he pioneered. She confesses that her book represents a sustained answer to Wright's question to her: "what kind of girl would want to fly an experimental jet?"

Although Carl was a pioneer in the field of aviation and a daring and adventurous woman, she does not see

a role for women in combat. She makes it clear that the women of the WASPs did not aspire to fly in combat and spurns the idea of what she calls "women Amazons out to kill" (p. 112). It is curious that women like Ann Carl, who broke down barriers for women, see fit to add support to the remaining barriers preventing women from taking on combat roles. The director of the WASPs, Jacqueline Cochran was another such woman who, though responsible for extraordinary breakthroughs and accomplishments, also contributed to sustaining barriers to women in combat.

As World War II was winding down, the WASPs were disbanded in December 1944. They were then largely forgotten. Only in 1977 were the WASPs militarized by Congress due to the efforts of Senator Barry Goldwater and many former WASPs. In the early 1990s, the debate over women in combat aviation resulting from the 1991 Persian Gulf War suddenly shined a long awaited light on these hitherto unrecognized women of the WASPs. Carl's book resulted from the post-Gulf War flurry of interest in these women who fifty years before had selflessly and without publicity contributed to America's war effort. Her account represents a nicely-written addition to the mounting literature on these recently recognized women pilots.

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