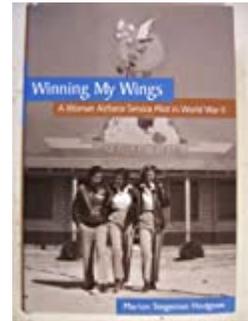


**Marion Stegeman Hodgson.** *Winning My Wings: A Woman Airforce Service Pilot in World War II.* Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1996. ix + 257 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55750-364-0.



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## Flying Home: The WASP and the Postwar Return to Domesticity

*Winning My Wings* joins a growing list of women's military history books, fitting comfortably into the niche of memoir, rather than "war story." It is a coming-of-age tale of a young woman who yearns to leave home, parents, and pink-collar job for adventure and service to her country during World War II as a Woman Airforce Service Pilot (WASP), then chooses to return to domestic life without any deep regrets. Hodgson skims lightly over the military and technological components of her story, recreating instead the culture of the Homefront via correspondence among her family, fiancé, and herself, and in the process shows how ordinary people accomplished extraordinary feats during wartime. She leaves to other historians, however, questions about the permanence of changes the war made in American society in regard to gender, class, and race.

Marion Stegeman was a journalism student at the University of Georgia in the prewar spring of 1941, when the government's Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) opened its doors to a small number of female students as a way to increase total enrollment without appearing to be gearing up for entry into the conflict.

That ruse may not have fooled anyone; by June, when the program was closed to women because the CPTP required automatic enlistment in the armed services in case of war (at a time when women could not fly for the military) Stegeman had earned her degree and a private pilot's license. It took her until February 1943 and the lowering of flying time prerequisites, however, before she could report to Sweetwater, Texas for training as a WASP, as wartime fuel rationing had prevented her and others from accumulating the 100 hours in the air needed initially to apply.

By this time, she was corresponding with a long-time family friend, Maj. Ned Hodgson, a Marine Corps pilot recovering slowly in a military hospital from a fiery crash that threatened first his life, then his career. The correspondence between the two underscores how the war redirected lives, and also makes another, often-overlooked point: neither male nor female had to see combat to catch a glimpse of death. Ned Hodgson had transitioned smoothly from airline pilot to military aviator until a training accident in North Carolina removed him from flying status. Marion Stegeman lost thirty-

eight WASP colleagues to Stateside accidents that happened while the women trained, ferried aircraft, test-flew new planes, and towed targets during gunnery practice. She gives the reader the sense that this was not remarkable; death could have come for any one of them at any time:

This trip to San Antonio was made with one second lieutenant and four other WASPs. One of the WASPs was Mary Trebing, who had been in the class ahead of me at Sweetwater. She was a pretty, shy Oklahoma girl with a sweet smile, who had been a student law apprentice and court stenographer before joining the WASPs. Nine days after we delivered our planes to San Antonio, Mary was dead, with a broken neck, killed while ferrying a PT-19.

Her letters reveal little about the aircraft the WASPs flew but much about the young Georgia woman who saw most of the U.S. from several miles high. In every city she dated young officers whom the reader suspects were likewise small-town youngsters masquerading as sophisticated aeronauts, at least for the duration, and found that the number and variety of uniformed bachelors she met as a WASP made matrimony a bewildering (although inevitable) choice. Correspondence with Ned, her mother, and her grandmother was Marion's anchor to home and stability, but the letters show that as the relationship with her hometown acquaintance deepened, the young WASP agonized over choices about career and marriage. Working out their relationship and their expectations for life in peacetime via letters and the rare visit, both Ned and Marion managed to get through bouts of cold feet to marry, a year and a half after their correspondence began. Fifty-two years, three children, and seven grandchildren later, Marion Stegeman Hodgson describes her courtship as a process of thinking, analyzing, communicating, and controlling one's emotions; of making a commitment, mentally and spiritually, rather than indulging in the heady combination of wartime and hormones. In witnessing this couple work through their indecision over tying the knot, the reader gains some insight into why marriages of that era lasted as long as they did: partners looked beyond physical appearance, were optimistic about their economic future because they believed in their own strengths, and made a commitment for life, rather than lust.

For those who pick up the book for insight into the organization of America's first women military pilots—and why they were disbanded before the war even ended—Hodgson defers to the existing WASP historiography. The group's political history has been fairly well de-

scribed in a cluster of books that includes WASP director Jacqueline Cochran's *The Stars at Noon* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1954), WAF Adela Riek Scharr's two-volume *Sisters in the Sky* (Tucson: Patrice Press, 1986 and 1988), *For God, Country, and the Thrill of It: Woman Airforce Pilots in World War II* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1990) by WASP Ann Noggle, aviation historian Deborah Douglas's *United States Women in Aviation 1940-1985* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1991), and—newest on the list—feminist filmmaker Molly Merryman's *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). Hodgson does place the roots of women military pilots in the formation of the Women's Air Ferry Service (WAFS) under pilot Nancy Love, a small band subsumed by Cochran's WASP. She touches on the internal and external politics of keeping the WASP running, mentioning the conflicts within the Army over whether to militarize the WASP and the reaction of male pilots and the American public to their work.

Militarization was the most significant political question in Hodgson's own experience, and she limits her discussion to what it would have meant in her life. Given their civilian status, the Army provided Hodgson and colleagues no transportation to Sweetwater, no uniforms, no extra pay on missions over enemy territory, no death benefits, and in many instances, no ride home after disbandment. After the war, failure to militarize the WASPs meant they had no medical or GI Bill benefits either. Just as the goings-on in Washington were beyond the ken of the average pilot, so Hodgson leaves the political scrapping largely beyond the pages of her book, and readers see only young Marion's hopes for militarization and a posting near Ned frustrated when Congress refuses to accept the Army's own recommendation to bring the women into the military as pilots.

One reason for this turn-down was that once the need for combat pilots had peaked, males in ferrying service (also civilians) were not happy to be released from flying jobs to be drafted into the infantry or to sit unemployed while a woman was paid to "do a man's job." Some of them made things rough for individual women and the WASP program as a whole, as had certain civilians, members of the press, and military personnel throughout WWII, but particularly after 1943, according to Merryman.

Who precisely orchestrated the campaign to shut down the WASP while America was still at war, and to prevent its incorporation into the armed services (women

were forbidden to fly in the military for decades afterwards) Hodgson does not—perhaps cannot—really say. She places the dissolution of the WASP in the background as a factor in the timing of her marriage and her consequent unemployment as an aviator but offers nothing specific enough to be of use to the historian interested in causation. In contrast, social and political lobbying against the WASP is the focus of Molly Merryman's 1998 book, but as University of South Carolina military historian Reina Pennington pointed out recently in an H-Minerva review of *Clipped Wings*, her analysis comes up short. [1] One problem is Merryman's dismissal of the Cochran-Love rivalry for control of the WAF/WASP, another is her failure to identify the individuals or groups that sponsored the hate campaigns and legislative actions against the WASPs and the proposal to militarize them. Hodgson's book offers the ordinary WASP's-eye view on questions like control, militarization, public support, and male reaction to female pilots. This perspective doesn't answer the big questions, but it tells us how the small ones were handled, for better or for worse.

Hodgson leaves for the epilogue just how totally her flying career was snuffed out, writing, "I didn't get that test pilot's job. Nobody was hiring women when men were available." Some WASPs did transition to positions as non-flying service personnel, and a number of those remained in the military for decades afterward. Scharr, for example, retired as a major in the Air Force Reserve, Noggle as an Air Force captain, and Cochran as a Reserve lieutenant colonel, the highest rank then allowed a woman. Aerospace historians need to ask, though, what effect the presence of grounded female fliers within the military hierarchy—and unusually-credentialed women in private and commercial aviation—had on mid-1970s decisions to admit women to the service academies (something Cochran opposed), open military flying jobs to females, and hire women as NASA scientist astronauts (with the stipulation that they learn to fly military jets). Equally useful would be a comparative study of all WWII pilots, male or female, civilian or military, that would look at the significant differences in entrance require-

ments. Over the course of the war, varying enlistment prerequisites as to age, education, race, and flying time (implying corresponding differences in disposable income, leisure time, and access to schools) resulted in a pilot population that was not as completely upper-middle class as is commonly thought. Class differences among the pilot cohort might well have resolved themselves in a scapegoating of gender as a means to close ranks. Separating the "girls" from the "boys" got one thousand excess pilots out of the cockpit in 1944, and after the war, away from the hot new jets being tested by the Air Force (created in 1947) and from jobs flying for the airlines. Gender was one factor in the creation of the "Right Stuff" mystique, but given postwar fears of renewed depression and unemployment, class and economics deserve closer scrutiny by aerospace historians as a cause for the total gendering of military aviation as a male domain.

The list of books on the WASP is becoming substantial enough by now, however, that a memoir like Marion Stegeman Hodgson's can stand on its own and need not do double duty as a technology history, a statistical compilation, or some such creature. Researchers interested in the nuts-and-bolts of WAF and WASP aircraft, biographies of the many individuals who made the programs work, and the politics that terminated it can turn to other sources. Although research needs to be done on policy decisions that gave rise to the WAF and WASP formation (and merger), to the many causes of the WASP's demise, and to the impact of these military pilots beyond WWII, Hodgson's book can take its place on the shelf as a readable, usable, and insightful memoir for classroom or personal reading.

[1] The review is available at <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=20149892151432>

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