

AirSpace Season 3, Episode 9: Fly Girl

Intro music up then under

Emily:

Welcome to AirSpace, from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Emily.

Matt:

I'm Matt.

Nick:

And I'm Nick. 2020 marks the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, and as the veterans of this war are getting older, we're acknowledging that this will be the last major milestone anniversary for a lot of them and the last opportunity the world will have to benefit directly from the wealth of living memories from that time.

Matt:

Today, we'll speak to one World War II veteran, who couldn't technically call herself a veteran until more than 30 years after her service as a WASP, a member of the Women Air Force Service Pilots. We'll also hear from the daughter of a WASP who grew up to fly commercial aircraft and a pioneering Naval aviator who credits the WASP for breaking some boundaries ahead of her generation.

Emily:

We've been wanting to talk about the WASP on AirSpace for a while, to discuss the huge impact these women had on the war effort and the big legacy they left behind. We'll take a look at the echoes of the WASP throughout military and commercial aviation history today on AirSpace.

Theme under and out

Nick:

For this episode of AirSpace, we'd also like to welcome our first ever guest host, historian and author Dr. Kate Landdeck. Her recent book, *The Women With Silver Wings* is super duper apropos to our conversation today, so we're really excited to have Kate on board.

Kate Landdeck:

Thanks so much. I'm so glad to be here.

Matt:

So, Kate, what got you into researching and writing about the WASP?

Kate Landdeck:

I met them by chance. Back in 1993, I went to an air show and walked up to meet Curtis Pitts, the great aircraft designer, and he introduced me to Caro Bayley Bosca sitting next to him. And she'd flown B-25s

and B-26s in World War II, and I'd never even heard of them. I couldn't believe it. It's like, how is this possible that women flew during World War II and I didn't know anything about it. And that kind of set me on my path.

Archival newsreel clip:

And out of those busses are stepping girls. Girls will give a new angle to an Air Force story.

Emily:

Throughout this episode, you'll hear clips from a film of the time. It's very sexist, and it's in this episode to paint a picture of how these amazing women who were literally fighting a war were talked about and treated at the time.

Archival newsreel clip:

They're WASPs, Women's Air Force Service Pilots.

Nick:

Let's put ourselves back in the shoes of not knowing anything about the WASP. What's the first thing people should know?

Kate Landdeck:

You know, I think the simple version is these were women who flew as civilians for the Army Air Forces. They flew everything the Army Air Forces had during World War II, 77 different types of planes, and they did all the jobs that needed to be done domestically. They ferried planes, they towed targets behind their planes, they flew non-flying personnel. They did practice strafing missions and searchlight missions with the men, and just did anything that needed to be done for the Army Air Forces domestically, these women did. There were 1,102 of them that were those silver wings, so they did everything that needed to be done.

Nell "Mickey" Bright (interview):

We flew the P-47, the two Navy Helldivers, the Douglas A24, and the Curtiss A25 on strafing missions.

Kate Landdeck:

Mickey Bright was in class 43W7, so she was the seventh class who went in 1943, the seventh class out of the 18 of the WASP. And she did a huge variety of jobs and trained in Texas in Sweetwater, and was one of the first groups that really expanded into a lot of different types of jobs. She's 99 years old. She is sharp as a whip and will keep you on your toes.

Nell "Mickey" Bright (interview):

One night we were towing target in a B-25, and the boys were trying to find... they had to find the target with the search lights which they were training on also. And they weren't very good shots and the flack was breaking in front of us. So, we had tell the crew chief to cut the target and move it back to base. We told them that when they learned how to shoot, we'd would come back and fly for them again. That was the only time that I remember... That's the only time that they really came close. That was the night

mission. So we knew what was... Because they were shooting world bullets at the targets, but we knew that, but it was something we needed to do. And we enjoyed it. If you had any fear, you should just quit flying.

Archival newsreel clip:

Each WASP, like other women and other services, has achieved no little thing. She's gone into a man's world because the men needed her. Gone through a tough ordeal as just a girl, and come out a girl pilot for the US Army Air Force.

Emily:

My perception of World War II, having not been there myself, is that a lot of the participation in the war effort, especially by women, was driven predominantly out of need. Right? All of the men left the workforce to go fight in the war, which sort of left a lot of job openings that were then filled by women because they also needed to support the war effort, especially in a lot of manufacturing situations. So, at what point were women called upon? volunteered? I mean, how did it even get started?

Kate Landdeck:

They were brought in to release men to do other flying. Right? They were brought in to do that rather than replacing men. They were going to release men. And we'll see that nuance is important when it comes to the WASP being ended in 1944. But as early as 1939, Jackie Cochran, who goes on to lead the WASP, Jackie was writing to Eleanor Roosevelt saying, "We've got to get the women in here. The war started in Europe, in Poland, we need to get women ready to fight and ready to fly." In 1940, Nancy Love, who's the other woman leader, is pushing and saying, "We're ready. We're ready. We're ready." So, they spend two or three years trying to convince the men in charge of the Army Air Forces that women are there and they're ready, and it's not until September of 1942, that General Henry "Hap" Arnold, the head of all the Army Air Forces, was desperate enough, basically. And that's really what it was, desperate enough for pilots to bring the women in, starting as ferry pilots, and then very quickly spreading into these other types of jobs.

Terry London Rinehart (interview):

Well, they started off just ferrying training airplanes, which most of them were already qualified in. My name is Terry London Reinhart, and I am the daughter of a WASP.

Matt:

Terry's mother, Barbara Erickson London, was part of the original group of women who started out as the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, and she went on to command a group of WASPs stationed at Long Beach, California.

Terry London Rinehart (interview):

As the need grew and so many more airplanes were being produced, that they needed more people to ferry these airplanes to be put on ships to be taken overseas, and they just didn't have enough males to do the job. So, the women as they started off just doing training airplanes, rapidly moved up the ladder in qualifications for pursued airplanes for bombers, and just filled the need as the void appeared. The women were increasing their qualifications and took up the slack and jumped right in there and flew

absolutely everything the military had during the war. The girls were filling this void of having so many airplanes to deliver that they had to get qualified in all of these airplanes. And where my mother was based in Long Beach, was some of the highest producing areas of military airplanes coming off the assembly line, so they had lots and lots of variety of airplanes that needed to be ferried right in the Los Angeles area.

Emily:

I think there's a lot of things that you can train someone up really quickly to be able to do. Piloting is not one of those things. Right? You don't just send somebody in for a week long intensive training and they come out on the other side being able to do these things and do them well. And so, I think that's especially interesting that they had to fight so hard and for so long in order to participate in an effort where they were truly needed, especially when you talk about skilled work.

Kate Landdeck:

You look at early letters and diaries of the women and the WAFS, those first ferry pilots, or in those early classes, and they are very aware of the fact that they're being watched very closely. And that if they fail, it all fails. And even throughout the whole program, the women were aware of the fact that they were being watched and judged as women, besides just wanting pass and to fly and not wash out of the training. But those early classes of women, especially, knew that they had a heavy weight on their shoulders of women ever flying for the Army Air Forces again.

Nick:

So, who wasn't a WASP? This was a group of trailblazers and pioneers. Were there any groups that were excluded?

Kate Landdeck:

Yeah. And I think that's a really important part of the story, Nick, that not everybody who applied got to be a part of it. Over 25,000 women applied to this program, which that number always blows me out of the water, because it's so many. But again, they grew up in the age of Earhart and Lindbergh, and everybody wanted to fly. It was the golden age of aviation that we were coming out of. And there were a lot of people who were not qualified. They didn't have any flight time or things like that, or they were too old. You had to be between 21 and 35, or 18 and a half, eventually.

I think the most obvious group that was left out, though, is Black women pilots. There were a number of African-American women who trained with the Tuskegee Airmen in Tuskegee and had qualified to serve as pilots. There was a great flying organization in Chicago of Black pilots. I've found the names of at least six women who applied. There may be more, but that's all I found so far. And they were fully qualified, and they got a form letter back, a couple of them did get interviews with Jackie Cochran, where she said, "Look, I'm sorry, I can't let you in. You're Black, and we're segregated. And we're training in the South. And the military is segregated." Right? It doesn't desegregate till 1948. And so, these women just didn't get the chance to serve their country in the way that they wanted to and were qualified to simply because of their race. Where Black men who were qualified as pilots were able to go through the Tuskegee Airmen, the women just had that one strike against them too many being women and Black.

Emily:

Yeah, and it's incredible, right? You can't be a WASP because you're Black, but you can't be at Tuskegee Airmen because you're a woman. And I think how frustrating that is because of the need for talented pilots, especially in this moment, and not only did women have to fight to convince everybody that they were just as capable and had something to contribute, but to then be told, "But not you, still not you." It's a disappointing part of the story, but it's also a part of the story that doesn't get repeated enough to be really clear that it's okay to celebrate these accomplishments, but it's important to also recognize who wasn't included.

Kate Landdeck:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, these women weren't even given a chance to try, and that's the tragedy of it. They were qualified. A couple of them, I've seen their qualifications, and they're fully qualified. There's no reason they couldn't have started training, except for their race, and I just think that you're exactly right. That's one of those parts of the story that's just not told because the women who did it are inspiring, you still have to recognize the limitations that were a part of the program, as well.

Nick:

Yeah. It's easy to contextualize it in the time because of the systemic racism of the armed services then, but obviously, we want to acknowledge that a lot of that still does exist and that decisions on the parts of leadership within the armed services, but also within the WASP program itself, contributed to excluding perfectly qualified pilots. It's worth noting, however, just from the conversations that we've had, that some of these pilots recognized that they were making history and breaking barriers and saw kindred spirits in the Tuskegee Airmen themselves. As Mickey told us, she actually, not worked directly with them, but she was stationed with a unit of Tuskegee Airmen at the time. And they found common ground and kinship in the idea that the armed services really wanted neither one of them, but that they were going to persevere anyway. And that was a nice moment in the interview.

Nell "Mickey" Bright (interview):

We became good friends with them. They were very nice guys. There were 20 of them, and of course, when we first got there, the commanding officer didn't want the Tuskegee, and he didn't want the women either. But he got them. We got to be very good friends with them. Most of them had their wives there with them. So, they were kind of an experiment the way we were.

Kate Landdeck:

Even in the later years, you see them, they put their booths next to each other at air shows and things like that, and spent time together and gave presentations together. And you really see a real bond between many of the Tuskegee Airmen and the WASPs, because you're right, I mean, they were both considered experiments by the Army Air Forces at the time. Could Black men really do this? Could women really do this? And so, they saw that bond, and of course the Airmen, the women have so much respect for them and the work that they did. But yeah, it's another part of the story, for sure.

Archival newsreel clip:

No time to waste. Everywhere they're badly needed for ferrying duty so that the men trained in planing can go off the fight, while WASPs help get their ships started on the road overseas. They're the reason for the WASPs.

Matt:

The WASP were denied militarization and unceremoniously disbanded at the end of 1944, before the war was even over. So, I mean, why were the WASP disbanded in this way?

Kate Landdeck:

It's complicated as everything in the WASP story is, but in the end, the effort from the very beginning was to bring them into the military. They thought that the women, we'd come in in September and would have 90 days of training, kind of a probationary period, which is exactly what they did with men. It got complicated in part because Jackie Cochran wanted them to be segregated from men. She wanted to have control over them to protect the women, that kind of thing. So, there was an attempt to have a separate bill to make the women part of the Army Air Forces proper. That bill traveled through Congress for months, almost the entirety of the WASP experience. And in June 1944, it finally came to a head before Congress. Of course, this is days after we've invaded Normandy, this is months after the Air Force and the Navy have let go a lot of civilian male pilots they were using as flight instructors, who are now eligible for the ground Army draft when we're preparing to invade Japan.

And so, there was a huge push and a huge backlash against the women among these male flight instructors. Why are you paying all these girls to fly when we're already qualified? A lot of really nasty sexism in the newspapers about the women. And then, at the same time, you have the reality that they were brought in to release men for flying duties in combat, not replace men. By the fall of 1944, the men are coming back, they're surviving. The P-51 has the long range fuel tanks, the B-17s are getting escorted all the way into Berlin to bomb. Our pilots are surviving, and they're coming back. And so, now we don't need women to release the men any more. Now, the women are getting in the way, the men can have those jobs. So, it was this combination of sexism, I guess it all comes down to, where they no longer needed the women to release the men, and so they announced that they'd disband them and they just sent them home.

Nell "Mickey" Bright (interview):

We were really still needed, but there were lots of planes left on the ground that weren't ferried, there were lots of missions at our place that were not flown, but that was what they ordered. We weren't too happy about it, but we couldn't do anything about it.

Matt:

Barbara Erickson London was ferrying planes from California when news came through that the WASP would be disbanded.

Terry London Rinehart (interview):

I think she was crushed. She was devastated. My mother was the commander of the squadron at the base in Long Beach, and I think at the time she might've had 60 women beneath her who were, almost on a daily basis, flying an aircraft, a different aircraft every day across the country, delivering them to Newark or the different bases to be shipped overseas. And when they disbanded them, it was unceremoniously one day you're working, and the next day you're not.

And that day that they sent them home in December, there were 65 airplanes parked at Long Beach airport where she was the commander, and 65 airplanes did not get delivered that day and for weeks to come, maybe even months to come. Because the men who they put in to replace them were

maybe qualified in one or two aircraft, which was normal in the military back then, but the women flying in the ferry command were qualified in all the airplanes. So, every day when they showed up to the office to get assigned an airplane, they didn't know what airplane they were going to get assigned or where they were going to take it, but they were qualified in everything from fighters to bombers and training airplanes. And that just wasn't the case of the men that came in to replace them. So, they were devastated.

They offered to stay for a dollar a day, and the government still said, "No, you have to go home. You have to return to whatever you were doing." Not even a thank you, nothing, no ceremony, no nothing. The girls got together the night before they were disbanded and had a toast, and that was it. It was horrible. I think that was one of the most devastating days of her life, actually.

Archival newsreel clip:

Very deftly and seriously, the WASPs, girls like Mary Abbott, maybe a little younger, maybe older, are willing to plow into as rugged a six months stretch as anything handed to women in the whole war effort. Map reading and physics, navigation and code.

Emily:

I remember reinvestigating for myself who the WASP were and what they had accomplished when I saw an article on NPR about how the WASP had just achieved the right, or the privilege, of being buried at Arlington. And it was at that moment when I had this aha where it was like, "Wait a minute. What?" And sent me down the rabbit hole of the notion that not only was the job of a WASP not safe and not easy, and in fact dangerous and in many cases very dangerous. They weren't given the same rights as men who came home as war veterans because WASP were not quote-unquote "veterans" because they were not enlisted, they were not military personnel. They were civilians, and it has taken them decades to achieve the same recognition as the men they worked with.

Kate Landdeck:

Your emotion is common. You know, this idea of, "Wait a minute. What? What?" The WASP were in this weird position throughout their whole time during the war of being civilians, but they were treated like they were military because they expected to be part of the military. And then it all kinda fell apart right at the end. There was even an effort right after the WASP were disbanded in '44 to get them recognized as veterans even for a day because they didn't get any medical benefits. Several of them had hearing damage, and some had been in crashes and had long-term injuries, and they didn't get any medical benefits for that. They didn't get the GI Bill, they didn't get any of those things that if they'd been part of the military, they would have gotten.

What happens is a lot of these women spend the 1950s and '60s serving in the military as part of the reserves, and they realized their war time service isn't going to count towards retirement. In the 1970s, the military, especially the Air Force, then, comes out and says, "For the first time ever, we're going to let women fly our planes." There'd been a few WASPs who'd been fighting to be recognized as veterans for years, but starting in the '70s, the rest of them just got pissed off. You know, they really get mad, and they just can't believe they've been forgotten. And those 38 who died have been forgotten.

Trish Beckman (interview):

Well, when we got selected, it was basically like everybody had forgotten about the WASP.

Emily:

So, I had the opportunity to talk to Trish Beckman, who was a navigator in the Navy and really recognized the path that the WASP paved for her military career.

Trish Beckman (interview):

I am Trish Beckman, commander, US Navy, retired.

Kate Landdeck:

Trish is part of what we called gen two, the second generation of women aviators. They were part of that first generation after the WASP. So, the WASP ended in '44, it's not until the early 1970s that there's a group that comes in and gets to be a part of it again. And Trish is part of that really trailblazing group of women from 1973 to '93, who really broke some serious glass ceilings when it comes to military aviation.

Trish Beckman (interview):

They, like all the rest of the greatest generation, went back home, and they didn't talk about it. They just did what they needed to do to save the free world, and they were happy with that part. But when the Air Force said, "We're going to train women pilots to fly military aircraft for the first time," and they said, "No, you're not. We've done this before," and the whole world got to know that, who the WASP were and what they had done.

Kate Landdeck:

So, they start this huge grassroots effort, and it's amazing to really break down... This is before technology. There's no change.org. This is women going with a piece of paper to sit in front of the movie Star Wars and get signatures to say, "Support these women." And to have this huge fight where they've got these calling trees, where they're all calling each other and they're using The Stars and Stripes to inform each other, it's just this incredible grassroots effort to get recognized as veterans.

Nell "Mickey" Bright (interview):

All of us sent anything that we had, Barry Goldwater was taking care, was doing it, was introducing the bill and everything in Congress. We sent Barry everything that we had that would help him. I had my 201 file. I don't know why I had it, but when we left El Paso, I think they were going to just throw all our files away. And we said, "No, we'd like to have them," so they gave them to us. So, Barry used that. Now, I was in Arizona then and working and had kids and everything. I couldn't go to Washington DC, but the girls that lived on the East coast, they established an office there in DC, and they were right there working on it. And then the ones of us that were not able to be in DC working on it, we helped out in any way that we could.

Kate Landdeck:

But even then the way the bill they achieved in the 1977 was written, they achieved veteran status for the purposes of the Veterans Administration, which meant that they got a flag on their coffin and they could go to VA hospitals.

Terry London Rinehart (interview):

It didn't give them very many benefits. It gave them things like they could go to college under the GI Bill, but most of them were in their 70s at the time. They could put a flag on their coffin, they could go to a military hospital for the first time. So, it was some acknowledgement. It wasn't a lot.

Kate Landdeck:

Which was huge because they all needed hearing aids, and to have a chance to get help from the VA was important. But they still didn't count that time they served in the war towards their retirement, they still didn't get veterans preference. And then the fight to get back into Arlington, Elaine Harmon was the WASP who pushed the fight to get back into Arlington National Cemetery. She was dead. She died in 2015, but her family wanted to honor her wish and put her into Arlington. But the Secretary of the Army runs Arlington National Cemetery, not the VA, and so the Secretary of the Army said, "No, this group is no longer eligible to be placed in Arlington National Cemetery."

And I think an important little piece of this WASP story is when they became veterans in 1977, there was a whole group of tagalongs that hung onto their bill. So, the Merchant Marines who were civilians in World War II, despite the great risks they took, they were brought in under that same bill. The female telephone operators that served in Europe in World War I were brought in on that bill. And so, the Secretary of the Army said, "Anybody brought in under this bill is no longer eligible," which means the Merchant Marines were no longer eligible, those telephone operators who were long gone, but they wouldn't have been eligible, this whole, long group. So, the family of Elaine Harmon fought to get a bill passed in Congress. I helped write the bill, it was a great honor to be a part of it, to admit the WASP into Arlington National Cemetery.

And we had a heck of a party in 2016, September 2016, when Elaine got buried. It was a lot of fun, which I know is a strange thing to say for a funeral, but there was a lot of singing and carrying on and Elaine would have had a blast at it. A lot of the WASP fight because of those 38 who died. You know, those 38 whose families got a \$250 civil service death benefit rather than \$10,000 Army Air Forces benefit. Those families of the 38 who didn't get to put the star in the window. That's who you fight to remember, is those women, and so they did. They fought all along, and it's just been amazing to watch.

Emily:

Well, and it's incredible to me listening to your telling of that story that not only did they achieve veteran's benefits with an asterisk, their additional rights were at the mercy of whoever was in charge in a particular decade, which I can't imagine being a human who sits in one of those positions and is like, "You know what? I don't know if you guys were important enough."

Kate Landdeck:

And that's exactly right. That was the fight in 1944, was if we recognize you, we have to recognize everyone. It's the Pandora's Box. And if you look at the testimony in the 1970s, the people who fought against the WASP being recognized as veterans, that was their exact argument, was it's going to open up the door where all these other groups are going to have to be let, and we're going to have to recognize them all. And the national economy is in a mess, and we can't afford it. The WASP response was, "Let them all fight for their own. If they deserved it, they deserved it. But we deserve it." And they stood up for themselves.

Archival newsreel clip:

Nobody should ever tell a WASP that flying's not a woman's job. They wouldn't believe it, any more than if it were said a girl can't be a good flyer and a woman, a woman at the same time.

Matt:

So, the flying that we've been talking about up to this point wasn't really combat flying. It wasn't until the '90s that women were allowed to fly in combat missions, and the laws and policies varied across the branches. And it seems like a lot of things started changing, though, in the '90s.

Trish Beckman (interview):

Congress took it upon themselves, the House decided, "Hey, we're going to repeal these aviation combat exclusion laws," and the Senate looked like they were willing, they were going to do it. So, we went there, we're in our uniforms walking the halls of the Senate, and they went along, they put in the bill to repeal those combat exclusion laws.

Emily:

It had never occurred to me to think about the fact that it took all this additional time before women were allowed into these roles that they'd been... I mean, they'd been pushing on that ceiling since they were WASP, and if not before.

Matt:

And how much can we attribute to the legacy of the WASP in talking about the accomplishments of that second generation of women aviators in the military?

Kate Landdeck:

Right. I think the WASP themselves would say nothing, because they were new battles. But the women I've talked to, people like Trish and some of the others of that second generation, the WASP mentored them.

Trish Beckman (interview):

You know, I had a cadre of women to look up to and that I could say, if the guys were saying women can't do this, which they did regularly, I could say, "Oh, but the WASP did, and I'm doing it now."

Kate Landdeck:

They created this group called the Women Military Aviators, this organization that was made up of WASP and modern women, and they befriended them. And they were a group of women who that second generation who was making those fights and having those great accomplishments could really look to and have a common language and have some common experiences. And the WASP were so proud of them. They were so proud of them. They applauded them. They stood for them. They loved that generation of Trishes. So, I think that's where that legacy is, is that belief in them that they could do it and that encouragement of them to keep on with the good fight that made the biggest difference for that generation.

Terry London Rinehart (interview):

The WASP were such an inspiration to all the women who are flying in the military now, and I think that they're following in a legacy that really is very hard to come up to the standards that these women had during World War II. And my mother always said that, very humbly again, that she didn't really think that the gold medal should come to us, it should come to the women who are flying in Afghanistan and Iraq now and who are going into combat. And she thought that WASP deserve the recognition, but the girls who are in the military now we're doing so much more. And for those women flying in the military that heard that and heard the sentiments of all these women who looked up at the girls flying now, thinking, "You've really come full circle, because we flew domestically, but you're flying all over the world and fighters and going to war, defending the country." And so, I think it was a mutual admiration society. They both very much supported each other and inspired each other.

Nell "Mickey" Bright (interview):

I get letters, for instance, on my birthday. I had several cards from the pilots that are flying now thanking me again and my group and the WASP for paving the way for them to be able to be an Air Force pilot. And we get that from when we meet young ladies that are flying today, that they say, "If it hadn't been for you girls, we wouldn't be flying today either." And of course, when we were flying, we just loved flying, we had no idea that we were making history or anything else, and that was not what we were there for. We just thought it was a wonderful opportunity for us, but in the process, I guess, we did make history.

Emily:

I think what's interesting to me is this path has been long and hard fought, but I think it's still staggering that only 6 percent of Air Force pilots are actually women. Going on this journey through this episode today of sort of what it took to first get the military to accept female pilots, and I use accept very loosely, very loosely, as we've talked about, to kind of get to this point of knowing that women can fly anything a man can, and by can fly, I mean allowed to fly. But when you break down things into the sort of bits and pieces, those numbers, the road is just, feels, like it's a lot longer in sort of the front direction rather than in the backwards direction. And it's insane to me that these women who were risking so much, who were being so badass, by being these really accomplished pilots, helping to fight a war, were expected to just go back home into their kitchens to take care of their families after the WASP were disbanded.

Archival newsreel clip:

So long, ladies. Go to it. Some day, you'll be able to sit down in the evening with your husbands, who will probably be flyers, and remind them that during the war, you did your part five. Keep them flying Fifinella.

Nick:

So, WASP are veterans, WASP are eligible for benefits and full military burials, and they've received a long overdue recognition in the form of something like the Congressional Gold Medal. What's left? What glass ceilings are there still to fly through?

Kate Landdeck:

For me, I think that the idea is to stop having firsts. Right? To stop having the first woman this and the first woman that, just to have enough women a part of it where they're just another pilot, which has been the goal of all these women military pilots I've met. They just wanted to be pilots. They just wanted

to be a part of the group and to do their part for the war. And we go from 25,000 women applying to the WASP to today only 7 percent of all pilots are women. Where's that disconnect? And I think some of that's a lack of imagination, the idea that airplanes aren't seen as fun as they are. You know, I'm a private pilot, and it's so much fun to take off a plane and to land it again. And it gives you so much confidence, and it's just beautiful up there. And to get more people flying in general, I think, is an important thing.

I think one way that we could really increase the number of women flying, and something that happened in the 1930s and '40s, was a government program. That Civilian Pilot Training Program just before the war increased the number of women pilots in this country by thousands. And if we had something like that today, that would really, I think, increase the number of women and minorities exponentially.

Emily:

Right? And I like your explanation of it's sort of a lack of imagination. And growing up, this wasn't a career choice. Right? Like, what a career looked like was something that fit into a very small, very square box. I think there almost needs to be more of a conversation of, what do careers look like? Being able to see what all those careers look like that don't fit into that small, square box, I think, is a really powerful story that isn't being told, even though we're trying to bring more diversity to STEM fields. Just knowing that those fields exist as career paths, I think, is a huge part of that hurdle.

Matt:

Yeah. And you know we talk a lot about firsts and we celebrate firsts, but the type of first that we're talking about, today in particular, really speak more to problems with organizations, problems with the culture in general, that don't allow people to imagine certain careers, or that restrict people from those careers or from serving in various different parts of the armed services, as specific to today's episode. But really, what these women accomplished means so much more because of the obstacles that they had to overcome. It really is annoying in some ways that they have to wear that mantle of first woman, because what that really means is that they put up with a lot of crap along the way to get to where they got that had nothing to do with their talents.

Exit music up and under

Emily:

That's it for today's episode of AirSpace. A huge thanks to Dr. Katherine Landdeck for joining us as our first ever guest host. We were so excited to have you and be able to talk to you about this episode that we have been wanting to do for years. So, thank you so much for helping us make this happen.

Kate Landdeck:

Well, thank you for inviting me. This has been a lot of fun. You guys are a blast.

Nick:

Thank you for joining us, and if anyone would like to join in the mission to make sure that no one walks into a room and nobody knows who the WASP are, you could start with Dr. Landdeck's book, *The Women With Silver Wings*, available now wherever you buy books.

Emily:

Like your small, local bookshops.

Nick:

Oh yes. Available wherever you buy independent books.

Matt:

AirSpace is from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. You can follow us on Twitter or Instagram @airspacepod. Special thanks to the WASP archive at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas for the archival audio from the WASP training video you heard in this episode. AirSpace is produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart. Mixed by Tarek Fouda. Special thanks to Andrew Fletcher. Distributed by PRX.

Music up and out

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