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ASEN 3046-001

April 3, 2017

Jacqueline Cochran

Significant Impact:

Jacqueline Cochran was one of the pioneers for women in aviation, who not only broke through the glass ceiling for women in aviation but flew through it at great heights, distances, and speeds. She was extremely influential as the creator and director of WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots). She was the first woman to go supersonic and break the sound barrier, the first woman to take off and land on an aircraft carrier, the first woman to pilot a bomber across the North Atlantic, the first woman to successfully complete a blind instrument only landing and much more. She continues to hold more distance and speed records today than any pilot living or dead. Her contributions of women in the air force had a significant impact on the war, aviation, military and women pilots. Prior to Jacqueline Cochran’s push for the Airforce to employ women during World War II for noncombat positions, there was a shortage of men able to fight in the war, because they needed men to also work in the noncombat positions. This caused pilot shortages. With a push from Cochran to Lieutenant Colonel Robert Olds, she began to do immense research regarding the feasibility of women’s aviation skills and if they would have a desire to work for the Airforce. With Cochran’s background in the British Air Transport Auxiliary and being part of “Wings for Britain”, she knew women were successfully used in the British Airforce and that America could benefit from doing the same. Within a year of Cochran issuing the idea, in September of 1942 the Women’s Auxiliary Firing Squadron (WAFS) to ferry military crafts. Cochran unpleased with this knowing that women pilots could do more than ferry pilots pushed further and got the Women’s Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) created. By 1943 these two organizations were merged to create Women Airforce Service Pilots with Cochran as the director. Because of the creation of WASP over 25,000 women applied to be a part of this revolutionary new organization for the military. 1074 women were chosen and ended the pilot shortage freeing up male pilots to go into combat. These thousand women were the first women to fly American military aircraft and flew over sixty million miles in every type of military aircraft.

Background:

Jacqueline Cochran truly changed the game when it came to military Aviation for women. You cannot discuss Cochran without realizing that a significant portion of her success came from her husband’s wealth that allowed her to do such things in aviation. Floyd Odlum was a significantly wealthy man who gave Cochran the original idea of flying to get an edge up on her competition, in regards to selling cosmetics on the road. She quickly fell in love with flying in 1932 and earned her pilot's license in three weeks. On Cochran’s first flight after receiving her license two days prior, she learned to read maps and the compass as she flew from New York to Montreal, Canada. Being a competitive person and truly obsessed with flying Cochran spent the next years of her life perfecting flying, by practicing every flight maneuver possible. This competitive aspect came in handy when she began Air Racing in 1934. Her first race MacRobertson London-to-Australia air race which she flew one of the most dangerous aircraft, the Gee Bee. She had immense struggles throughout the competition and did not win. By 1935 she flew in the Bendix transcontinental for the first time and in 1937 she won the women’s division and third place in the overall competition in the Bendix transcontinental. In 1938 she placed first in this important race. Because of all this Cochran began being noticed for her skills in aviation. In 1937 she was awarded her first Harmon International Trophies of the International League of Aviators as the outstanding woman flyer in the world, she would earn a total of 15 by the time of her death. In 1938 she received the General William E. Mitchell Memorial Award as the person making the greatest contribution to aviation for that year. This all was happening within six years of her earning her pilot's license and her first time flying. She continued to break records for women in aviation and started to use her influence for good in regards of World War II with her desire to bring women into the Airforce to “free a man to fight,” discussed above.

Challenges and Barriers:

Cochran grew up in poverty. She overcame this with her desire to become one of the greats, which early in her career meant she would become one of the greatest hairdressers. She did this and by doing so it allowed her to mingle with affluent individuals and the finding of her husband Floyd Odlum. This passion and push that she harbored during her hairdressing career not only allowed her to create her own cosmetics company, it also affected her flying career. With this strong desire to be the best at everything she did, she was able to become one of the best and most influential people in aviation.

One of the largest challenges Cochran faced with her vision of creating and directing a women’s section of the Airforce was the systemic sexism in America and especially the military. Not only this but at the same time as she was working in Britain to make her dream a reality, Nancy Harkness Love had been tasked with training women for the ferrying division of the Air Forces and created the Woman Airforce Ferrying Squadron. This did not stop Cochran, as she knew that women could do much more for the Airforce than just ferrying and wanted to continue to push their abilities forward. She campaigned again for her vision of women doing a variety of roles for the Airforce and because of her determination, Women’s Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) was founded with her as the leader. It was not until 1977 when WASP was given true military status, a hard fought battle between the military and the women of WASP, another large challenge she faced. Because WASP was not military for a long time the women who helped the military in WASP during this time did not receive the same benefits as men who were doing the same. For the thirty-eight WASP fliers who lost their lives during the war, they were sent home at the families expense without any military honor. These women were not allowed to have a U.S. flag placed upon their coffin, a common honor for those who die in the military (Bohn).

Lasting Impact:

Jaqueline Cochran’s true legacy lies in the difference she made for women in aviation and in the military. For thirty-five years all records regarding WASP were sealed and little was known about the important contributions that it made. In 1977 these records were unsealed. It was not until 1984 that the women of WASP services would be considered “active duty” and thus allow them to become Veterans of World War II. In the same year each WASP woman was awarded the World War II Victory Medal and for those who served for more than one year were also awarded American Theater Ribbon/American Campaign Medal. Many of the women of WASP were unable to see this and their services being recognized as they had passed away. With the records unsealed the data showed that when women were given the same training as men in regards to military piloting, they were as capable as men in non-combat flying.

On July 1, 2009, President Barack Obama and the United States Congress awarded the WASP the Congressional Gold Medal. President Obama stated "The Women Airforce Service Pilots courageously answered their country's call in a time of need while blazing a trail for the brave women who have given and continue to give so much in service to this nation since. Every American should be grateful for their service, and I am honored to sign this bill to finally give them some of the hard-earned recognition they deserve."

The importance of WASP set a precedence for all women in military aviation. With the push from women aviators like Jacqueline Cochran and the women of WASP, they were able to start the push for greater air equality in the military. Without these women, women like Lt. Cmdr. Barbara Allen Rainey who became the Navy’s first woman pilot, Katherine Bessette Carl who became the first female U.S. Air Force Aircraft Maintenance Specialist in the School of Applied Aerospace Services, Sheppard AFB, Wichita Falls, Texas, Sally D. Woolfok becomes the Army’s first female military pilot to fly Bell UH-1, Janna Lambine becomes the U.S. Coast Guard’s first woman aviator, and many others would not have had the same opportunities as they did. With every step forward to air equality, we must look back and thank those original pioneering women who began the push for equality. Jaqueline Cochran had a huge importance on aviation, the military, and equality. She was truly a pioneer who broke through the glass ceiling and forever changed the field of aviation.

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