Ultius, Inc.

Writing Samples

31 August, 2016

Women Pilots during World War II

It is a truism, of course, that the military has been seen for a long time the world over as a masculine profession, where women could and should only have a marginal role (if any role at all). In this context, it will be interesting to discuss the role of women at war—and more specifically, the role of women pilots during World War II. This is the discussion that will be taken up by the present sample essay provided by Ultius. The essay will begin with a general discussion of the role of women within the military profession in the modern world. From this point, it will consider the specific role of women air force pilots within the United States during World War II. Next, the essay will compare this role to the role of women during World War II within the nation of Japan. Finally, the fourth part will reflect on current changes in laws regarding the role of women within the American military.

**Role of Women in the Military**

To start with, it is worth pointing out the fact that historically, the military profession has very much been seen as one that is primarily reserved for men. As Goldman, for example, has written:

"Traditionally, in the United States military, women are excluded from direct combat roles and from significant assignments in administration. In fact, since the end of World War II, the armed forces have not even filled the 2% authorized quota for women. In the U.S. forces they are entirely volunteers, although the basic military structure for manpower has rested on a draft system" (892).

Clearly, there have not been many women in the American military, and there have been no real social or political forces in play to try and compel women to join the military in the same way that such forces exist for men.

Moreover, it would seem to be clear enough that this is not really an anomaly but rather a historical fact that has been shared by many diverse societies over a great deal of space and time. That is, within most cultures, there would seem to have existed a sort of assumption that it is "natural" for men to work within the military profession in a way that it would not natural for women to do the same. This is related to the historical characterization of women as homemakers and caregivers, with the likewise characterization of dealing with the problems of broader society (including war) as inherently masculine in nature. Whether there is truth or justice in such a conception of gender is a question that falls beyond the scope of this essay. For present purposes, the only important point is that there has historically existed a long-held notion that the military was really no place for a woman. In this context, if women did end up playing an important role within the military context, this would have additional significance simply by way of contrast against common expectations.

**Women Airforce Service Pilots**

It is time now to turn attention to the role of women pilots within the United States during World War II—more specifically, to the group known as the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP, for short). According to the Air Force Historical Support Division, this is how the WASP first came into being:

"In September 1942, after several times rejecting proposals to use qualified women pilots for flying duties, Army Airforce Commanding General Henry H. Arnlod agreed to form two groups designed to help meet the need for pilots to ferry aircraft" (paragraph 1).

This eventually led to training programs for women pilots and the consolidation of the group that came to be known as WASP. Over time, these women proved that they could become just as skilled at flying the existing aircraft of their time as their male counterparts, including the relatively bulkier and more cumbersome ones.

This is how Stamberg has described the role of the women of WASP:

"A few more than 1,100 young women, all civilian volunteers, . . . ferried new planes long distances from factories to military bases and departure points across the country. They tested newly overhauled planes. And they towed targets to give ground and air gunners training shooting—with live ammunition" (paragraph 4).

In general, these were women who had a passion for flying independent from their role in WASP. That is, they showed up to WASP training already in possession of an adequate knowledge of aviation, and they were simply utilizing this civilian skill within a new military context. By all indications, these were very brave women who were not afraid of the dangers inherent in aviation and who were committed to pushing the boundaries of the gender roles of their contemporary society.

It is worth noting, however, that the women of WASP were not in fact permitted to engage in actual combat roles. Rather, as the Air Force Historical Support Division has somewhat laconically noted, "The Army Air Corps had from the start intended to use women pilots to free up male pilots for combat roles" (paragraph 2). Likewise, the WASP program came under threat when it began to seem that the program could be responsible for women actually replacing men within military jobs. WASP first came into being because there was a shortage of pilots in the American military, and the military thus figured that by finding women who could fulfill the non-combat piloting roles, they could free up men to focus on the actual combat piloting roles. The intention was never to give women equal opportunity to men, or to have women do the work instead of men. In other words, WASP emerged as a result of strictly pragmatic considerations and had pretty much nothing to do with any sort of ideology of feminism. If anything, the basic premises of the existence of the program was diametrically opposed to any such ideology.

This disparity can be seen in the burial rights accorded to the women of WASP. As the WITW Staff has indicated:

"Because the missions the Women Air Force Service pilots, or WASPs, flew were non-combat flights, their status as veterans was a matter of debate for decades. . . . President Obama signed a bill into law clearing the way for WASPs' remains to be buried in Arlington along with their fellow heroes from WWII and other wars" (paragraph 2).

The fact that this was ever an issue at all, however, indirectly calls attention to the fact that the WASP program was conceptualized in such a way that it was not meant to be a matter of women's rights, or acknowledging that the role played by the women of WASP was as serious or legitimate as the role played by their male counterparts. Within a pragmatic situation that gave women the concrete opportunity to participate in the military, then, one could still perceive the underlying ideological supposition that the military was in the end not really or truly a place for women.

**Role Comparison**

The role of American women pilots during World War II can be meaningful compared against the role of women during the war in two other nations: Japan, and Russia. In principle, Japan had no role at all for women pilots within its war effort. As Kageyama and Toda have suggested, for example, the primary role of women in the war related to flying was to say goodbye to men kamikaze pilots, through among other things the construction of headbands for the pilots as displays of moral support. This makes sense, insofar as Japan was a quite traditional society and could thus be expected to display the same gender roles that have characterized almost all traditional societies for a very long time. Among other things, these gender roles would suggest that the woman's place is in the home, and certainly not in an airplane that is engaged in war efforts.

On the other hand, it would seem that the women of Russia had even greater opportunities within their air force than did American women in the same. Significantly, Russian women were allowed to participate in every role available within the air force, including combat roles. As Dowdy has written:

"From mechanics to navigators, pilots and officers, the 588th regiment was composed entirely of women. The 588th was so successful that the Germans came to fear them, calling them Nachtexen—night witches" (paragraph 3).

The fact that Russia was even more progressive in this regard than America could perhaps be attributed at least in part to the Communist ideology of that nation, which is premised on the abolition of all traditional forms of social roles in favor of a rigorous concept of the human being as a worker or the member of a given class. In any event, one could sketch a spectrum here, with Japan being at the end of extreme conservatism and Russia being at the end of extreme progressivism with respect to the role of women pilots, with America actually being somewhere in the middle.

**Current Changes in Role**

Recent laws within America seem to have opened up actual combat positions to women for the first time in national history. Chappell has described this shift with the following words:

"The formal process to open combat jobs to women began in January 2013; in finishing that process, [Defense Secretary] Carter acknowledged that in recent years, U.S. women have fought—and sometimes given their lives—in combat posts in Iraq and Afghanistan" (paragraph 2).

This shift of policy has had the full support of President Obama, who has consistently expressed the view that this is in fact a matter of gender equality and equal opportunity. In short, the current changes directly contest the notion that the military is no place for a women and affirm the idea that if a woman has the desire and ability to do a given job, then the fact of her being a woman should not be a barrier against her fulfilling that role.

Relative to the mindset that prevailed regarding women pilots during World War II, this current change could be read as a progressive ideological change. Again, during World War II, even with the institution of WASP, there was no basic idea that women were equals to men within the military, or that it was appropriate for women to fulfill jobs within the military that could instead be fulfilled by men; the only reason WASP came into being was that there was a shortage of men pilots, which led to the idea of women pilots fulfilling lesser, non-combat work in order to free up the men for the more important jobs. The current change, however, is premised on not pragmatism but rather ideology. That is, there is no pragmatic reason at this time why it would be necessary for women to serve in the military, in the way that there was during World War II and the time of WASP. Rather, the idea now is entirely ideological in nature: the idea is that women should simply be granted equal rights and opportunities to men, which includes being able to freely serve in all posts within the military.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the present essay has consisted of a discussion of women pilots during World War II. After providing an overview of the history of women in the military, the essay turned to the women of the group called WASP, compared this role of women pilots to the role in other nations at the time, and finally reflected on current changes in the role of the women within the American military. A key point that has been made here is that while WASP gave ambitious and adventurous women a fantastic opportunity to serve in the military and assist with the American war effort, the ideological significance of the group should not be overstated: the group was created for pragmatic reasons, and it was not undergirded by any sort of real idea of gender equality. Such an idea is only now in the process of being implemented and changing women's roles within the military.

Works Cited

Airforce Historical Service Division. "Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)." Author, 8 Sep. 2015. Web. 31 Aug. 2016.

<http://www.afhso.af.mil/topics/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=15244>.

Chappell, Bill. "Pentagon Says Women Can Now Serve in Front-Line Ground Combat Positions." *NPR.* 3 Dec. 2015. Web. 31 Aug. 2016. <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo- way/2015/12/03/458319524/pentagon-will-allow-women-in-frontline-ground-combat- positions>.

Dowdy, Linda. "The Night Witches." *Seize the Sky.* 20 Jul. 2006.

<http://www.seizethesky.com/nwitches/nitewtch.html>.

Goldman, Nancy. "The Changing Role of Women in the Armed Forces." *American Journal of Sociology* 78.4 (1973): 892-911. Print.

Kageyama, Yuri, and Miki Toda. "Japanese Girl's WWII Job: Waving Goodbye to Kamikaze Pilots." 3 Aug. 2015. Web. 31 Aug. 2016. <http://www.japantoday.com/

category/national/view/japanese-girls-wwii-job-waving-goodbye-to-kamikaze-pilots>.

Stamberg, Susan. "Female WWII Pilots: The Original Fly Girls." *NPR.* 9 Mar. 2010. Web. 31 Aug. 2016. <http://www.npr.org/2010/03/09/123773525/female-wwii-pilots-the-original- fly-girls>.

WITW Staff. "Women WWII Pilots Now to Be Buried in Arlington Cemetery." Women in the World, 23 May 2016. Web. 31 Aug. 2016. <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/

womenintheworld/2016/05/23/women-wwii-pilots-now-allowed-to-be-buried-in- arlington-cemetery/>.

Citation information

You are free to use this sample work for reference and research purposes. However, you **must cite it** and provide attribution to the author. The citation is provided below in MLA format.

Ultius, Inc. “Women Pilots during World War II.” *Free Writing Samples | Ultius*. 31 Aug. 2016. [Web](https://www.ultius.com/explore/writing-samples.html).

If you need help with MLA style, please visit the [Ultius citation style help section](https://www.ultius.com/help/citation-styles/mla-style.html). Thanks for playing fairly.