

Barbara Jane London nee "BJ" Erickson

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Question: It's just to have me give your name, your maiden name and your married name so I have it on tape and the correct spelling of that.

Answer: Okay. My maiden name is Barbara Jane Erickson and my married name is Barbara Erickson-London. My husband was Jack London.

Question: The other one.

Answer: Okay.

Question: The other Jack London, right?

Answer: The other one, well we're shirt-tail relatives you see Jack London was a pen name; that wasn't his real name. He was adopted into the London family, which my husband was related to in Oklahoma and took that name as his writing name.

Question: Oh, okay. So you are his shirt-tail..

Answer: So I'm so shirt-tail I can't claim it really. It's way back in the family someplace.

Question: Now you have an interesting history for a variety of reasons. Because flying when you first started flying, were there very many women that were flying at all? Was that a pretty uncommon experience of..

Answer: I think at the time I started there were about a hundred commercial women pilots in the country. That's, that's the nucleus from which the original women pilots in World War II came from. The original 25 were picked from that group who had commercial licenses and were flying commercially and there were about a hundred in the United States at the time.

Question: And commercially at that time, what type of commercial?

Answer: Instructing - they might be doing, performing in air shows and so forth but mainly instructing. Because most of us had graduated from CPT and we went right on into CPT as instructors.

Question: So when did you get into CPT?

Answer: 1939. I soloed on Lake Union in Seattle in a seaplane with Kurtzer Flying Service and went on and finished up at Boeing Field.

Question: What was your attraction? I know some people that are pilots have this amazing love for it; some fall into it?

Answer: I fell into it. I had never been near an airplane and had no idea that that would be my life but the opportunity came when I was a sophomore at the University of Washington. They were opening up this CPT Program and our University was large enough to have a class of forty; and after quite a bit of consideration, the government finally decided to allow one girl for every ten boys. So there were four slots open; so I went down and applied for it, passed the physical and was in the class. From then on, Home Economics was gone.

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Question: 'Cause it really did change a lot of history there for women, didn't it?

Answer: It was, it was a great breakthrough but then they only allowed us to take the first class because we were never gonna be used, but I had some friends in the CAA and some mentors who got me into the second class and by that I got into the third and fourth class so when I got through I had my commercial license and my instructor's rating. So I went back and instructed in the same program with Kurtzer on Lake Union until the war and then in January of '42 the government decreed that there would be no civilian flying on either coast. So consequently we had to move the flight school from Lake Union and from Boeing inland and Kurtzer moved the school to Yakima. And instead of going to Yakima because I had, I stayed back in Seattle and finished up my senior year in school. And during that period of time I went to work at Boeing and worked on the wing assembly of the B-17 on the swing shift - why I don't have any idea. But I did that until I grad... until June graduation; and then the job in Yakima wasn't open so I ended up in Walla Walla, instructing for Herman Martin. And in September of '42 the word went out that the government was going to allow a small group of women to see if they could perform enough to become pilots for the military, and I was asked to be in that group, went back, passed the flight check and was accepted in the original 25. So that's how it all started. From then on it was the airplanes were it.

Question: Just a love affair.

Answer: That was all it was. And I stayed in it ever since. And all my family flies.

Question: Did, did you ever think that they were gonna be sending you into combat, I mean, was that a thought process?

Answer: Combat was never a consideration. We were hired strictly to relieve the men for duty by flying cubs and trainers; that was all we were hired for. And we were already qualified in those so we didn't take any training by the government; it didn't take any money. We spent one month learning how to do it the Army way, to fill out the forms and fly the airplanes and report the way they wanted but flying the airplanes we already were doing that. And we had no anticipation of going any further at that point. But then we got into the system and as we got proficient in one airplane, they gradually began to transition us just like the men into the bigger airplanes; and so we were able to go through the whole chain right up to the top just like the men did. So the girls had a terrific opportunity. I mean, it won't happen again.

Question: What were some of the planes you flew?

Answer: Well, I was very lucky because I was stationed at the best base for one thing; I was stationed at Long Beach, which is the very hub of all the factories. So we had Lockheed and North American and Northrop and Convair and all the factories were sitting right in southern California so we had a terrific variety of airplanes. By the end of the war I think I had something like 36 different airplanes on my checkout card, not qualified in all of them but at all times, but at some point you'd flown all of them. So we were very... some of the other bases were very limited in what they had to offer, but we had the choice of almost everything.

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Question: Most exciting plane to fly?

Answer: Well everybody asks me what was my favorite but you know when the government gives you a million dollar airplane in the morning and says, Girl go to Newark, you love 'em all, you know. The big...from the P-51 to the P-38 to the B-17, you know, they're all marvelous airplanes. They were all nice brand new shiny airplanes and they give you the key one morning and say, Go. Now where else can a 21-year old girl have an experience like that?

Question: Whew – were you, I know male pilots, especially fighter pilots, I know bombers and fighters a little different persona, but the fighter pilot, they were this kinda Don Juan and this stud. Did the same thing happen with women?

Answer: Well, you know, in the fighter you only have one seat so you're kind of doing it yourself. It's kind of this I'm out there all by myself sort of syndrome, and you get that feeling of accomplishment. It, it's a terrific thing because the first time you fly a P-51 you're in there all by yourself. They give you the key and say, Go, you know, and they give you the last minute warning, watch your right foot because it's got a lot of torque and off you go. So it's, it's a tremendous feeling. But you know you're 21 and invincible, you know, absolutely invincible at that point. There was not a thing in the world that could've happened to me. I was - it was Go. That was the mode you were in and that was so whatever you did you studied, got yourself prepared, and the next morning you went out and did it.

Question: And your uniqueness comes in the fact that you started out in the WAF, is that right, do I have the..?

Answer: Well, the first 25 were called Women...it was called the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron which is an experimental group in Wilmington, Delaware of those of us that were already qualified to be ferry pilots. We already knew.. could fly the airplanes and we all had a minimum of 500 to 1,000 hours already and were commercial pilots. So that group was the nucleus that started. At that same time Jackie Cochran started a school in, started in Houston but ended up in Sweetwater, to train girls to come into this ferry command and build it up from the original 25 to a larger corp. So that flight school was started for the purpose of training girls to come in to the corps and join us in the ferry command. So, and they, and that name was not changed until August of '43. We were, everybody that graduated from the school was a WAF until the name was changed in August of '43. Because at that point the girls coming out of the school did not have enough total time to be accepted by the ferry command. Their minimum was 300 to 400 hours and by the time they finished Sweetwater when they were going in with 35 hours, they didn't have the requirement so they had to find other places to put the girls so they went into tow-target; they went into instructing; they went into "flying the small semi-military airlines." So it was a very diversified corps so the name WAF's didn't really symbolize what we did anymore. So the name was changed to WASP, Women's Air Force Service Pilots, which encompassed the whole ramification of all the different jobs the girls were doing. So the name was changed for that purpose. So actually it was always all one organization; it just had two different names at two different times. For the first year and a half we were WAFS; the last year and a half we were WASP but it was the same group. It wasn't like melting two groups together; we just changed our name.

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Question: The WAF's had a little more, because you came in early, you, you had a lot more training, a lot more experience?

Answer: Well, by the time the girls got through Sweetwater, they were as qualified as we were, a lot of them. Because a lot of the girls that were in the later classes had as much time as we did. But for various reasons they didn't make the original group; they either had children or they had a job they couldn't get out of or they couldn't make it. But they, the girls in the second, first, second, third, fourth classes, a lot of them had more time than we did. They just didn't make it into the first class. But they were just as qualified and we were all WA...all WAF's.

Question: How accepted, I know when they developed the Tuskegee airmen that was developed to be a failure. I don't know if you knew that or not but the black airmen that there, there are theories that that was supposed to fail. With the women did you face some animosity being all those women pilots or anything like that or?

Answer: From the men?

Question: Yeah.

Answer: No. You see actually these guys that were ferrying the same age we were. They were all 21 too, you know; we were all excited to fly the new airplanes. We were all so busy that we didn't have any problem with them. Let's see...a, a lot of the older men that were our superiors you could kind of say, you know, we don't really care much for the women but we were there, and they needed us so badly and the boys were all our same age. All do...we were all doing the same thing; we all got in an airplane and went the same places. We all did the same things; there was no really jealousy unless you might meet somebody, boy on the ramp and you were in a P-51 and he was in a AT-6. He kind of looked at you longingly. But it was all a matter of time until we all worked up the sequence ladder. So, no, we didn't; we all got along great because we were all doing the same job and we were really so busy. You know, we would make one or two trips a week to the East Coast from the West Coast, we...the minute you got back you were on orders again. So we were gone all the time.

Question: And were they usually brand-new planes that you were..?

Answer: They were all new airplanes.

Question: Right off of the show...?

Answer: Right off the line – a lot of them had never been flown before; they just shove them out the door and off you go. But those women that built them did a magnificent job; those airplanes worked beautifully. We didn't have any problem; I never had a mechanical problem.

Question: Which is an interesting thing there because they talk about America and how quickly and, and also how well built these planes were and I, it sounds like you're attesting to..

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Answer: Well they were; we didn't really have any mechanical problems. Well, there was the usual, you know, maintenance sort of things; but they, those women built beautiful airplanes and they did a wonderful job.

Question: Now technology's changed a lot, I mean, now you get in and they get them up and almost put them on autopilot and they got all their radars and...

Answer: Oh, it's incredible how it is. I, I got in my daughter's airline the other day; and I asked her where the needle ball and airspeed was because here she's got this whole glass cockpit she's looking at and nothing in there looks familiar to me. She's reading all these gauges that go every which way on a computer screen to fly her airplane and it's, it's incredible.

Question: What was it, and I know they vary from plane to plane but kind of a cockpit that you sat in to.. How were you flying - what instruments were you using to fly?

Answer: Well, the needle ball and airspeed, you know, we only had - we had very little radio, maybe one radio. A lot of our original navigation was done by watching the railroads - just the very basic instrument. We didn't have DME and, and all the modern radio conveniences we have now. We communicated and we had the low freq radios like KFI or one of your radio stations that we got home on and that was it. And at night you had a light line across the United States on the top of each mountain was the light that blinked a certain letter in the alphabet, and so you knew which mountain you were over. It was very primitive.

Question: What was the hairiest flight that you flew direction wise, of trying to figure out where you're going - you ever get lost or..?

Answer: Well, any pilot that says they've never been lost is lying. Why, you know, you're disoriented a little bit. But...oh, the mid-west, the flat mid-west where all the lines are straight like section lines can be very confusing cause you don't know which section line you're crossing. And every town out there looks alike; they've all got a water tower; they've all got a racetrack; they've all got a railroad. So they all, you have to go down and buzz the water tower to see what town you're in. They all look alike. But as things progress, navigation has become so exotic now; and my kids are so spoiled, they get in and turn on the GPS and off they go.

Question: Most of the planes, well probably all of the planes you were flying were not pressurized, right?

Answer: No.

Question: So, cold flights, noisy flights?

Answer: Oh they're cold and noisy, yeah. We wore heavy winter flying suits...in the winter.

Question: Same as the men, same uniforms?

Answer: Yeah, uhuh...they fit just like they belonged to the men, not the women. They weren't made for us.

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Question: I won't...should I ask; should I not ask. I know I've asked the men and they've talked about, cause you had some fairly long flights, is that right?

Answer: Well the average flight of each leg was probably maybe 2-1/2 to 3 hours.

Question: Oh, not too bad then.

Answer: That's, that's the length of the fuel we had.

Question: So you didn't think, 'cause I know the men we've asked about, you know, some of their longer missions and the relief tube and all that...they weren't designed for women so..

Answer: They never were. That...they could send us to the moon, which they've done, but they never could figure that out during World War II. They tried but there was never any way. There's nothing worse than being in a bulky flight suit and trying to figure out how to get out of it; but no, they didn't figure that out. No, our flights were as long as our fuel capacity; and when most airplanes that we were flying were not equipped for combat they weren't, so they were just the standard airplanes, which is probably about three hours.

Question: So...and you flew generally solo; you would be the only person in that plane?

Answer: Well, we needed a co-pilot in a DC-3 and we had a copilot in the B-17 and a flight engineer; but everything else we flew solo.

Question: Women co-pilots?

Answer: Huh?

Question: Did you have women co-pilots or men co-pilots?

Answer: In a B-17 a man co-pilot usually. I had a woman co-pilot a couple of times but we always had a man engineer because if he had a gear failure, he had a problem with getting all the way to the back of the airplane and cranking it down.

Question: Did you ever have landing gear stick up on you or..?

Answer: No, I never had a problem, you know. As I say, the good Lord was sitting on my shoulder the whole time.

Question: Now did you, were you fully military or were you not military?

Answer: No, we were fully civilian and that's one of the, had been one of the problems because they didn't really know how to handle us during the war. You see, there were WAC's that were attached the Army; there were SPAR's attached to the Coast Guard. There were WAVE's attached to the Navy but here was this group of women pilots out here that didn't have anybody to be attached to because we had, didn't have an Air Force yet. It was still the Army so the logical thing that you would think of is that we would become a WAC and become flying WAC's. Well, in the first place, Jackie wasn't about to be under Oveta Culp hobby so that knocked it out from

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that point of view. By the same token our requirements weren't the same. We had a lot of girls that were married and we had a lot of girls that had children. We were much older; the WAC's had to be much younger. We were, could be up to 35 years old. So, our requirements didn't fit into the WAC's either so we were kind of a group out here in limbo, not attached in any way to anybody except the Army; and they didn't really know what to do with us so the whole time we were in there was a program to get us militarized but the way to do it never was worked out. They gave up trying to make WAC's out of us; there wasn't any place to make a separate unit out of it because we didn't have any support group to be attached to which is what Jackie wanted because then she could command the whole group. But we, it never got through. The Rumsfeld, Rumsfeld, the Ramspeck Committee which was late in '44, when it went to Congress, finally went up a bill to militarize us and it was, it was defeated by something like 200 something vote to 160 vote. And that's when they decided, but their recommendation was not to disband us; it was so, just send us back and let us just operate like civilians, like we'd been doing for 2-1/2 years; but the powers that be decided if we couldn't be militarized we were out so we were sent home. And unfortunately, we were sent home before the war was over and it was very disheartening because we had a group of very qualified women pilots that were badly, badly needed; and we were sent home before the war was over. The war went on; we were disbanded in December of '44; the war went on until what, July and August of the next year and that was, that was a bad, a shame. The day I left Long Beach to go home after we were disbanded there were sixty-some fighters sitting in the middle of the airport there that didn't get delivered that day and..

Question: Just because they couldn't..

Answer: Because our, my squadron is, 60 women pilots were on their way home.

Question: And that was 'cause they couldn't decide what to do with you they said..

Answer: Well no, Jackie decided that if we couldn't be militarized we would just quit. She would just disband the organization.. which she did, and it was very sad. We offered to stay and work for, work for free and the, and the ferry command tried very hard to keep the girls, at least the girls that were in the ferry command, because they were the ones that were really badly needed. But there was no way that part of us were going to stay and part of us weren't, so the whole; and that was, the same way that the women in the factories when their job was done and the airplanes were all built, they just said goodbye to them and sent them home too, very unceremoniously they went, said no, it's time to go back to the kitchen. They said the same thing to us, you're, we're through now – time to go home.

Question: Now if, if one of the pilots were to have crashed or would have gotten killed, there was no military..

Answer: No, I lost six girls, my, I lost six girls at Long Beach. And sometimes we had to take up a collection to figure out, to get the body home and so forth. There were no provisions; she couldn't, her Mother couldn't put a flag on the coffin; she couldn't hang a gold star on the window; she couldn't call her daughter a veteran because we were in that nebulous place of being civilians but attached to the military and being required to act as, like we were in the military but never being in the military. And it was almost 36 years later in 1977 that Congress passed a law

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that declared that the women pilots of World War II were actually veterans and became... We got veteran's benefits which meant that I could go to a VA Hospital; I could get buried in a VA cemetery but by that time any benefits, you know, were long gone. But at least the Mothers of the girls who died knew their daughters had been veterans, and that was terribly important to me that those Mothers got to feel that way eventually.

Question: It's interesting 'cause earlier you talked about how different the country was at that time, that it was this unified country; so at that time not being military and fighting, all that, was there still that positive attitude of we're just doing our job?

Answer: The girl, the girls?

Question: Yeah.

Answer: Oh heck yeah. We were never promised anything when we went in; we were never promised we would be militarized; we were never promised anything except \$250 a month and a barracks building to live in and you'd do what the Army told you to do. But you'd get to fly their airplanes and that's all we were promised. And militarization came up later. I was never told I was going to be in the military when I joined. I think some of the later girls were told, were of the opinion that they were ultimately going to be militarized. But it didn't make any difference to, to us really. Eventually, as I say, it became important later on because eventually, particularly to the families who'd lost their daughters, they could realize that their daughters actually were veterans and did serve their country.

Question: So where were your parents, back here in Seattle?

Answer: They were in Seattle.

Question: And so what did Mom and Dad think about their little, are you the only child, or are there a number of..?

Answer: No, I had a brother who went in the service also and a younger, a younger brother, younger sister. My brother was, just got in and got started, got checked out and everything and the war was over. And my sister was way too young.

Question: So what did Mom and Dad think about..?

Answer: They went along with it. When I got in and started to fly, they said if that's what I wanted to do, that was fine. I don't think my Mother, might have not - terribly happy about it but she never said a word. They were very supportive. And had they not been, it would've been a lot harder. But they were very supportive.

Question: Let me mention a name and you give me your response to the name - Hap Arnold?

Answer: Oh, I think he was a marvelous leader of our Air Force; there's no question about it. I think he was overburdened with an awful lot of problems that a General would have but I think he served his country well, very well.

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Question: You met him?

Answer: Yes, I took him for a flight when I won the Shell Scholarship in 1940 I went back to Boeing Field to compete against the boys from the other sections, and I met him back there and I took him for a flight in my little cub.

Question: How was that?

Answer: It was fun. Yes I do; I admire him greatly.

Question: You also have a unique distinction in the fact of you received the Air Medal.

Answer: Yeah, I've had to live with that. That wasn't given to me as an individual for me. That was done to show what the women pilots did; it was an example. At that point in time Jackie was trying very hard to get us militarized and it was very important that she get across to people what the women were doing so this was used as an example. And I never took the Air Medal to mean that I did anything that any one of the other girls couldn't have done. I was used as an example and the Air Medal was to show what these girls were doing for their country and that they did, they should be given the military rights that the boys had and it was done for that purpose. And I don't take it as an individual because any one of the girls, I can name you any number of girls in my squadron, who could've done exactly the same thing. It just happened; the weather was good and I had four good trips and they used that as example. But I don't take it as a personal tribute at all. That was, it was to represent what everybody did, every one of those girls had done.

Question: Is it a, was it a pretty unique sorority, I mean, was there a unique bond between this group cause you, you were pioneers?

Answer: No, because we didn't know each other, you know. The only girls I knew were the ones I was stationed with and to this day of the thousand WASP, I probably don't know more than fifty of them.

Question: Cause you're so busy doing your work?

Answer: We were just; we were stationed in one place and never saw anybody else. They were, we were stationed at a hundred different bases all across the country and most of us never met each other. The only camaraderie that really sticks with a lot of them is girls who went through the school in a certain class, if you were in a class 44W, whatever it is, that class knew each other very well because they lived together in the barracks at Sweetwater. Then they were scattered throughout the whole Army Air Corp and mostly probably never saw each other again. And I really only knew the girls in the ferry command and particularly those that were stationed with me at Long Beach.

Question: Did you keep in touch with them over the years?

Answer: A lot of them, uhuh.

Question: Or was it when they let all of you go did you just kind of go back to..?

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Answer: A lot of the girls reverted back to what they were before the day they got out. It was, it was amazing. They'd served their time; they'd done their job and the following day they were back at Macy's as a buyer, you know. It was strange – there were a lot of them, there was no opportunity for us after the war to fly unfortunately. I tried for the airlines and I got applications back for stewardesses and said that wasn't really what I had in mind but that's all they had in mind. And there really was no great opportunity for women pilots after the war. And a lot of the girls went back to what they were doing before. I couldn't quite go back to Frederick and Nelsons which is where I was working putting myself through school. And it was very hard adjusting. A lot of the boys had problems as well as the girls because it, the disbandment was very abrupt. And we were all of a sudden put back and it's a lot like the boys. You have to realize these boys were 18 to 21; they were all in uniform and everybody thought they were wonderful. And they walked down the street and everybody knew who they were and they really were somebody and they all looked gorgeous. Then all of a sudden they're in civilian clothes and nobody knows who they are, and it's a whole new world. And they're 21 years old and all of a sudden they're nobody. And it's, it's very, it's a hard adjustment. It was for the boys as well as the girls.

Question: Yeah, I can see where that would be.

Answer: Cause all of a sudden one day you're, you're a hero and the next day you're nothing. And all of a sudden you're in a pair of jeans and a tee shirt walking down the street and nobody knows that you were a P-51 pilot the day before.

Question: Let me throw out another name and tell me a little bit.. Jackie Cochran?

Answer: Well, uh, I'm, I'm kind of ambivalent because I didn't start under her; and she did take over. I think she accomplished a lot in her life; I think she could've done a lot more. She definitely was not a person that pushed women pilots per se even though she was head of the Corp. She really wasn't out for women per se, particularly if they were going to compete against her. Now she never flew in the Bendix of another woman who entered the Bendix but she did a lot and gave a lot of girls the opportunity to fly. There's no question about that. Her methods and tactics were what sent us home and her drive to make us military instead of just leaving us alone but she did a lot and she accomplished a lot. And she was, she was very talented in that line and very well connected. I mean, she had connections with Eleanor Roosevelt; she had connections with Hap Arnold; she had the, was married to the second richest man in the United States; and her influence was tremendous. She could get almost anything she wanted.

Question: Did you have personal contact with her or was it so big..?

Answer: Oh yeah, I've met her several times. She didn't come very much to ferry command bases because that was, we were kind of kept separate and Nancy Love controlled the ferry command. And she didn't, she didn't really come very close to us.

Question: That was the next name I'll throw out, Nancy Love.

Answer: Well Nancy started the original group and a very talented lady, a very gracious lady and her, her idea of the Corp was entirely different than Jackie's.

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Nancy wanted to use the girls that were already trained that didn't cost the government anything and build up a small, elite group that could meld immediately in to the Air Force, the Air Corp, and didn't have aspirations for a huge organization where we were training girls with no time at all. There, there, there ideas of the Corp were, were entirely different. But everybody that came out of the training school was going to end up in Nancy Love's ferry command. That was the purpose of the training command. The problem was that Jackie ran out of girls with any time by the second or third class so consequently the requirements were lowered to 35 hours at 18 years old – from 21 years old and 500 hours. So consequently when the, these now 18-year-olds graduated from Sweetwater they didn't have the required time to be a ferry pilot. So by the end of the sixth class, the ferry command said we don't take anymore. So then is when the girls started going out and doing other jobs. The first group was put into tow-target. And then they went into training command and into various other commands and we became much more diversified. But nobody after the sixth class came into the ferry command because they didn't have enough total time.

Question: Were you as a 21-year-old woman aware of the politics that were happening around this or were you just..?

Answer: Well, I was because I was very close to Nancy and being a squadron commander I was in Cincinnati at headquarters probably two or three times a year and I was very aware of what was going on. Oh yeah, definitely. It was kind of, it was kind of an ongoing under, under, underground battle but the girls kept coming out and very well trained out of the training command and we took them as long as they were qualified into the ferry command. The rest of the time they went to other groups and did other jobs.

Question: Do you remember the first time you flew a P-51?

Answer: Oh yeah.

Question: What was that like?

Answer: Well, it was in Palm Springs. We...they hadn't started a pursuit school per se where they just trained pursuit. The beginning of it was started in Palm Springs and I was sent down there just one weekend by myself to transition into the P-51. I was the first one out there to do it and I got three hours in the AT-6 with the seat all the way on the floor where I was sitting down inside the cockpit and they figured if I, you could land that by just feeling the airplane that you could land a P-51 which was a tail-wheeled airplane, you couldn't really see out of it very well. So two or three hours in an AT-6 and then they put you in a P-51 and I was on a real nice long runway and a beautiful sunny Sunday morning in Palm Springs and went out and shot landings and put in two or three hours and I was ready to go.

Question: What's it like sitting in the cockpit of a P-51? That must be...

Answer: A P-51's a nice compact cockpit with everything right where you want it; it's just like a B-17 is a nice small compact cockpit. A P-61 was big enough to play ping-pong in it; there was a huge, huge cockpit. So, they were all different, very compact, very nice, a beautiful airplane, beautiful airplane.

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Question: Huh. And you never, it sounds like you never had any complicated flights.

Answer: No, the only problem I ever had was one was when I was ferrying a war weary, shot-up B., a P-38 that had been overseas and they brought them back. What they did is they brought back the P-38's that had been in combat and refurbished them and re-did the engines cause they were using a different kind of fuel and put them in the training schools. And I went back to, it was Kansas City or someplace in the mid-West to pick up a, what we call a war weary, P-38 that had come back from combat, then refurbished and was getting ready to come out to Chico, California to be put in the school. And there were three of us, two boys and myself, to pick up three different airplanes and we all taxied out and being very nice, the boys let me go first. And as I went down the runway, the whole turbo-charger blew off the right engine, so needless to say, I wasn't off the ground but I did leave the runway and decide not to go. And the boys went right off the runway behind me and all three of us decided we'd take the airline back to Long Beach and left those. But we did ferry, towards the end we were ferrying some war weary airplanes that were being refurbished to go into the training school. Some of them were pretty beaten up; there were pretty good-sized holes in them.

Question: So they'd fly them back to States and then you would..

Answer: Either fly them or ship them, uhuh, ship them on a boat; you can't get them across the ocean; they didn't have the range for that.

Question: That's the thing I hear from a lot of the pilots, that it was so amazing what abuse these planes would take but still..

Answer: That were what?

Question: What abuse...

Answer: Oh, it was amazing; we, you've seen, you've seen World War II pictures, seen them coming home without tails and without wings and without engines. They're amazing.

Question: Huh. What was your favorite part of being a, in, I guess you weren't in the service, but in the WASP, the WAF's?

Answer: What was the favorite part of it?

Question: Yeah.

Answer: I guess, you know, I guess you have a kind of a feeling of being patriotic, you know, in a way. You were serving your country and I guess I'm basically a good military person because I, I like the camaraderie; and I like the feeling of all of us working together for a common cause and a common good which we felt we were doing. We were fighting for our life and our country's life; and that was, that was enough to keep us jazzed up because we, we had to win this war.

Question: And you didn't separate yourself the way history has it said well you weren't military. You were doing your part for the country.

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Answer: Absolutely, absolutely. In fact we were so concentrated on what we were doing I don't remember how the war was won. I have to go back now and watch TV because I don't know when the Battle of the Bulge was and when the, when we were fighting the war because we were so busy doing what we were doing and we were, we didn't have access to TV. We very seldom, we got our newspaper occasionally; we very seldom were sitting any one place long enough to listen to the radio. We didn't know what the day-by-day war was. We were so divorced from that, so busy just doing our one job, day in and day out that we lost sight of the whole war picture. As I say I have to go back now and kind of watch TV to see what happened.

Question: Which is interesting because a lot of people think: Oh, well you were there at that time so you must have known what happened. Well, it's just like today, I don't know what all's happening in the world every..

Answer: Oh, I don't know anything, I don't know anything, as I say, I have to go back and have somebody tell me on a TV screen.

Question: Did you, you said that you watched six friends that..

Answer: Six of my girls, yeah.

Question: Did you ever write your parents and tell them about that?

Answer: I had to go and talk to the parents, yeah, and that's pretty rough for a 21 year old, 22 year old...usually took the Chaplain. I only had to do it in two or three cases. Well the first girl that was killed was Cornelia Fort and she lived in Tennessee. And it was kind of tough because her uncle or one of her relatives was a Senator or something, pretty high up in the government; and we were so afraid that that would hit the press and being killed it would, you know, be hard on the program. But it was kept very quiet and never really made the papers very much. It was, it was tough. But the girls were killed in various parts of the country; they weren't killed in Long Beach, so they were handled, it was all, they were handled differently.

Question: So that one with Ms. Fort, did you fly to..?

Answer: I, Nancy and I delivered a DC-3, had a DC-3 trip back East and we stopped in Nashville, Tennessee and went to her funeral; that was the first girl that was killed. And Nancy and I attended that funeral and I wrote my folks a long letter after it because I'm not much on funerals. But this was one of those ones where you sit around and look at the body for a week, you know, and have this, all this ceremonial stuff because she, they were a very wealthy, very staid, very prominent family back there, and so it was a big affair.

Question: So for you, it sounds like that this, I'll call it the service, was a very growing up part of your life too, would you say?

Answer: Oh, absolutely. I was a 19 year old from the sticks as it comes, you know, I was very, very immature really, as far as the world. I'd never really been out of Seattle except that one trip to Washington, D.C. to compete. I had, I had to, I had to, I had to grow up fast because I was commanding officer of a lot of girls that were ten, fifteen years older than I was. And they came from all walks of life, you

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know. They told me, I keep out of their life; they'll keep out of mine but they'll do their job. You know, that type of thing so I learned, I learned very fast.

Question: Were you a tough group?

Answer: Tough?

Question: Yeah.

Answer: No, it was a very dedicated group. As different as they all were, they all were dedicated to one problem, that's getting that airplane to its destination as fast as possible. And you see we were, we would be, we would either. Originally we would just usually come home on the airline or on the train or on the bus or whatever way we can get home. Eventually, they began to try and coordinate us between various factories so we would ferry an airplane both ways, which became a lot more productive. But we were, once we got back, we were put on the immediate list to go out the following morning if an airplane matched our qualifications. If something came up that we were qualified in and we were on the list then we'd be ready to go again. We'd wash that shirt and start out again, cause our clothes was one of our big problems because in a fighter you don't carry a suitcase.

Question: Seven days a week?

Answer: Huh?

Question: Seven days a week?

Answer: Oh, sometimes you could be gone thirty days because I was gone thirty days on one trip because you go to one place; they send you someplace else to pick up an airplane. You end up someplace else and back and before long you're gone thirty days with that same shirt. So you learn to iron it over a radiator. The collar looks pretty good but the rest of it looks pretty, pretty shammy

Question: See, it sound like you never were, I mean, you were busy.

Answer: Busy.

Question: Yeah.

Answer: Very busy.

Question: So, you weren't in the barracks with, the hurry up and wait?

Answer: Well, we did, we did that a lot of. Well we waited until the orders came but there was always such a, a flow of airplanes that we didn't have to, really have to wait very long.

Question: So there wasn't time to sit around and just shoot the breeze with the other women and...?

Answer: No, that's why we didn't get a lot, we didn't get to know each other an awful lot. We had a ready room, our office where the WASP Squadron Office was; and we waited there for orders but we almost always knew when we were coming up

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on orders. We'd be back, back at the barracks washing our clothes and getting ready to go out again. And that's why people say, did you, you did, did you have a lot of boyfriends and things? We didn't really stay in long enough to cultivate a lot of long time relationships. We spent most of our time on the road.

Question: Doing your job.

Answer: Doing the job in a hotel room someplace.

Question: Huh. The, the girls that you lost, was it mostly a severe failure of a plane or?

Answer: No, one was a mid-air collision; two were mid-air collisions. One, two were weather. Only one that I can really say was probably pilot error where the airplane, the airplane got away from the girl – she let it stall on final, coming in for a final approach; it was in a BT. But in Palm Springs, well, the girl was overrun by another airplane on final approach. And two were killed in a B-25 in St. Joe, Missouri on an instrument flight due to weather. So there were various reasons.

Question: So were the skies just full of planes, I mean, with so much activity?

Answer: No, actually, you can take off with a hundred airplanes and never see another airplane till the next spot – they just disappear. You don't see that many airplanes in the air. We can take off in a flight of eight and never see each other till we all get to Albuquerque.

Question: Is that usually how it was once you got up there, it was you and...

Answer: You're on your own. Every ferry flight was, you were, you were on your own. They, they gave you an airplane and said this is where it's supposed to go. It's up to you to get it there, any route you want to take just as fast as you can do it. So we had to decide whether we went by, by El Paso, whether we went by Albuquerque or we went by Salt Lake, which way we were gonna go, which way the weather was, where we were gonna stay over night. But our ultimate aim was to get it where it was supposed to go.

Question: So when you were up there, did you have any radio contact with the ground?

Answer: Yeah, we had contact with the ground; we had contact with the tower and we had a radio beacon.

Question: So you would just take a..

Answer: But they were all low frequency stations, which only had a certain distance, you know.

Question: So there, would there be a lot of time that once you got out of the range of the tower..

Answer: Well, we always needed to know where we were by ground, by watching the ground. But we didn't get lost. You know, the hardest time was in the, when we were ferrying trainers out of back East out of Hagerstown when there was

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snow all over the ground and you couldn't tell a railroad or a road or anything. And these were open cockpit airplanes and we had the map on our lap with the wind blowing and it snowing, snow on the ground, trying to find Charlotte, North Carolina; and we always found it but I don't really know how because everything was just completely white in the winter.

Question: So well now, like with that, what elevation would you be flying, fairly low?

Answer: Probably a thousand feet or so, so we could see the terrain.

Question: Oh boy.

Answer: And it was cold.

Question: It sounds very cold.

Answer: It was cold.

Question: Huh. That's amazing, I mean, did the finding the, you know, a little landmark but when you describe it being snow, I mean, it's white.

Answer: Yeah, well you have to look for antennas and you look for water towers, you look for railroads, look for rivers, lakes.

Question: Now you said if you got lost, I don't know if you're being facetious or not, but you'd go down and buzz the water tower.

Answer: The town was always written on the water tower, the name of the town.

Question: Did that cause any complications with people being a little nervous with the war going on that here comes this...

Answer: No, I don't think they even knew we were there. These, this is, these are way out in the wilderness, in the flatlands.

Question: Oh, I'm going to jump back just a little bit. You said you worked at Boeing. Is that right?

Answer: Uhh huh.

Question: So what did you do on the assembly line?

Answer: I worked on the wing of the B-17 and I say, I was still in school and I don't know why I did go to work for Boeing cause I worked the swing shift; I remember taking my lunch in a little paper sack and we carpooled it and I went and I got, I remember coming home at midnight because I had to go to school the next morning. But you know my supervisor; his name was Burin Rieder, Sp and he kind of became a mentor because he knew I flew and I said, told him one day, one day I'm gonna fly one of these. And I kept track of him all of his life for the next forty years we corresponded, and he lived in St. Helena, California. And eventually I did send him a note that I had flown my first B-17 and there was a little article in the

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Boeing Newspaper that said Boeing girl flies her first fortress. And I kept track of him, as a, as a friend; and eventually he called me one day and said that his niece was a schoolteacher in southern California and would I contact her which I did, and we became lifelong friends and are to this day. And I kept, I called him, we talked very Sunday night; and I said as long as you don't call me in the middle of 60 Minutes we're fine, so either before or after, and we talked until the day he died and he was almost 90 years old when he died but he became a very close friend. He was my supervisor on the swing shift on the wing of the B-17 when I worked for about six months. It was a very lasting friendship.

Question: Boy, that must have been kind of neat for, I mean neat for you that you got to fly what you built but for him too that you told him, I'm gonna fly one of these.

Answer: And eventually it happened. It took awhile but it eventually did.

Question: Huh.

Answer: But he was a great mentor; he, he said, you know, you will, you can and so forth. Because working at Boeing was just kind of an interim, something I did while I was finishing school because I couldn't, we couldn't fly anymore on the coast. Everything had been moved inland and I still had till June till I finished school so I went to work. There was only about six months from January when they closed down flying until school was out in June. But it was a very momentous time; I enjoyed my time at Boeing and I said and that meeting Burin was one of the, he was one of the staunchest friends I ever had in my life.

Question: What do you think the history books are leaving out?

Answer: What do I think of the history books?

Question: That the history books are leaving out about World War II from your perspective?

Answer: I think they're re-writing the whole thing, you know. Because my kids don't know much about World War II, and they never did learn anything about World War II in school.

You know, I remember learning about the Tigris and the Euphrates in Egypt; and I can remember that, but I don't remember learning much about our own country's history. And I think that's a shame. I think we ought to have a better civics and United States governmental schooling.

Question: When umm, I'm quickly reading notes here..

Answer: That's fine.

Question: Is there... when you see an airplane, when you look and you touch an airplane out there, what do you see in an airplane? I mean, is it, do you have a unique bond with these planes, especially a historical plane that would have been from World War II, and..

Answer: Oh, what do I feel when I see it?

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Question: Yeah.

Answer: Well, it brings back nostalgia there's no question about that. I look at that P-51 and I think there's no way I could have flown that. It looks so big now. The B-17 looks tremendous. I went out and sat in a B-17 the other day when one of them came through Long Beach and I thought, hard to believe that I was up here by my, practically by myself in these airplanes.

Question: Did they look big when you were 21?

Answer: No. But now they look terribly big. I look at the, I, we had an air show where they had a Douglas Invader, an A-26, which I, was one of the last ones that I was checked out in and to me that was one of the nicest airplanes I ever flew. But I look at it now and I think, my heavens, I flew that all by myself all the way across the country. It's hard to believe. But, you know, they say we were 21 and invincible; it was just.. We have a joke, you know, they, they all fly alike: the only problem is if you can get it started, you can fly it. Cause you pull back and they go up and you push forward and they go down, so they all fly alike. And you kind of had that feeling during the War, you know, no matter what it was you could do it and you knew you could. And there wasn't, we never thought of any problems.

Question: Huh.

Answer: They built, they built them good and we knew they were gonna make it so, and all we had to do was get it there.

Question: And that's where, that's what you had such a unique aspect because a Rosie the Riveter and then to go off and fly those.

Answer: Yeah, well I'd say I'm, I'm a great admirer of Rosie. I think she did a tremendous job. Without her, we wouldn't have had those airplanes, and she, if she hadn't done such a good job. It's, they were very talented and they, you know, they were making cookies the week before; and all of a sudden now they're riveting airplanes together. And so, I think they did a fantastic job. And they haven't been given credit for what they did.

Question: How much do you think it changed your life? Had World War II not come along, as a little girl, what was your dream to grow up and do?

Answer: Who knows? I mean, cause I was one of those that really didn't have a driving force. I was, when, when, in my era, sixty years ago when a girl went to college, unless she was going to be a doctor, a lawyer or some a scientist or something that she was driven, you really didn't have too many choices. You could go into Home EC or you could go into PE; and I chose Home EC, why I don't know. But, you know, I wasn't driven to it and I didn't really and it wasn't, didn't give me momentum to life at all, so I don't know what would have happened. I'd probably end up being a schoolteacher and I don't mean that in a derogatory term but that's what I was training to be. I was, I took Home Economics and probably would've ended up being a schoolteacher some place. But fortunately, I got diverted and once I got diverted then school was just academic.

Question: It's interesting cause hindsight's always 20-20. Did you realize at the time that this was a unique experience for women?

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Answer: Oh heavens yes. Yeah. And I don't think there's any question that once I started flying and particularly when I got my instructor's rating and began instructing my senior year I only went to school one day a week. I made a deal with the Dean of Women at the University of Washington which was kind of unique cause the war was, it was wartime. Because I was instructing six days a week so I went to school on Mondays and I made a deal with my professors that I could pick up all of my lecture notes. The problem is I missed a few of the lab courses but I only went to school on Mondays and picked up all of my lecture, lecture information for the week. Then I instructed the rest of the week because, see, it was wartime and they allowed me to do it. So as a consequence I didn't ever graduate because I missed three or four lab classes in my senior year, but I was elected President of Mortar Board my senior year; and I wanted to stay in college and keep that job and I wanted to finish my four years which I did. But I did it kind of a haphazard way because the war interfered.

Question: Darn war.

Answer: Yeah, it did but it changed everything.

Question: Did you interact with male pilots once you got in the program, I mean, did you compare notes and talk about flying?

Answer: Oh sure. We studied together all the time, uhuh.

Question: So you were side by side then?

Answer: Yeah, well in the CPT program, there were only four of us and the 40 boys in that class; and in the secondary class I was the only girl so I got along with all of them, you know. We compared notes, oh sure.

Question: Did you become, did, did the gender thing become invisible at all, I mean, or was it always, oh, here comes that girl into class?

Answer: It just became invisible as far as I was concerned. I knew them all; they were all my friends. We were all in the same class in school, all the same age. We were all poor kids, you know, that were all in the same general economic level. We all got along fine. Nobody really looked at me like I was different.

Question: What was the most difficult plane to fly?

Answer: Difficult? Well, none of them are really hard. The, when I took secondary CPT, I used a Stearman on a UPF-F7 which is an open cockpit biplane and it was a little tough to do the acrobatics in order you had to be pretty strong to be able to roll it over and hold it inverted or do a spin and so forth. It took a little bit of brut strength. But normally an airplane doesn't take any strength to fly. I mean, it's, it's fingertip control, so you don't have to be a big brawny bully to fly an airplane.

Question: Do you think there's a difference between men and women pilots?

Answer: The airplane doesn't know; it can't tell. Basically no; you all learn the same fundamentals and it's a matter, it's like doing the dishes. Does a man do them

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differently than a woman, you know? It's a job; it's an activity. It's something that you learn through a certain process and everybody has their own idiosyncrasies of how they do that job but from male and female there's no particular difference. And as we jokingly say, you know, the airplane doesn't know whether it's a girl or boy flying it. It reacts exactly the same.

Question: Huh. That's nice to hear cause that is true. It's the politics that get in the way of everything.

Answer: Well, same thing my daughter had when she started flying for the airlines because she started way, way back and the only comment that the airline captains had there's not going to be any goddamn woman in my cockpit. And that, of course, has eased now. She's been there 27 years and now the girls that are going in are accepted, you know. There's thousands of them and it's a very accepted career, but back then it definitely wasn't and you get that kind of antagonism.

Question: The, if I understood right earlier, you said, I asked you if you ever had any interest in flying combat, that wasn't an interest?

Answer: That never, that never occurred to any of us because that was never a question and I don't think it ever, as far as I'm concerned it never came up that we would ever be in combat.

Question: Were you familiar with the German woman pilot, Hannah Reitsch

Answer: Hannah Reitsch?

Question: Reitsch.

Answer: I knew of her, yeah.

Question: What, in retrospect you knew of her or during..?

Answer: I knew of her later; I never knew of her during the war, just like I didn't really, wasn't aware of the Russian women pilots during the war either; but they, they did fly combat. They dropped the bullets right out of the air, bombs right out of the airplane. But we didn't know that during, at the time. But we didn't have that much contact with the, we were fighting most of those nations. We weren't, we weren't friendly with them so we didn't know all that.

Question: Who inspires you most, or inspired you most, was it this Mr. Rieder or..?

Answer: Well, we didn't have an awful lot of role models back then. I think you just strive to succeed regardless of who you were following. It wasn't necessarily that you follow somebody. It's that you have your own goals that you're trying to accomplish. You want to be successful and you want to be successful at what you, whatever you do. Once I got into the flying, my role model was being, was doing a good job at what I was doing and being competent at what I was doing was more my reason for going on than following what somebody else had done. I mean, I didn't want to be Amelia Earhart, for instance, and fly around the world. That never intrigued me. There's too much water out there for me. But to do what I was doing

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and do it well was important to me and to do the job well and to accomplish it was my goal and if you want say that, a role model, that was the model I was striving for, not necessarily a person.

Question: It's interesting because, now do you have two daughters that fly?

Answer: Yeah.

Question: So do you think you were their role model?

Answer: I think it had to be. My kids never went to grandma's in a car. They always went in an airplane from the time they were born we threw them in the back of an airplane with a bottle and a blanket and went to grandma's. And so they grew up in an airplane. It was second nature to them. Now the oldest girl who is a Captain for Delta, went, took to flying first. She became, at sixteen, decided she was going to be an airline pilot and this is one of the times in which they said, no, we don't have women airline pilots, period. But she, again, became the first woman hired back by Western back in '75 so she's been an airline pilot 27 years and determined not to give up her role. But she, because she'd been in an airplane all of her life, now a younger girl rather than following so close on her sister, went into horses and she spent most of her life training horses. But eventually, when my business partner died, she came to work for me. And I said, there's no sense in working for me if you can't fly so she went out and got all of her ratings and she doesn't fly as a commercial pilot, she's an executive for Jet Blue, handling their government relations for the west coast. So she's involved with aviation and she's got all the ratings and flies all the time so. It was just a natural progression because they'd spent all their life in an airplane.

End of tape 1