

Female aviator made ultimate sacrifice for war effort

On Dec. 7, 1941, Cornelia Fort, a young civilian flight instructor from Tennessee, and her regular Sunday-morning student took off from John Rodgers Airport in Honolulu. Fort's apprentice was advanced enough to fly regular take-offs and landings and this was to have been his last lesson before going solo.

With the novice at the controls, Fort noticed a military aircraft approaching from the sea. At first that didn't strike her as unusual; Army planes were a common sight in the skies above Hawaii.



Fort

But at the last moment, she realized this aircraft was different and that it had set itself on a collision course with her plane. She wrenched the controls from her student's grasp and managed to pull the plane up just in time to avoid a mid-air crash. As she looked around she saw the red sun symbol on the wings of the disappearing plane and in the distance, probably not more than a quarter mile away, billowing smoke was rising over Pearl Harbor. The disbelieving Fort had just unwittingly witnessed the U.S. entry into World War II.

A little more than a year after this near miss, Fort would be flying military aircraft for the U.S. and a mid-air collision would tragically make her the first American woman to die on active military duty.

That Fort should one day put on a flight suit, live in army barracks and fly some of the largest and fastest

military aircraft of the day, would probably have raised more than a few eyebrows in the genteel circles in which she was raised. Dr. Rufus Fort and his wife Louise had brought up their oldest daughter to be the demure wife of a Southern gentleman.

Around the time Dr. Fort died in the spring of 1940, Fort took her first flying lesson. She was instantly addicted. Within a year Cornelia had become the first female flight instructor in Nashville. After President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Civilian Pilots Training Program, she took a flight instructor's job at Fort Collins, Colorado. Then in the fall of 1941, she was hired to teach defense workers, soldiers and sailors to fly in Hawaii.

In fact, the national emergency created by America's entry into the war did temporarily create better opportunities for Fort and many other U.S. women pilots. The first invitation came in a telegram dated Jan. 24, 1942, from leading female aviator Jackie Cochran. It asked Fort to join a select group of American women who would fly with the Royal Air Force Air Transport Auxiliary in Britain.

Fort couldn't accept the offer because she wasn't back in the continental U.S. in time, but in the fall of 1942 she was one of a handful of

women to receive another invitation. This time the telegram asked her, "if interested, to report within twenty-four hours to Wilmington, Del., for service in the Ferrying Division of the Air Transport Command." Fort was more than interested, she was ecstatic. Here was a chance to play an important role in the war effort. In a letter home she wrote, "the heavens have opened up and rained blessings on me. The army has decided to let women ferry ships and I'm going to be one of them."

The female pilots in the newly established squadron, the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Service, or WAFs as they were known, were hired to fly planes from factories to military air bases. Their services freed up male pilots for combat missions.

Fort frequently found herself flying in open cockpits in freezing weather without a radio. On these ferrying missions during the war, the women often had to navigate by comparing maps with landmarks they could see below them. The job was made even more difficult because some of the planes, though tested, had never been flown before, and many of the air

bases were camouflaged. In poor weather conditions a cross-country trip could sometimes take several days. At the end of a mission, Fort would hitch rides back on whatever form of transportation was available, sometimes it was a train sometimes another plane.

Fort flew for her country for just a few brief months. On March 21, 1943, she was one of a number of pilots, both male and female, who had been assigned to ferry BT-13s to Love Field in Dallas. During the course of that mission, one of the plane's landing gear clipped Fort's airplane, sending it plummeting to earth. Fort didn't have time to parachute to safety.

Her commanding officer sent a compassionate letter back to the young pilot's mother: "My feeling about the loss of Cornelia," wrote Nancy Love, "is hard to put into words — I can only say that I miss her terribly, and loved her...If there can be any comforting thought, it is that she died as she wanted to — in an Army airplane, and in the service of her country."

Despite the words of sympathy, Fort and the other 37 female pilots who died flying military planes during the war, received no military recognition. The army didn't even pay for their burial expenses because the women were considered civilians. Fort's achievements as a military pilot are commemorated by an air park named after her that was built in 1945 near her family farm.

Her own words on an historical marker at the site simply and modestly sum up her wartime contribution: "I am grateful," she wrote, "that my one talent, flying, was useful to my country."



Jackie Cochran: leader of the first unit of WASP pilots

At 2:23pm on Sept. 23, 1938, with the equivalent of just a few minutes more gas left in her tanks, Jackie Cochran's silver P-35 shot across the finish line in the challenging, transcontinental Bendix Race. The triumphant woman had just won the cross-country race, completing the 2,042 miles from Los Angeles to Cleveland in just eight hours, ten minutes and thirty-one seconds.

In September 1939, shortly after Warsaw fell to the invading German army, Cochran wrote to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt arguing that, in the eventuality of American involvement in the war, women pilots could fly military aircraft on support missions, releasing men for combat duty. Implicit in Cochran's letter was an offer to begin the planning for such a squadron of female pilots. Even though she constantly promoted the idea, nothing came of her suggestions for a couple of years.

It was the British who resoundingly demonstrated that women were more than up to flying military aircraft. By July of 1941, the Royal Air Force was using trained female aviators to ferry planes around the British Isles. The women's contribution was invaluable. They were moving planes around by the thousands with just a few minor accidents. In the summer of 1941, Cochran spent some time in London studying how that operation worked. When she returned to the U.S.,

President Roosevelt asked her to research ways of using female pilots in the U.S. Army Air Corps. The following summer, Cochran returned to Britain, this time with 25 hand-picked American women recruits who would help ferry planes for the British Air Transport Auxiliary.

While Cochran was in Britain, another renowned female pilot, Nancy Harkness Love, suggested the establishment of a small ferrying squadron of trained female pilots. The proposal was ultimately approved. General Hap Arnold asked Cochran to return to the U.S. to establish a program to train women to fly. In August of 1943, the two schemes merged under Cochran's leadership. They became the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs).

Cochran was soon thrilled at the success of her experiment. Her female pilots were no longer just ferrying planes around the states; some were training B-17 turret gunners, others were working as test pilots at repair depots, some were training staff pilots at navigator schools, and yet others were tow-target pilots. In January 1944, the War Department announced that the Army Air Forces women's fatal and non-fatal accident rates were lower than the men's. In March Cochran presented a report of the WASPs' achievements to General Hap Arnold. She hoped that it would help convince Congress to bring the WASP formally into

the Army Air Forces.

Cochran's hopes were dashed by the end of the year. Not only had Congress voted against admitting the WASP into the military, the program had been deactivated. As the war progressed, fewer men were required for combat missions. Also, male pilots conducted an extremely effective campaign against the WASP, arguing that the women weren't needed. On Dec. 20, 1944, the women pilots were flown home.

The end of the WASP, however, was not the end of Cochran's flying career. In 1950 she set a new speed record for propeller driven aircraft, and in 1953 she became the first woman to break the sound barrier. In the end it was her health that grounded her. In the early '70s, doctors told a devastated Cochran that she needed a pacemaker and that she could no longer fly.

Cochran's spirit finally broke after her husband died in 1976. Her health deteriorated rapidly, and she was often in excruciating pain. Friends say she began talking a lot about death, frequently asking to be buried with a doll that she won as a child and a sword presented to her by the Air Force Academy. The latter she wanted in case she needed to fight her way out of hell. When she finally died in 1980, the sword was returned to the Air Force Academy, but the doll went with her to the grave.