

# Contesting Veterans Status: The History of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) of World War II

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**OVERVIEW:** The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) served in the Army Air Force from 1942-1944. After basic training, the WASP served in military assignments on air fields in the United States. In 1944, Congress failed to pass a bill that would have granted the women military status. Decades later, the WASP fought for militarization and succeeded in 1977. Those who debated the WASP militarization bills in Congress were stakeholders of the title veteran. The cultural purchase of the varied representations in this debate resulted in the female pilots' absence in American popular memory. Their veteran status was contested as recently as 2016 when the Army attempted to keep the WASP from being inurned in Arlington National Cemetery. This module will trace the history of the WASP fight for militarization, recognition of their military service, and rights as veterans.

## #1 Evidence of the Militarization of the WASP and the Failed Congressional Bill of 1944

**Background:** When the WASP failed to receive militarization in 1944, the program was disbanded in December 1944. Women could no longer fly aircraft in the U.S. military. The WASP remained civilians and were ineligible for veterans benefits, i.e. education under the GI Bill, that the female units in other military branches obtained.

### Reading:

1. Merryman, Molly. *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) of World War II*. New York: New York University Press, 1998. Chapters 3-5.
2. Meyer, Leisa D. *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps during World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. Chapter 2.

### Primary Sources:

1. WASP Trainee Handbook [Available via the WASP Archives at Texas Woman's University: [www.twu.edu/downloads/library/handbook.pdf](http://www.twu.edu/downloads/library/handbook.pdf) ]
2. AAF Regulation No. 49-9. "Wearing of the WASP Uniform." [Available via the WASP Archives at Texas Woman's University: [www.twu.edu/downloads/library/uniform.pdf](http://www.twu.edu/downloads/library/uniform.pdf) ]
3. WASP Honorable Discharge certificate: [http://www.fifinella.com/images/harmon\\_discharge.jpg](http://www.fifinella.com/images/harmon_discharge.jpg)  
Watch *Ladies Courageous* (1944 film) [Available via World Cat libraries or on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YktI\\_AUTRQ0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YktI_AUTRQ0).]

### Discussion Questions:

- Who were the stakeholders of the term veteran in 1944? What were their key debates? Compare and contrast the militarization bills the Women's Army Corps and the WASP. What role did gender play in these women's experiences?

- What does Merryman argue is the reason for the failed militarization bill in 1944? What are some additional theories that would explain this failure?
- How does the *Ladies Courageous* film portray the WASP? What does it insinuate about women as pilots and as military personnel?

## #2 WASP Militarization in the 1970s

**Background:** The WASP organized and fought hard for military in the 1960s and 1970s. As in 1944, there were vocal supporters and opponents of granting the female pilots military status and access to the title veteran.

### Reading:

1. Merryman, Molly. *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) of World War II*. New York: New York University Press, 1998. Chapter 7. Chapter 5, on “‘A Constitutional Right to Be Treated Like American Ladies’: Helen
2. Feeney, Robert Goldberg, and Military Obligation in Contemporary America” in Kerber, Linda K. *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998.

### Primary Sources:

1. P.L. 95–202, Approved November 23, 1977 (91 Stat. 1433); GI Bill Improvement Act Of 1977. Title IV. [https://www.ssa.gov/OP\\_Home/comp2/F095-202.html](https://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/comp2/F095-202.html)
2. Col. Bruce Arnold, “WASPs Win 33 Year Battle for Vet Status.” *Stars and Stripes* Nov 10, 1977. [http://www.twu.edu/downloads/library/WASP\\_Stars\\_and\\_Stripes\\_1977.pdf](http://www.twu.edu/downloads/library/WASP_Stars_and_Stripes_1977.pdf)

### Discussion Questions:

- Who were the stakeholders of the term veteran in the 1960s and 1970s?
- What can you argue about women’s citizenship status in the U.S., based on the story of WASP militarization?
- For those opposed to the WASP receiving veteran status, why did they fight hard to maintain a current status of the title?
- How does the history of the WASP fit within the historical context of the 1960s and 1970s?

## #3 WASP Reactions to Militarization, Recognition, and Veteran Status

**Background:** In these oral history interviews and personal narratives, the WASP discuss their militarization, recognition, and veteran status. Consider how their voices capture the complexities surrounding these issues.

### Reading:

1. Oral History Interview with Elaine Danforth Harmon (2006). Available via the Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project. <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/WVHP/id/4314/rec/1>
2. Joanne Wallace Orr, interview by Jean Hascall Cole for Texas Woman's University, September 16, 1991. <http://twudigital.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p214coll2/id/4710/rec/4>
3. Carl, Ann B. *A WASP Among Eagles: A Woman Military Test Pilot in World War II*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999. Chapter 15-17, Epilogue.

4. Excerpts from Byrd H. Granger, *On Final Approach: The Women Airforce Service Pilots of W.W.II*. Falconer Publishing Company, 1991.

**Discussion Questions:**

- How did these WASP discuss their complicated civilian/military status during and after World War II?
- Did the WASP consider themselves to be military (versus civilian) during the war? Do they identify as veterans?

## **#4 A Continuation of the WASP Fight for Veterans Rights**

**Background:** In the fall of 2015, the family of WASP Elaine Harmon discovered that the WASPs' right for burial at Arlington National Cemetery, which they received in 2002, had been revoked. Her family fought back and in May 2016, President Obama signed a bill from Congress to allow the WASP to be inurned at Arlington once again. This led to a continuation of the WASP fight for veterans' rights.

**Reading:**

1. Piehler, G. Kurt. *Remembering War the American Way*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2014. Chapter 4.

**Primary Sources:**

1. Army Memorandum, "Inurnment Eligibility of Active Duty Designees at Arlington National Cemetery," March 23, 2015. [http://www.fifinella.com/anc\\_mar23memo.pdf](http://www.fifinella.com/anc_mar23memo.pdf)
2. Matthew Barakat, "Female WWII Pilots Barred from Arlington National Cemetery." *Military Times* <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2015/12/31/female-wwii-pilots-barred-arlington-national-cemetery/78140712/>
3. Letter, Barbara A. Mikulski to Ms. Terry L. Harmon, October 6, 2015. [http://www.fifinella.com/anc\\_mikresp.pdf](http://www.fifinella.com/anc_mikresp.pdf)
4. Leo Shane III, "Female WWII Pilots Now Allowed Burial at Arlington." <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/veterans/2016/05/20/wasps-arlington-obama-signs/84659734/>

**Discussion Questions:**

- In this debate about inurnment at Arlington National Cemetery, what discussions surfaced in regards to gender? What about with reference to the term veteran?
- How is the media coverage evidence of the historical memory of World War II and the "greatest generation"?