

A Curriculum Guide to

Fly Girls: The Daring American Women Pilots Who Helped Win WWII

By P. O’Connell Pearson

About the Book

In late 1942, at the height of World War II, the U.S. Army Airforce faced a desperate need for skilled pilots. General “Hap” Arnold, commanding general of Army Airforces, decided to implement plans proposed by two outstanding women aviators who knew women could pilot planes as well as men. Eventually 1,102 women served as WASP – Women Airforce Service Pilots. They flew military aircraft of every kind, thus freeing male pilots for combat missions. The women ferried planes from factories to bases, towed targets for live ammunition artillery training, tested repaired planes and new equipment, taught military trainees to fly, and more. They lived on military bases, trained as military pilots, wore uniforms, marched in review, and thirty-eight of them died in the line of duty. Yet unlike the army’s WACs and navy’s WAVES, the WASP remained civilian employees who received less pay than men doing the same jobs and had no military benefits, not even for burials. Many also faced discrimination and hostility on military bases.

Fly Girls is the story of their courage, determination, patriotism, and love of flying—character traits they never lost. The WASP did what they had set out to do. They used their skills to serve their country, played an important role in the nation’s effort to defeat the Axis powers, and proved that women can fly as well as men. Without realizing it, they also opened doors to the women who followed them into military aviation. Their story demonstrates the meaning of persistence and the willingness to make a great contribution without thought of personal gain.

Prereading Activity

Either in groups or as a whole class, have students share what they know about World War II.

- What were the major causes of the war?
- What countries were involved in the war? On what sides?
- Who was the president of the United States during most of World War II?
- Who was the leader of Germany during World War II? What kind of leader was he?
- What technologies were important in winning the war?

Discussion Questions

The following questions contained in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RH.6-8.1) (RH.6-8.2) (RH.6-8.5) (RH.6-8.7) (RH.6-8.8) (RH.6-8.10)

Chapter 1—War Clouds

1. Analyze the significance and meaning of chapter one’s title.

2. Why did General “Hap” Arnold want Congress to appropriate more money for the military during the early 1930s?

3. Why did Ann Baumgartner feel fear whenever she heard the German soldiers’ marching song in European towns?

Chapter 2—Preparing for War

4. Describe Jacqueline Cochran and explain how she challenged many people’s expectations for women.

5. Why did Hap Arnold reject Jacqueline Cochran’s and Nancy Love’s suggestions to recruit women as pilots for military planes? Be specific.

Chapter 3—No More Choices

6. Find the following quotations in the text and reread them, as well as a sentence or two before and after each. Then label the underlined segment of each quotation as Fact, Opinion, or Reasoned Judgement.

a. FDR: *Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan. . . .* _____

b. FDR: *Every single man, woman, and child is a partner in the most tremendous undertaking of our American history . . . We are going to win the war . . .*

c. Letter to Air Corps recruiter: I learned to fly from a World War ace . . . if I were only a man there would be a place for me. _____

7. Summarize ways in which the United States mobilized for war after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Include the roles of Congress, the military, industry, and men and women of all backgrounds.

Chapter 4—Answering the Call

8. Find three samples in the text that show comparisons between men’s and women’s requirements and training as pilots of military aircraft during World War II.

Chapter 5—Becoming WASPs

9. What was Lieutenant Fleischman’s viewpoint on women flying military aircraft? What did his beliefs about the program lead him to do?

Chapter 6—Ferrying for Uncle Sam

10. How did technology influence the direction of the war in 1943?

11. Why did the WASP continue to volunteer after Cornelia Fort's death and while facing discrimination and inequalities?

Chapter 7—Yes to Every Job

12. Why did the WASP accept dangerous jobs that some male pilots refused? What is the source of your answer?

13. List three dangers the WASP faced at Camp Davis that were unavoidable.

14. List three dangers the WASP faced at Camp Davis that could have been avoided.

Chapter 8—Greater Heights

15. One Wasp said this about Lieutenant Logue Mitchell: ““He was firm, but he was compassionate. He was concerned. He did everything in the world he could to bring out the best in you.”” Give examples from the text's description of his teaching that support or oppose the quotation.

16. How do you think Orville Wright would feel about women fighter pilots in the military today? What is the source of your answer?

Chapter 9—Attacked

17. What adjectives would you use to describe Rosie the Riveter as she is pictured in the sidebar?

18. Why did the public's attitude toward women in the war effort change during 1944 and 1945?

19. How did negative articles in newspapers and magazines in 1944 influence public and congressional opinion about the WASPs?

20. What was General Arnold's conclusion about the WASP program?

Chapter 10—At Last

21. Why did many former WASP decide to fight for militarization thirty years after the war? Why did they think they might win?

22. What piece of evidence was crucial to the WASP's argument for militarization? Why?

Extension Activities

The following questions contained in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RH.6-8.1) (RH.6-8.3) (RH.6-8.4) (RH.6-8.7) (RH.6-8.10)

1. Primary and Secondary Sources

Discuss the differences between primary and secondary sources. Look through the sources listed in the book's bibliography and identify which are primary sources and which are secondary sources. Be sure you can explain your reasoning.

2. Vocabulary

As you read, make a chart of words or terms that are new to you or that you are unsure of. Define each word or term and choose ten words to use in sentences.

3. Gender Bias in the News

Read several news articles about women in political life, such as senators, representatives, governors, heads of state, or candidates for office. List any references to age, clothing, shoes, hair, and voice, as well as the adjectives used to describe the women. Then read several articles about men in public life and do the same. Analyze your findings for gender bias.

- Do articles mention women's ages more often than men's ages?
- Do articles describe women's clothing or hair more often than men's?
- Are the adjectives used to describe men and women the same or different? If different, in what way?

Alternatively, watch three or four television newscasts or morning shows and describe your impression of how the women reporting the news or weather dress compared with the men.

4. Industry Goes to War

Using books or the Internet, research the transition from peacetime automobile production to the production of military aircraft in the United States after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Prepare a written report on production of one kind of aircraft, one company, or one state to share with the class.

5. WASP Geography

On a classroom map of the United States, mark the military bases where WASPs served between 1942 and 1944. List any bases in your state.

6. Time Line

Using history textbooks or the Internet, create a time line of significant events and achievements in women's military aviation history since 1945.

7. You Are the Reporter

Imagine you are a reporter in 2010. The WASPs have just been awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, and you are going to interview a former WASP at the ceremony. Make a list of questions you would like to ask her.

8. Military Aircraft of World War II

Using books or the Internet, research the type of military planes flown by the WASPs; make a poster with pictures and descriptions of several different types of planes.

This guide was created by the author of Fly Girls, P. O'Connell Pearson. She is a former history teacher with a master's degree in education from George Mason University. She has contributed to and edited history textbooks and published articles in magazines and newspapers including The Washington Post. Always enthusiastic about sharing the stories of history, she earned her MFA in writing for young people from Lesley University and now writes both historical fiction and nonfiction.

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