

“Up in the Air Junior Bird-WOMEN”

Excerpted and re-written by Monica Wooton

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Magnolian Josephine (Jo) Keating Swift must have loved to buck the odds. As a WASP (Women’s Airforce Service Pilots) flying in the US Army during World War II, she was one of the one woman to every 1,000 men pilots who flew military planes. She was among the first “women in history trained to fly American military aircraft,” and Eleanor Roosevelt was an outspoken advocate of women’s participation in the war and in particular as a force in the air, according to Wasp on the Web, Wings Across America.

<http://www.wasp-wwii.org>

When Swift was 22 years old, in an open cockpit stereotypically outfitted “with goggles, leather skull cap helmet, and a long scarf” Swift took her first flight in a “Jenny” bi-plane, (WWI planes that were used to drop information or advertising flyers from the sky to those below and as “barnstormers”.) Pilots took adventurous folk, curiosity seekers and daredevils for rides on open farm fields. Swift’s brother had no trouble getting her to hand over her \$2 for her first ride when he made the suggestion.

Swift went on to college, flight instruction and earned her pilot’s license. “Swift applied to [the] WASP [program] and was accepted into the training program. Ironically, the friend who had told Swift about the [US military] service program for female aviators was unable to qualify for training. Despite Swift and others literally “pulling her legs”, Swift’s friend was disqualified because she did not meet the height requirements of 5 feet 6 inches.”

“The program trained women for six months and assigned them to military bases throughout the United States. The fliers of WASP contributed immensely to the war effort because they ‘filled the flying jobs and freed up men for combat.’ said Texas Women’s University Assistant professor Kate Landdeck, who has spent years researching the group. Approximately 25,000 women applied, about 1,500 were accepted and 1,074 graduated from training.” Slim odds they were indeed, that Swift beat to be in this elite corp. These women flew missions in the States ferrying goods and personnel, they also towed practice targets behind the B-26’s they flew and live ammunition was fired at them as the male pilots practiced for over-sea air battles.

Swift trained in Sweetwater, Texas and lived with the few women there in the barracks. As WASP’s these women pilots made a flat fee of \$18 per month and were not included in any military benefits. 38 women died in this service and their fellow female fliers collected funds to help families pay for a loved one’s last flight home.

Re-written and excerpted from “Magnolia: Making More Memories”, published by the Magnolia Historical Society, 2007. Chapter: World War II Here by Monica Wooton with Helen Rodgers Haladyna and Stacey Furness. Side bar: JO SWIFT; WOMAN AIRFORCE SERVICE PILOT (WASP) by Helen Rogers Haladyna. Ms. Swift passed away in September 2010 at the age of 91.

