

Nancy Harkness Love Pilot and Leader

When I wrote *Women Aviators*, I had a number of subjects to write about and I was looking at diversity of women pilots—in backgrounds, accomplishments, etc. When recognizing the amazing organization, the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), I chose Jackie Cochran (and Violet Cowden) due to her work with WASP and later accomplishments. Yet Cochran wasn't solely responsible for the WASP of World War II. WASP wouldn't have been possible without accomplished pilot, Nancy Harkness Love. And while I mentioned Nancy Love, I've always regretted not giving her more page time. She certainly deserved it.



Nancy Harkness was born on Valentine's Day in 1914 in Michigan. She traveled to France with her family at age 13. Along with thousands of people, she witnessed Charles Lindberg complete his first transatlantic flight. While she found it interesting, it didn't motivate her. What did light a spark for Nancy was her first ride in an airplane. Pilots often went from town to town, earning money by giving rides or performing aerobatic shows. Three years after seeing Lindberg, Nancy took her first ride in an airplane. And her life would never be the same.

Nancy begged her parents for flying lessons. Her mother told her that "nice young ladies don't do such things." Eventually, Nancy wore them down and took lessons from an 18-year-old named Jimmy. Nancy was his first student. After 13 hours of instruction, Nancy passed her exam and earned her private pilot license.

She continued to learn the craft of flying at a small Poughkeepsie, New York airport while a college student at Vassar. The French History major earned extra money by taking students for rides. Her goal after college was to demonstrate and sell airplanes to customers. Nancy had that opportunity sooner than she expected when she had to drop out of college at the beginning of her junior year. The stock market crash had made it impossible for her father to afford her college tuition any longer.

Nancy moved to Boston and began selling airplanes for Inter-City Air Service. It was founded by Air Corps Reserve Officer Robert Love. They were married by the time Nancy was 21, flying themselves to California for their honeymoon.

After they returned, Nancy Harkness Love was hired as a test pilot for the new Bureau of Air Commerce (BAC), which would later become the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA). She performed safety tests and tested the latest aeronautics technology of the day. Nancy also worked with the Air Marking program in Massachusetts, placing over 290 navigational markers in high places like water towers to help pilots find their way. Remember that this was the 1930s and almost all pilots flew with manual controls and navigation.



When war broke out in Europe in 1939, Nancy believed that female pilots like herself could help by transporting airplanes from factories to military bases. She knew 49 women pilots, each with more than a thousand hours of flying experience. Although Lieutenant Col. Robert Olds supported the idea of a women's flying unit, it was rejected by General Hap Arnold in 1940.

The idea came up again two years later when Nancy and her husband were living in Washington, D.C. The Air Transport Command (ATC) hired pilots to ferry airplanes to various destinations for the Air Force. Colonel William Tunner began talking to Nancy about an all-female ferrying division. This time, General Arnold approved the idea

and Nancy Harkness Love was appointed commander of the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), which started with 29 experienced women pilots. Within a year, she commanded over four different squadrons of WAFS.

Jackie Cochran had been trying to do something similar, form a women's flying unit to aid the war effort. Her idea was to train women to be pilots. Cochran finally got her female flying training program—Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD)—approved after Nancy's WAFS program took off.

With similar objectives, it was just a matter of time before the two organizations merged in 1943 into the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). As the more ambitious, Cochran became director of the operation. Nancy was appointed Executive for WASP Ferrying and later the troubleshooter for the U.S. Ferrying Division. She fought for and won the right for the WASPs to fly 23 different military aircraft. The WASP program delivered 12,650 aircraft during World War II before it was disbanded by the government because of controversy in using female pilots.

As a pilot, Nancy had a long list of firsts even though there was a lot of resistance against women pilots. She was one of the first woman to fly various military planes, including the P-51, B-25, and B-17. She flew the B-25 coast-to-coast in record time. In her last assignment as a WASP, Nancy became the first woman to fly a military plane overseas as part of a "secret" assignment. She piloted a huge C-54 Army transport cargo plane from Calcutta to China, flying over the fabled and dangerous Himalayan "hump" during wartime.

At the end of the war, Nancy and her husband were decorated at the same time for their service. She received the Air Medal for "operational leadership in the successful training and assignment of over 300 qualified women fliers in the flying of advanced military aircraft." She earned the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

After the war, the Loves had three daughters. Nancy continued advocating for women in aviation and fought for veteran status recognition for the WASPs. Three years after her 1976 death from cancer, the WASPs were awarded military veteran status. In 2010, almost 70 years after their service, the WASPs were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.

For more about the WASPs, go to the [WASP Museum](#) or check out this [NPR story](#).