

Hazel Ying Lee and the WASP

1912–1944



WHY THEY MADE HISTORY Hazel Lee and other members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) performed flying tasks vital to the war effort. Their work on the home front allowed more military pilots to join the fighting overseas.



As you read the biography below, look for examples of the courage and patriotism of Hazel Ying Lee and the other women of the WASP. What did they prove?



National Archives (342-FH-4A05432)

Pilots were in short supply. As the United States moved into the second year of the war, the military could not train fliers fast enough to meet the needs of U.S. forces in Europe and the Pacific. In response, civilian aviator Jacqueline Cochran worked with the U.S. Army to set up a new program that would train female pilots. She proposed that these pilots could take over work in America that was being done by military pilots. The male pilots would then be free to fight the war overseas. Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) had just been born.

Twenty-five thousand women applied to this organization. Candidates were required to have commercial flying licenses and high school diplomas. Only American citizens between the ages of 21 and 24 were considered. The 1,830 women who were admitted were then given military flight training, and of them, 1,074 earned their wings.

Once trained, the women of WASP took new planes on test flights to pinpoint any mechanical problems. Some flew experimental aircraft. Others flew planes from the factories that made them to the military bases where they were needed. Pilots also flew troop transport planes. On military bases, their planes towed targets through the air as male recruits training to be gunners tried to shoot them down.

At this time, Hazel Ying Lee, a Chinese American from Portland, Oregon, looked for ways she could take part in the fight. Her husband was an officer in the Chinese Air Force, fighting the Japanese in China. Hazel Lee traveled there and volunteered her services as a pilot to the Chinese military. She was turned down because she was a woman.

Back in the United States, WASP gave Hazel Lee her chance to serve. After completing her training, she flew new fighter planes from factories to airfields all over the country. She gave each of these planes a name, using

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lipstick to write it in Chinese characters on the plane's tail. She seems to have had both a great sense of humor and a quick temper. There is a story of Lee crashlanding unhurt in a field in Texas, only to be taken prisoner by a farmer because he thought she was Japanese and part of an invasion. She yelled at him in Chinese all the way to the sheriff's station.

Thirty-eight members of Women Airforce Support Pilots were killed while performing their duties. Hazel Ying Lee was one of them. At a military base in Montana, faulty communication between the air traffic controller and another plane caused the midair collision of that plane and the fighter plane Lee was flying. She was able to land her damaged and burning plane, but she was badly injured. She died of those injuries.

Women Airforce Service Pilots were not part of the U.S. military, so those who served and sometimes gave their lives received no military honors, hardship pay, bonuses, veterans' benefits, or death insurance. In some cases, the women had to take up a collection to have the body of a comrade who died in service sent back home for burial.

The organization was disbanded at the end of the war, but those who served in WASP did not forget. Almost immediately they began to petition the government to grant the organization military status. After years of petitioning, WASP was declared part of the U.S. Air Force by President Jimmy Carter in 1977. The surviving women received no veterans' pay or other benefits, just the recognition they believed was their due.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** Describe several character traits of Hazel Ying Lee.

2. **Identify Cause and Effect** What events led to the formation of WASP?

3. **Evaluate** If you were a young female pilot during World War II, would you have joined WASP? Give reasons for your answer.

ACTIVITY

Walt Disney created the WASP mascot, *Fifinella*, a fairy-like blond girl with wings. If you were to design a new mascot for WASP, what would it look like? Share your sketches and thinking with classmates.