The Wings of the WASP’s

Since 1913 Military Aviators have proudly worn wings over the left pocket of their uniforms. The WASPs were no different except they were not issued the same wings as the Army Air Corp pilots.

This is a brief history of the wings and an example of how they were made. It is my hope that this is as accurate as possible. While some of the detail is still missing, I hope with time to gather the remaining details and have an exact history.

This is presented in two parts, the first part is a history of each of the wings from every class that had its own wings and the type of wings awarded.

The second part is more on the making of the wings and which wings were used to craft the unique WSAP wings.

Special thanks to WASP Shutsy Reynolds, 44W-5, who ran the WASP Store for many years and made WASP wings and jewelry. She made corrections to this history and aimed me in directions to find many of the details.

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In 1939, on the day after Germany’s tanks rolled into Warsaw, pilot Jacqueline Cochran sent a letter to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt encouraging the use of women pilots in the armed forces. In May 1940, another pilot, Nancy Harkness Love wrote the Ferry Division of the Army Air Force with a similar idea, but the Army was not ready to put women in the cockpit of planes.

The demand for male combat pilots and warplanes left the Air Transport Command with a shortage of experienced pilots to ferry planes from factory to a point of embarkation. The leaders remembered Love’s proposal and hired her to recruit twenty-five of the most qualified women pilots in the country to ferry military aircraft. These outstanding women pilots were called the Women’s Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, or WAFS.

By September 14, 1942, General Henry “Hap” Arnold, Commanding General of the Army Air Forces, also approved a program that would train a large group of women to serve as ferrying pilots. The training school was placed under the direction of Cochran. The program was called the Army Air Force Women’s Flying Training Detachment (WFTD).

On August 5, 1943, the WAFS and the WFTD were merged and were redesignated the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP. Cochran was appointed Director, and Love was named WASP executive with the ATC Ferrying Division.

Love and the WAFS first gathered as a squadron at New Castle Army Air Base in Wilmington, Delaware. Although the WAFS were required to have 500 hours of flying time, those that arrived averaged more than
1000 hours. The pilots were checked out and trained for just a few weeks before they were assigned to their posts.

While the WAFS were beginning their ferrying duties, Cochran began organizing the WFTD and recruiting classes of women pilots. The training involved six months of ground school and flight training. The first three classes trained in Houston, Texas at the Municipal Airport. Bad weather and crowded skies led Cochran to move the program to Avenger field in Sweetwater, Texas.

The Jobs

The WAFS and the first classes that joined the Air Transport Command out of the Houston and Sweetwater training programs ferried planes from factory to point of embarkation.

Eventually, the Air Transport Command complained that it could not take all the pilots graduating from Avenger Field. Cochran announced to all the air bases that she would accept any job (she called them “dishwashing jobs”) which the WASP could do and thus relieve additional males for combat duty. Besides flying all the airplanes in the Army’s arsenal, WASP taught flight instruction, flight testing, flew radio-controlled planes and anti-aircraft tow targets.

Deactivation and Militarization

Unfortunately, the WASP and WAFS were hired under Civil Service. Cochran and General Arnold had intended the women pilots to be made part of the military, but the need for pilots was so great and the road to militarization was slow, requiring an act of Congress. They began the program with the idea of militarizing later.

In 1944, just as the bill to militarize the WASP went before Congress, the need for pilots lessened. The decision was made to deactivate the WASP in December 1944. General Arnold would record that “in any future total effort, the nation can count on thousands of its young women to fly any of its aircraft.”

The amazing experiment using women pilots during wartime almost seemed destined to be forgotten. Then, in the mid 1970s, the Navy announced to the media that, for the first time in history, women would be permitted to fly government planes. The announcement reverberated among the former WASP, and like nothing else, mobilized them to seek recognition. With the help of Bruce Arnold, son of General Arnold, and political help from Senator Barry Goldwater, who commanded women pilots in his squadron, the WASP finally gained their belated militarization from Congress in 1977.
THE WASP WINGS

We must remember the WASP’s were not military and therefore were not awarded wings by the Army Air Corp. But Jacqueline Cochran had a very good understanding of what wings mean within the US Military and knew she had to reward the women who trained and became WASP’s. Using her own funds she developed wings. Many of these wings are very rare today because of the small number that were made and awarded. While it is not known how many were made for certain we can get an idea by the size of each class. What is interesting is that the first seven graduating classes each had their own wing, class W-8 was due to get the new standard WASP wing, but the wings did not arrive on time so they got one of their own. After that everyone got the new unofficial, official wing. Here are the details of the wings as best as we can figure them out.

Class 43-W-1

The wings were made by Taylor and Co.. An old and respected jewelry company in Houston, Tx. The wings made by taking a standard Army Air Corp wing and soldering a shield for the class on the center. The shield was the training shield of the 319th Training Squadron in the center of the wing. The first wing was actually made of two styles. The first 24 wings were made from Gemsc Air Corp Cadet hat badge missing the propeller that was in the center and the second was of the GEMSCO Aerial Gunner which had the bullet ground down flat and the shield solder on the wing. 24 cadet wings were purchased by Lt. Alfred (Al) Fleishman at the Ellington Post exchange. On his way back to the 319th he designs a shield to fill the gap between the wings where the Prop devise would be.
The First 24 Wings

Gemsco Instructor Badge
Sterling Silver

Lt. Alfred (Al) Fleishman and in a more familiar sight leading the WASP’s in Calisthenics on a table.

GEMSCO Sterling Silver

Version 2 based on GEMSCO Aerial Gunner and made up the remaining wings required. Since Lt. Fleishman purchased 24 of the instructor wings, it is not known why a few of these were made or how many.

Taylor and Company is one of those family owned jewelers that were common in the United States before malls. Terry Taylor the current owner said that during WWII the business was owned by Harry Taylor a jeweler and his father and his uncle Raymond Taylor also worked in the business as a jeweler until he joined the Marines in 1943. During this time period Taylor was a large business with about 25 employees making a large a number of military items. One of their salesmen used to go to military bases and sell directly to the GI until he would be chased off base by the MP’s. Both Harry and Raymond may have been involved in making the wings, but also very likely is was Rutherford Mayeur, a master engraver, who likely made the shields. Also Terry believes that Sonny Windt, shop foreman, and Bud Hogan were involved in the production of the wings.
Class of 43-W-2

Something must have gone wrong with the first jeweler as the rest of the wings W-2 to W-8 were made by another Waco, Tx jeweler. But he followed the same concept of taking a Army Air Corp Wing and soldering the shield for each class on top. The W-2 wing was similar to one of the W-1’s in that they used the cadet hat badge without the propeller and he shield in the center.

Class 43-W-2 graduation review

Jacqueline Cochran (in black dress) and class 43-W-2 WASP graduates.

Cadets 60
Graduated 43
Graduation Date: May 28th, 1943
Class of 43-W-3

Starting with the wing for Class 43-W-3 we find that the wing that was selected changed once again. This time the jeweler used a Balfour Pilot wing. Considered at the time to be one of the nicer wings made. He cut down the center shield and ground it flat. Then once again soldered the training DI to the center.

Cadets 58
Graduated 38
Graduation Date: July 3, 1943

Betty Hanson and Vivian Gilchrist

Leader is Gretchan Gorman and holding Guidon is Dora Dougherty.
Class 43-W-4
The wing for Class 43-W-4 once again changed. This time the background wing that was selected was a Bell Observer. Once again he cut down the center shield and ground it flat. I do know that working with this wing it is much harder to flatten the center area and wonder if the section was due to good looking shoulders in the design of the Bell wing. Then soldered the training DI to the center.

Cadets 151
Graduated 112
Graduation Date: August 7, 1943

Katy Loft (shoulder length hair), Didi Moorman, Gene Slack, Kathleen Kelly,?

Eileen Roach PT-19
Class 43-W-5

The wing for Class 43-W-5 did not change from W-4. The Bell Observer wings was used again for this class. The only change was the correct W-5 DI in the center.

Cadman, Epsberg, Fremd

Ringing the Bell

Cadets 127
Graduated 85
Graduation Date: September 11, 1943

Ethel Finley
Class 43-W-6

The wing for Class 43-W-5 did not change from W-4 and W-5. The Bell Observer wings was used again for this class. The only change was the correct W-6 DI in the center. Maybe a standard had been established.

Cadets 122  
Graduated 84  
Graduation Date: October 9, 1943
Class 43-W-7

The theory of a standard went out the window with the issue of W-7 wings. Or the fact that a standard wing was coming resulted in what can only be called a mess for W-7. The must have known that with Class W-8 a new standard wing had been selected and Josten had been selected to make them. I am willing to bet he did not want to stock wings for future classes as it appeared the end of his production was near. In the case of W-7 three different background wings were used. They were all similar in design since they were what was called the Juarez Design. The name comes from the selling of these wings across the border to new Flyers who went down south for a weekend, etc. The three wings used were: Pilot in Sterling, Pilot in Coin Silver and an Observer in Sterling.
Class 43-W-8

This was the first class that was due to obtain the new official wings, but they did not arrive in time from Josten. So the jeweler had to make up a wing for this class. The new wing design was based on a diamond or lozenge shape in the center of the wing, representing the shield of Athena, goddess of war and wisdom. The wing shown below was made from a Amico Pilot wings with a diamond shape soldered onto the center.
Classes 44-W-1 to 44-W-10

The “Official” WASP Wing made by Josten in sterling silver finally arrive for class 44-W-1 and became the standard for all classes until the program ended with the graduation of class 44-W-10.

L-R Mary Hilberg (44-W-6), Helen Venskus (44-W-8), Anita Paul (44-W-6), Jean Ward (44-W-8), Mary E. Martin (44-W-3), Ruth Hageman (43-W-5), Katherine Kleinecke (44-W-9), Mary Hiller (43-W-5).

44-W-1 Cadets 101 Graduated 49 Graduation Date: February 11, 1944

44-W-2 Cadets 112 Graduated 49 Graduation Date: March 11, 1944

44-W-3 Cadets 100 Graduated 57 Graduation Date: April 15, 1944

44-W-4 Cadets 95 Graduated 52 Graduation Date: May 23, 1944

44-W-5 Cadets 132 Graduated 72 Graduation Date: June 27, 1944

44-W-6 Cadets 136 Graduated 72 Graduation Date: August 4, 1944

44-W-7 Cadets 103 Graduated 59 Graduation Date: September 8, 1944

44-W-8 Cadets 108 Graduated 49 Graduation Date: October 18, 1944

44-W-9 Cadets 77 Graduated 55 Graduation Date: November 8, 1944

44-W-10 Cadets 117 Graduated 68 Graduation Date: December 7, 1944

Reunion Wings-

As with any group they held reunions and they also had wings made for the reunions. Unfortunately some people have sold the reunion wing as real. They look like the Josten wing but use a pin back and not clutch back as the original. Two other reunion items that are sold as real. These reunion items as shown here.

Made in 1986 and only 50 were made. 25 in Silver and 25 in Silver plate.

1994 The original was made in China for a company in Arkansas. These were used in museums on uniforms as the real one were being stolen.

Another WASP wing that is sold as real is one with an oversized diamond was made by a WASP’s husband for her. She must have lost hers and so he made her a pair of wings. It got copied but is not real.


This is a “joke” says WASP Shutsy Reynolds and she should know. Shutsy made copies of many of the WASP wings for years and ran the WASP Stores. It was never found in an attic in Sweetwater, it was just someone making money.
Crafting of the class wings:

As you have read each wing was created from the base of one or more wings. In this section I will show the class wing and the original wings that were used as the base wing. Also a little on the process of making the wings.

W-1 Version 1
and
W-2
Gensco Instrutor Wing
Also when gold plated and a propeller was added to the center is was the hat badge for Cadets

W-1 Version 2
Gemsco Aerial Gunner wings.

W-3 Balfour Pilot Wing
W-4, 5 and 6 were made using the Bell Observer Wing. Bell Jewelers were in Albuquerque, NM

W-7 is more interesting since three different wings were used. But from the front they all looked the same when finished. These are called the Juarez wings made by the Walter Lampl Company. They had a manufacturing operation in Mexico during the war. They were struck in the USA to meet US Government requirements.

The company was begun in 1921 by Walter Lampl. Based in New York, the company continued under his leadership until his premature death in 1945. His wife, Sylvia Lampl, inherited the company, which was then managed by his oldest son, Walter, Jr. until the company went out of business in 1959. They were not known for military items but rather for custom jewelry.
W-8 used an AMICO wing as a base. This was an emergency wing, since the Joston wings were on order and didn’t show up.

**Process**

The making of the WASP wings was a two step process.

Step one -- the Shield. It appears that Taylor and Co. made a die to strike the center shield. In discussions with Terry Taylor, he stated they have in the past found all kinds of dies in the shop and used them for paper weights. The shield would then be engraved with the unit and class number.

Picture Shield

Step Two -- Sawing and milling of the base wing. The upper part of the center section would have to cut off and then milled flat to allow for soldering of the shield to the center.

Two pictures wings
first cut, second milled

Next the two parts would be silver soldered and finally polished.