

The Storyteller: Woman finds aviation just plane exciting

By Charmaine Smith-Miles (Contact)
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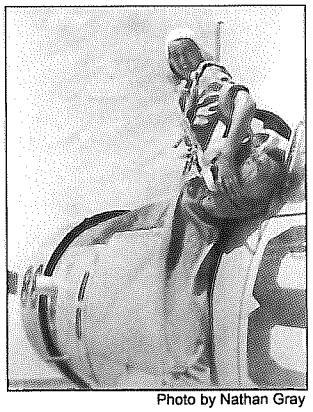


Photo by Nathan Gray

Lois Nash is pictured here on an AT-6 airplane in 1943 after her training in Sweetwater, TX.



Photo by Nathan Gray

Lois Nash stands in front a poster of a B-26 airplane which was one of the many planes Nash piloted as a Womens Airforce Service Pilot (WASP) during World War II. She will be receiving a congressional medal for her service.

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On a table in Lois Nash's living room at Lake Keowee in is a brown metal plane, a B-26 plane. It is the only thing, besides a lamp, that sits on the small stand. And in her hands are pictures of the same plane. And two posters stand up on the floor — at least one of them is another B-26.

It's her favorite plane. But her story doesn't start with that plane.

Instead, it begins with another aircraft, a Ford tri-motor, a much smaller plane that had three engines and was made of corrugated metal. She was 5.

Nash, her parents and her sister were at place they often went on Sunday afternoons: an airport in Dearborn, Mich., near her hometown of Ferndale. The skies were clear. Planes were taking off and landing like usual. But this day, they did something different.

They went up in one. That was the day she fell in love.

"They were offering a special that day on plane rides," Nash said. "I can still see the Rogue River, the Detroit River, Dale Department store and looking into Canada. It's still as clear as can be. That gave me the idea that I wanted to learn how to fly."

Twelve years later, in the seat of an open-cockpit plane, Nash knew. Flying was her love, and she wasn't content to just sit in the passenger seat.

As a woman living in the midst of World War II, she never really thought about flying commercially. But she knew she could fly as a hobby, as a private pilot. It would just take a lot of money for lessons.

So she headed to Eastern Michigan University. A degree and a position as a teacher may give her the money she would need to take those lessons. Nash had no idea then that a president and war would give her an opportunity she'd never thought of.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt put the Civilian Pilot Training program into place.

"It was a wonderful opportunity. When I called, it was full of young men already," Nash said. "Three weeks later, a fella dropped out. So they called me."

It was a $25 course and a window to her passion. Two years later, Nash received a call from the



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government. They needed pilots to train the men so they could go overseas and fight. At the time, she said no. She had to finish school. In June, she graduated. By July she was headed on a plane to Sweetwater, Texas.

Some of the pictures she shows off today are of those days. A younger Lois Nash smiles from the photo wearing a "zoot suit." She and a half-dozen other women are all smiling, wearing belts around the baggy suits to hold them up. The suits were made for the men. But they had to make do. They had a mission to accomplish.

They were there to train men to fly so they could fight in the war.

"We would tow these targets for the B-24 gunners to shoot at," Nash said. "They would have us go up to 10,000 feet, put on oxygen masks and then go up to 20,000 feet. It was OK with me. I didn't have any incidents. But some of the other girls did. And that wasn't good."

In the next 18 months, Nash would serve her country while her husband was fighting in North Africa and Italy. All the women at Sweetwater had boyfriends, brothers or husbands in the war effort, Nash said. They all "wanted to do what they could to help."

Nash flew 16 different kinds of planes in those months. She flew B-24s, B-29s and the B-26. The B-26 was her favorite.

"It was the fastest bomber that they had at the time," Nash said. "They were so maneuverable."

Nash said she flew every chance she had. She flew pilots in training, equipment and even two wounded soldiers one time. Here, Nash stops to take me on a journey. This is one of the flights that stands out in her mind.

She was flying from Pueblo, Colo., to Tucson, Ariz. The soldiers were in the back of the plane. About 60 minutes in the air, one of the engines quit. Luckily, she was able to turn around and head back to Pueblo. But all the way, the plane was losing altitude.

"I remember looking down at the airport runway and seeing fire trucks, ambulances, and like 100 people. I just made a nice big turn and used most of the runway to land," Nash said, looking at me and smiling. "That was the first incident we had. At first the men weren't sure they wanted women pilots. But they soon learned, 'Hey, these girls can fly.' "

And fly they did.

More than 1,000 women trained at Sweetwater — 1,102 to be exact, Nash said. There were 10 classes of women pilots to go through the place. And before their job was done, 38 would be killed during their duty. They didn't know it then, but they were paving the way for women today to be able to enjoy the same thrill they had in the skies.

About 30 years later, during President Jimmy Carter's era, the women were militarized and became "Women Airforce Service Pilots."

Now, 60 years later, there are about 300 of those original "WASPs" left. Nash is one of them. And in January, she and her fellow female pilots will go to Washington, D.C., to receive the highest honor the U.S. Congress can award a civilian — the Congressional Gold Medal.

But for Nash, it wasn't about medals or rank or even getting paid.

She just wanted to fly and serve her country.

"It was wonderful," she said. "I loved every minute of it. I couldn't get enough flying."

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