

Women in Aviation History at Naval Air Station Corpus Christi

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Post World War I and the Creation of the National Youth Administration

The National Youth Administration (NYA) was a program that trained youth in the United States between 1935 and 1943. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Executive Order creating the NYA stating: “I have determined that we shall do something for the nation’s unemployed youth because we can ill afford to lose the skill and energy of these young men and women. They must have their chance in school, their turn as apprentices, and their opportunity for jobs — a chance to work and earn for themselves.”¹

At Naval Air Station (NAS) Corpus Christi, NYA participants were trained to be aviation mechanics in support of World War II. Apprenticeship in the program lasted eight weeks after which the student could qualify for civil service, typically working in the Assembly and Repair Department.



Now an expert mechanic, Mary J. Farley shows a NYA trainee how to repair a Wright Whirlwind motor. (Library of Congress)



Young women and men of the NYA sit in front of the sign at NAS Corpus Christi. (Library of Congress)



Eloise J. Ellis was appointed by the civil service to be senior supervisor in the Assembly and Repair Department, 1942. (Library of Congress)

Youth, and more specifically women, were finding skills and leadership in the civil service work they were doing. For example, Mary J. Farley (pictured left), only 20 years old, had a private pilot’s license and had already made cross country flights. She ranked highest of all competitors on her civil service examination with a grade of 89 and was promoted to crew leader in less than five months.² Eloise J. Ellis (pictured above) was promoted to a supervisor in the Assembly and Repair Department. In that role she was able to maintain morale among the women and help solve personal and logistical problems.³

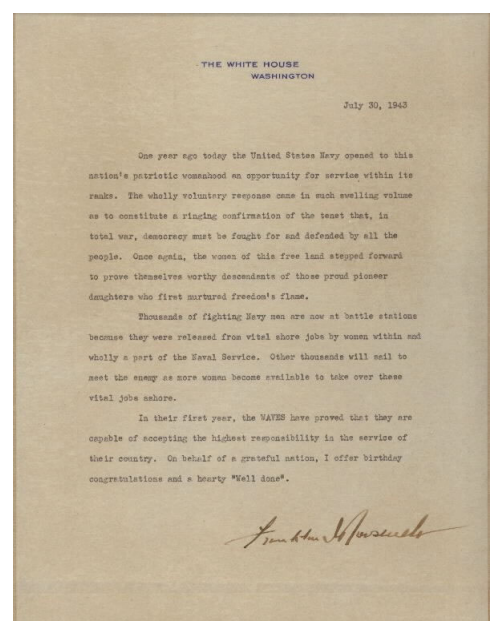
By the time the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, these women were completing jobs originally given to men freeing those men to focus on training for the impending entrance of the United States into WW II.

The WAVES of World War II

On July 30, 1942, Roosevelt signed the Navy Women’s Reserve Act into law, creating what was commonly known as the WAVES — Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service — a division of the U.S. Navy created during WW II to free up additional male personnel for sea duty.⁴

Serving as WAVES, women were able to take on many supporting roles such as Link trainer instructors, parachute riggers, aerologists, meteorologists, aircraft mechanics, radio operators, security officers, metalsmiths, hospital corps WAVES, dental assistants, gunnery instructors, secretaries, Chaplain’s assistants, pressure chamber technicians, air traffic controllers, cryptographers and language instructors to the Latin American aviators.⁵

As Naval Aviation News printed in 1943, “Bon voyage, boys, the girls are ready to take over!”⁶



Letter from Roosevelt praising the great work of the WAVES volunteering for their country. (Library of Congress)

Bring in the WAVES

By 1943, over 300,000 women were working in the aircraft industry; comprising 65 percent of the workforce. Most women serving in the WAVES felt a sense of accomplishment. Anna Phile Miller reflects how “the war made me proud to be an American, and being a WAVE gave me a way I could show my love for America.”⁵ Working as an instructor on a flight simulator known as a Link trainer, Doris Coppin Brand said, “I just don’t have words for telling you how fulfilling it was, we felt we knew we were doing something useful. It was challenging because most of us hadn’t had anything to do with aviation before...this experience.”⁷

Jobs to be Done...

Brand also remembers her formal training, in Atlanta, Georgia, for the Link trainer and being assigned to Corpus Christi (see Hangar 1015 page for more information on the Link trainers). As a Link trainer instructor, it was her job to put the cadets through a series of flying scenarios in a simulator that resembled a cockpit. The cadets were unable to see out of the simulator and had to rely on their instruments to pass the scenario. Even though most of the cadets disliked this section of their flight education, she found it “...interesting and challenging and even fun after we grew comfortable with it.” ⁷

Fifty years after the war, Parachute Rigger Arlene Tilley proudly notes the exact number — 1,054 parachutes — including one assigned to Admiral Nimitz — that she repaired while at Main Base.⁵ Parachute rigging was a very precise task and important to saving lives of the cadets and pilots. When asked how she felt about her service as a rigger, Mary McClusky Balaban said, “I did a lot of good for the pilots and the air crewmen that had to fly with them. I had four of my parachutes used in an emergency.”⁸ In fact she explains, one of the officers



Control tower operators, including a WAVES at work, circa 1944. (National Archives)

...and Obstacles to Overcome

Even though the WAVES felt great pride in the work they were doing and many recall good experiences; there were often struggles to allow the women to do the jobs they were trained. “One WAVES inspecting officer at Chase Field in Beeville, [Texas] was enraged to discover that WAVES trained as gunnery instructors were instead being employed to make coffee for the men.”⁵

“In the early days, as women began to filter into Navy life, male resistance was not especially subtle. But this soon changed to an attitude of acceptance and eventually respect as females proved themselves. Women held their own and broke down barriers.”⁹

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt wrote after her visit, “there is quite a big contingent of WAVES [at NAS Corpus Christi]. I was amused to learn that some of the officers, who had been very much opposed to them, were now clamoring for more. These first graduates are doing pioneer jobs and, from all accounts, are doing them very well.”¹¹



Example of a WAVES conducting Link training. (National Archives)



WAVES carefully folding the silk fabric while packing a parachute, 1943. (National Archives)

came to thank her personally for packing his parachute. He was involved in an accident where six men lost their lives and he survived with just a broken leg.

The WAVES assigned to the hospital corps were all classified as pharmacist mates, but roles other than nurses assistants were available. One of the more specialized jobs the WAVES were assigned was to the physiology department as a low altitude chamber technician. The chambers were created to simulate the atmosphere between 18,000 to 35,000 feet and included a chiller to mimic the colder air with elevation. Romona Forman Erwin explains that the pilots had to take the training to learn what altitudes required the use of an oxygen masks and how they would become incoherent by the lack of oxygen.¹⁰

The WAVES did an amazing job taking on important roles to ensure the pilots were safe and fully prepared for the war.



Picture from “The Beam,” the NAS Corpus Christi newspaper, 1944. Here the first WAVES to graduate as low pressure technicians. (Public Affairs Office at NAS Corpus Christi)

Making Way for Women Pilots

“In April 1946, after their wartime service had ended, the Women’s Reserve was established on a permanent basis. In 1948, the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act phased out the Women’s Reserve and changed their status from reserve to [active duty].”¹² Ensign Gale Gordon continued to push the envelope for women aviators and was the first woman to solo in a Navy training plane.

In 1973, Secretary of the Navy John Warner announced a test program to train female naval aviators. Eight women, four already active duty naval officers, were selected to complete the 18-month training program. Six of those women received their Wings of Gold.¹² Lieutenant Junior Grade (LTJG) Barbara Ann Allen completed her training at Corpus Christi. On Feb. 22, 1974, at NAS Corpus Christi, LTJG Allen received her Wings of Gold; becoming the first female naval aviator.

While determining the success of the first program, no other women were admitted. In 1975, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) announced a second class of flight training for women. Six more women earned their Wings of Gold. With the success of these first two groups, they decided to include a third group into the Aviation Officer Candidate School (AOC) at Pensacola instead of heading straight to training to better prepare them as officers.¹² Thus began the continuous training of female naval aviators the same as men.

The ‘Raven’ has Landed

NAS Corpus Christi not only had the honor of training the first women naval aviators, but another first for women in aviation. Lieutenant Commander (LCDR) Brenda “Raven” Robinson became the first African American woman to her earn her Wings of Gold in a ceremony at NAS Corpus Christi on June 6, 1980. Robinson said, “They were opening a door, I didn’t know was closed.”¹³ She further remarks “a black woman can handle the same rigors that a guy that’s in my exact same position can handle.”¹³



LTJG Madeline Swegle (US Navy Press Office)



LTJG Barbara Allen (National Naval Aviation Museum)



ENS Brenda “Raven” Robinson
(Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals Facebook Page)

The Need for Speed

In July 2020, LTJG Madeline Swegle became the Navy’s first African American female tactical air pilot. She completed her primary flight training at NAS Corpus Christi in Training Squadron 27 (VT-27) paving her way for more advanced training. She selected tactical air training and completed the program in Kingsville, Texas. Swegle commented, “I’m excited to have this opportunity to work harder and fly high performance jet aircraft in the fleet...I never intended to be the first. I hope it’s encouraging to other people.”¹⁴

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