

BOOKS



THE RAMSEY COLLECTION

Pilot Nadine Ramsey admiring her P-38 in March 1946. She served in the Women Airforce Service Pilots program.

Up in the sky: Paying tribute to pilot pioneer

Author chronicles life of her sister-in-law, Nadine Ramsey

BY SETH COMBS

Real heroes rarely brag about their accomplishments.

And to hear Raquel Ramsey tell it, her sister-in-law, Nadine Ramsey, was humble until the end.

"She was human, with all the foibles and weaknesses, but she was also a hero," says Raquel from her home in Los Angeles.

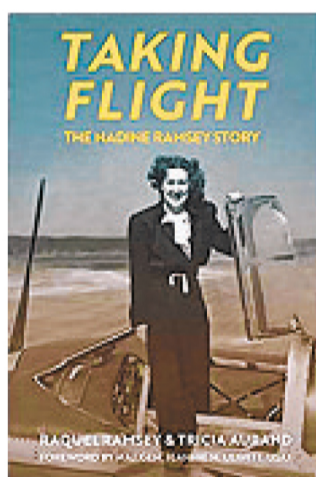
Indeed, Nadine Ramsey, who passed away in 1997 and is the subject of Raquel's new book, "Taking Flight: The Nadine Ramsey Story," possessed a certain humility throughout her life. From growing up in rural Kansas to her time as a pioneering woman pilot during World War II, Ramsey rarely saw herself as anything other than someone who would not be told what to do.

"She was a restless one," says Raquel, who was married to Nadine's brother, Lt. Col. Edwin Ramsey, for 37 years. "She was a pragmatist. There was vision, guts and that spirit of 'I'm going to fight,' but there was also this sense of family and caring for those around you. That's what made her so noble and the Ramsey family so special."

The "guts" in question was Nadine Ramsey's time serving in the Women Airforce Service Pilots program in the early 1940s, just after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor.

While the program mainly served to ferry military aircraft in order to free up male pilots for combat, the 303 women chosen to serve in the WASP program also worked as training and test pilots.

Despite their pioneering



"Taking Flight: The Nadine Ramsey Story" by Raquel Ramsey and Tricia Aurand (University Press of Kansas, 2020; 320 pages)

bravery and sacrifice at a time when women were not allowed to serve as pilots in the Armed Forces, the WASP program had no formal standing within the U.S. military. In fact, members of the all-volunteer organization were paid less than their male counterparts and even had to purchase their own uniforms.

"That's what Nadine was fighting for, also: recognition of the WASPs," says Raquel. "Ed would always say, 'Look at what happened to my sister.' They just disbanded them and said, 'We don't need you anymore.' Can you imagine?"

It wasn't until 1977 that the U.S. military recognized them as veterans, and in 2009, they were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. Nadine herself will soon be honored with a plaque at the Mount Soledad National Veterans Memorial in La Jolla.

In many ways, "Taking Flight" (University of Kansas Press) is the fulfillment of a promise Raquel made not only

to Nadine Ramsey, but to Edwin Ramsey as well. The latter would often tell his wife just how much he admired his sister's bravery. Despite being a war hero himself and the subject of the Oscar-short-listed documentary "Never Surrender: The Ed Ramsey Story," he would often remark that Nadine was more brave than he'd ever been. So after Ed Ramsey had finished his own memoir (1990's "Lieutenant Ramsey's War"), he told Raquel he'd like to tell his sister's story next.

"He said to me that he wanted me to write his sister's book because she had more guts than he ever did," says Raquel, who was still working as a high school English teacher at the time.

But when Raquel and the editor of Ed's memoir attempted to speak with Nadine about her time serving in the WASPs, they found that she wasn't as forthcoming as they'd hoped.

After Nadine passed away in 1997, followed by Ed in 2013, Raquel says she felt a new sense of urgency to tell her sister-in-law's story.

"When (Ed) passed away, the first thing I tried to do was immerse myself in Nadine's story and fulfill this promise," Raquel recalls. "God gave me another new mission, but it came from Ed."

Working with screenwriter Tricia Aurand, whom Raquel teamed with on "Never Surrender," the two began work on "Taking Flight" shortly after finishing the documentary.

Given that Nadine had already passed away, there were limited first-person accounts of her time serving in the WASPs.

Raquel says it was up to her to search the National Archives to track down as much official material as she could while also interviewing surviv-

ing WASP members, many of whom were well into their 80s and 90s.

"One of the ladies I interviewed for the book, and I just autographed a book to send to her, is 98 years old," Raquel says, referring to Iris Critchell, a fellow WASP who also represented the U.S. in swimming during the 1936 Olympic Games.

Still, Raquel was able to track down much of what she needed to paint a picture of Nadine's life both in service of her country and, later, as a pilot and businesswoman living in Southern California. While Raquel handled much of the archival duties that make up "Taking Flight," she says that Aurand brought a "screenwriter's touch" to the story, penning first-hand accounts of important moments in Nadine's life.

"Tricia added so much spice to the book," Raquel says. "You see the characters really coming to life."

The resulting book interweaves history and biography, and it has already been optioned for a documentary to be narrated by Jane Seymour. It's certainly a respectful portrait of a dedicated, pragmatic and, yes, stubbornly humble woman who made history — a story the author hopes will inspire others.

"That was the answer I found through my research. I saw in her all the guts that [Ed] was talking about. What she went through just to become one of the WASPs, teaching men to fly these planes. That's a woman ahead of her time," says Raquel. "That's one of the messages I wanted to convey through this book: That there are these people with a great sense of patriotism that I think we need more of today."

Combs is a freelance writer.