

# RAY'S BLOG

October 8, 2020

## NADINE RAMSEY: ONE OF THE OFTEN-FORGOTTEN WOMEN AIRFORCE SERVICE PILOTS OF WORLD WAR II

*"This is not a time when women should be patient. We are in a war, and we need to fight it with all our ability and every weapon possible. Women pilots, in this particular case, are a weapon waiting to be used."* — **Eleanor Roosevelt, 1942**

Nearly 1,100 women answered the call to service as pilots ferrying planes all across the United States from early 1942 until the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) was disbanded in 1944. During that time, these women had to overcome the discrimination they faced simply because of their gender, but still provided a valuable service for the war effort.

One of those women was Nadine Ramsey, born in 1911 in Carlyle, Ill. She and her younger brother, Edwin, born in 1917, lived there with their parents while their father worked in the early oil fields. Her story, "Taking Flight: The Nadine Ramsey Story," written by Edwin's widow, Raquel "Raqui" Ramsey, and Tricia Aurand, was just published by the University Press of Kansas.

The family moved on to El Dorado, Kan., after their sister, Treva, died after accidentally pulling a kettle of boiling water onto herself. Still working in the oil fields there, their father was away from home for days at a time, often as far away as Texas and Oklahoma.

After a fit of rage with their mother during one period when he was home, their father was arrested and taken to jail for the night. He was found hanging in the cell the next morning. Early in 1930, when their mother was having a difficult time providing income and overcoming the stigma of her husband's suicide, they moved to Wichita, a few miles north, to start over.

It was there in "the exploding aviation industry" that Nadine became interested in flying. She attended a business college for the secretarial and bookkeeping jobs that women held and were expected to do. But she was interested in flying and paid for flying lessons with her meager salary and received her limited commercial pilot license in the spring of 1937. Flying continued to be her interest, and she became one of the first two women to carry the airmail for the U.S. Postal Service.

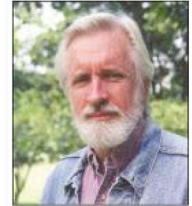
Her story continued to be intertwined with her brother.

In the intervening years before the war, Nadine continued flying and moved to California in 1939, got a job with Douglas Aircraft Co., and then took flight training at Mines Field near where she lived. She soon accepted a job at Aero Acceptance Corp. and offered flight training and sales as part of her secretarial duties after buying a small plane in 1940.

While taking a prospective customer flying who wanted to buy a plane for her husband, a retired Marine Corps captain, they crashed when the small plane was caught in a downdraft. Both women escaped with "crushed and mangled" legs, and Nadine also had a broken back and some broken ribs. Doctors wanted to amputate one of her legs. She refused.

As soon as Edwin heard, he left law school at Oklahoma University to go take care of her. He later encouraged her to get back in a plane and said she would, "even if he had to drag her by the hair." After her recovery, he persuaded her to pursue her plans to fly because there was a war coming and she'd be needed.

The war did come, and the Army Air Force needed pilots but initially only allowed men to fly military airplanes and ferry them around the country, to tow targets in training and to test repaired planes where they were needed for training, and to head for combat in Europe and the Pacific.



### ABOUT RAY ELLIOTT

He's been a farmer, a Marine, an oilfield roughneck, an English and journalism teacher and a dreamer. He's also been writing columns, features and novels that touch people's lives for more than 30 years.

### BOOKS BY RAY ELLIOTT

With the Silent Knowledge  
Wild Hands Toward the Sky  
Iwo Blasted Again  
Bittersweet: The Story of the Heath Candy Company  
(with Richard Heath)

Despite the need for pilots, it took a great deal of effort to allow women to fly. WASP was formed in 1942 and some 1,100 women, most of whom were in their early- to mid-20s eventually served as pilots—Nadine was in her early 30s. They were allowed to live on military bases, trained as male military pilots were, wore uniforms and marched, but were paid less than men and were not allowed to leave the United States.

Thirty-eight of these patriotic women—who ferried about 12,000 planes, completed countless domestic missions, and flew more than 1 million miles in service of the war—died during their service, fewer than the men who were doing the same service. Yet these women could not be buried in military cemeteries, and the military wouldn't pay for funerals or to send their remains home. And flags could not be draped over their coffins.

The WASP program was discontinued in 1944. At the last graduation ceremony of the last training class, Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold, commanding general of the U.S. Army Air Forces, said he hadn't been sure "whether a slip of a girl could fight the control of a B-17 in heavy weather." But he said, "It is on the record that women can fly as well as men."

Nadine Ramsey, like every one of these patriotic women, loved flying, loved the country and wanted to be a part of the war effort, just as did other men and women in uniform and the people at home working to provide services and material necessary to defeat the Japanese and the Axis powers.

During the time these women were serving, that released their male counterparts to head overseas for combat duty, they flew almost every type of military aircraft, including the B-26 and B-29 bombers and even towed targets for ground and air gunners who were training with live ammunition. They thought they would become part of the military for their service rather than being disbanded after two years. Nadine was one of only 26 of the WASPs to fly the P-38 fighter aircraft.

Only a few of these women were able to get piloting jobs after the WASP was disbanded. After the war, commercial airlines would only hire them as stewardesses, but not as pilots. Originally stationed at Love Field in Dallas, Texas, with the WASP, Nadine had asked to be transferred to Long Beach Army Air Base in California and was able to stay on as an attaché to the Sixth Army Ferrying Group.

In the late 1960s, the WASP started to have reunions, and the women began to fight for military recognition. That status was finally granted in 1970. It had taken years before the Air Force allowed women to fly. They finally received the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor, when President Barack Obama signed the bill awarding the honor. By that time, many of the pilots had died. Nadine died in 1997.

Edwin died in 2013. He had been an Army officer since the early 1940s, was stationed in the Philippines when the Japanese attacked there at the same time Pearl Harbor was bombed, and was living his own story. He had led the last calvary charge of the American Army in military history, for which he received a Silver Star, and then disappeared in the Philippine jungle countryside with others who refused to surrender. He became the leader of some 40,000 guerilla fighters until the Japanese surrendered. They placed a \$100,000 bounty on him because of the guerillas' success in fighting the Japanese Army and the relevant intelligence he was able to send to Gen. Douglas MacArthur in Australia.

Weighing less than 100 pounds when MacArthur and the American Army returned to the Philippines, Edwin was later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross by MacArthur and went on to a successful career in civilian life with Hughes Aircraft and his own company. In retirement he wrote a memoir, "Lieutenant Ramsey's War," and after his death in 2013, a documentary, "Never Surrender—The Ed Ramsey Story" was filmed for which his widow served as executive producer.

Ed had always said that Nadine "had more guts than I ever had," and a book should be written about her. Her story is the story of women's fight for equal treatment as pilots and how these women overcame discrimination and contributed greatly to the war effort. Nadine continued flying after the war and purchased her own P-38 (which had cost \$15,000 to build), for \$1,250. She performed in the piston-engined fighter plane in an acrobatic show in Phoenix and ended up featured in Life magazine in an article heralding her "as the only woman in the world to own one of her own."

There's much more to this book about her family and this amazing woman and those she flew with during the war. It's a book that clearly shows that women are quite capable of doing exactly what men do and deserve equal treatment.