

PROCEEDINGS

U.S. NAVAL INSTITUTE | The Independent Forum of the Sea Services

June 2021

TAKING FLIGHT: THE NADINE RAMSEY STORY

Raquel Ramsey and Tricia Aurand. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2020. 312 pp. \$29.95.

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The engine sputtered as she neared the airfield in Newark, New Jersey. Nadine Ramsey quickly radioed the tower and deftly maneuvered her P-51 Mustang onto the tarmac moments before the engine cut out. She was piloting the pursuit aircraft cross-country from California for shipment to the front in Europe. Ramsey had no time to let the close call rattle her. She jumped into a P-39 Airacobra for a flight back across the country. Ramsey was one of only 303 pioneering women qualified to fly these fighter aircraft, and her skills were desperately needed. World War II raged on, and Ramsey logged thousands of hours in service as a Women Airforce Service Pilot (WASP), ferrying aircraft for overseas delivery.

Taking Flight adds to growing literature about the WASPs, whose service freed men for war overseas while providing critical logistics and training support at home. Raquel Ramsey and Tricia Aurand memorialize the story of Nadine Ramsey, an aviator with a lifelong, irrepressible love of flying. It is not a story of glass ceilings easily broken, applauded by all around her; rather, it is an honest assessment of the effect the rapid opening and abrupt closing of doors had on the women who served as WASPs. Ramsey's courage and grit are traced in parallel with the creation and disbandment of the WASPs, illustrating the adventures, dangers, and patriotism of their service.

This is a tale of Ramsey's dichotomous life: of her great achievement and bitter heartbreak. Soaring the skies above Wichita in the 1930s, Ramsey found her calling as a pilot at a time when it was

highly unorthodox for a woman to be behind the controls. She raced aircraft in cross-country competitions, flew for the U.S. Air Mail, and taught others to fly before she joined the ranks of the WASPs at the beginning of World War II.

Ramsey's service as a WASP was brief. As 1,102 women flew tireless hours ferrying aircraft, towing artillery targets, and testing rebuilt planes, they expected to be militarized and formally join the ranks. That promise was broken as the war wound down. Men returned from the front, and the WASPs were seen as having replaced men temporarily—no longer were they needed to free men for duty. The WASPs were deactivated in December 1944, two years after their creation.

At their disbandment, General William H. Tunner of the Air Transport Command, for whom the WASPs had flown, praised them, noting "They have proven beyond all doubt that in times of national emergency, America can give its women the most challenging assignments with complete confidence." Those parting words must have stung. The WASPs had been assured of their imminent militarization since joining the force, only to be left without the dignity of an honorable discharge. It would be decades before Ramsey and her compatriots gained recognition.

Taking Flight reads like a love story—Ramsey's passion for flying, the elation of piloting the most powerful military jets of the time, and the heart-wrenching disappointment when the WASPs were deactivated. Her sister-in-law, coauthor Raquel Ramsey, writes with familial love, sharing not only the stories of wartime victories, but also the struggle to find a foothold after deactivation.

When a service member achieves a first today, celebrations and institutionalization abound. This was not the case for Nadine Ramsey and her fellow WASPs. *Taking Flight* enriches the achievement of those still claiming "the first" titles by situating their successes in a long line of fearless women who blazed the trail. It belongs on your bookshelf as a profile in courage, heartbreak, and triumph.

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