

Colorado Springs Author spotlights female pilots

- Guy Priel

Everyone has heard of Amelia Earhart, the famous female pilot who disappeared in 1937 over the Pacific Ocean while attempting to circumnavigate the globe. But, there are many female aviators of the period who are little known and long forgotten.

Except by Sarah Byrn Rickman, a Colorado Springs resident, originally from Tennessee, who has written a book about Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II. She recently signed copies of her book following a presentation at Manitou Springs Heritage Center.

When Rickman was in the ninth grade, Earhart was the only woman pilot featured in history books. "Reading about her gave me a romanticized view of women who flew airplanes."

While growing up, she had heard about the Women's Army Corps (WACs) and the Navy Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), but she had never heard of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs).

While working as a newspaper editor in Centerville, Ohio 20 years later, she began to hear about a group of 28 female pilots who served in the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) during World War II. That organization, according to Rickman, morphed into the WASPs. The mission of the organization was ferrying airplanes from factories to military bases and ports, allowing male pilots to go to combat missions overseas without having to worry about the supply side of it.

Before Thanksgiving, Rickman gave a presentation to about 70 people during the program and book signing event, which was sponsored by the Manitou Springs Public Library. During the presentation she explained the history surrounding the founding group of female pilots, known at the time as the Originals. She also showed a documentary film she made regarding the interviews she conducted while researching the book.

One pilot of note was Nadine Nagle, who she described as a "sweet, white-haired grandmother" who was part of the next-to-last class of women who trained to fly with the WASPs. It was her story that led Rickman to her interest in writing a book about their history, describing her story as a heart grabber.

Nagle had never been in an airplane when she was young. Her husband was a B-24 bomber co-pilot who died in 1943 when his plane crashed in England following a bombing raid over Germany.

"She was devastated," Rickman said. "She decided that if he couldn't be there to fly for his country she would do it in his place." she went to WASP training school in Texas, learned to fly, then served for six weeks before the organization was disbanded.

Other stories in the book focus on the Originals, including the founder of the WAFS, Nancy Love and pilots Florence Miller, Teresa James, Nancy Batson Crews, BJ Erickson, Dorothy Scott and Katherine Thompson. All of them were veteran pilots and each had accumulated at least 1,400 hours of flying time before they joined the organization.

Rickman said Crews challenged her to write a nonfiction account of the WASPs, She had previously concentrated solely on writing fiction and this would be her first foray into non-fiction.

She told Rickman that there was a perfectly true story that had never been told and she should be the one to tell it.

The WAFs went into service on Sept. 10, 1942 and was merged with another organization of female pilots, the Women's Flying Training Attachment under the leadership of Jacqueline Cochran in August 1943 to become the WASPs.

"They were patriots who loved their country and saw their efforts as something they could give to their country," she said.

Working as U.S. federal civil service employees with no military standing, a total of 1,102 women served in the WASPs. In addition to ferrying planes from factories to training schools, military bases and shipping docks, they also towed gunnery equipment and tested newly overhauled airplanes.

They piloted almost every aircraft available to the military, ranging from training craft to pursuit planes such as the P-47 Thunderbolt and P-51 Mustang to large bombers such as the B-17 Flying Fortress, the B-26 Marauder and the B-29 Superfortress.

In all, 38 members were killed, 11 in training accidents and 27 on active-duty missions. They were stationed at 122 air bases, delivered more than 12,000 airplanes and flew more than 60 million miles.

The organization was disbanded on Dec. 20, 1944. During the two years, the members received no military benefits, such as medical care, insurance or burial subsidy. According to Rickman, as the war drew to a close, women were viewed as unnecessarily taking jobs away from men.

Rickman, who has written nine books about the WASP pilots, is a pilot and a member of the Ninety-Nines International Organization of Women Pilots. The second edition of "The Originals," first published in 2001 was released in 2017.