



**TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH
DEANIE PARRISH
5 DECEMBER 2012**

QUESTION: Why did you join?

DEANIE: Well, that's very easy to answer. I joined because I had learned to fly about a year earlier. When I was growing up in Florida we had no female pilots in my little town. But just before World War II began a primary school for cadets moved into the town and here were all these young men who were my peers. I was working in the bank in the afternoons and on Saturdays as a teller and these good-looking instructors would come in to [LAUGHS] cash their checks. One day I wondered why they didn't have any girls learning to fly, so I asked one of the instructors why just because I'm a girl can't I learn to fly? And he didn't have an answer. So I decided to find out. So I found a married instructor who owned his own private airplane and asked him if he would teach me to fly. And he did. This was before the WASP were ever thought of. So I learned to fly from this private instructor. While I was learning to fly, on my first solo flight I had asked my instructor before do you think I will ever make a good pilot? He said, Deanie, I can't tell you, but someday something will happen and you will know whether or not you will be a good pilot. On my first solo flight in a Piper Cub we had made a couple of landings and he said I think you're ready to solo. So we stopped, he got out of the airplane, and in a Piper Cub the instructor always sits in the front seat and the student in the back seat. He knotted up his seat belt so it wouldn't go down in the rudders and he got out. He said, okay take it around. When I took off in that Piper Cub in the back seat and got up to an altitude where you always level off before you climb any higher because you're almost out of power, I got to that point I had my hand on the throttle, on the stick, and as I started to push forward on that stick to level off, it came off in my hand. My first thought was he did this on purpose to see if I would be a good pilot. Then I realized I was about to crash so I grabbed my seat belt off, held the throttle wide open and I reached over that front seat and with the tips of my fingers I could reach that front stick and I started easing it forward. When I knew that I had sufficient speed that I wouldn't crash, I climbed over into the front seat. I finally got the seat belt off and on. He said as he watched me from the ground he swore if I ever got down alive, I would never fly in an airplane again. But as I got the seat belt on and started my pattern around the field to come in and land, all of a sudden I noticed there's a big red sign up there that says do not solo from front seat. I thought, well, it's too late [LAUGHS]. So I came in and made a fairly decent landing. As I taxied over toward him he started walking away. I finally just stopped and I thought, he'll never let me fly again. He turned around and came back over towards the airplane with his head down. When he walked up he looked in the back seat and looked up at me and he said what in the hell are you doing in the front seat? And I just pointed to that stick. When he saw that stick he said something to me that I never forgot. He said now you know you have the right stuff to be a pilot. And that was before John Glenn had the right stuff. So months later, of course, the WASP were organized but I was too young. You had to be 21 in order to apply and you also had to have your private pilot's license, which that was no problem. So when I was 21, I didn't realize that maybe I could have sent it in a little earlier, [LAUGHS] I sent in my application to be accepted as a trainee in the WASP program. When it came back I had to take the physical and all the other things, then I was accepted. But I did it because my country needed me and I felt

that was the best thing that I could do. Everybody did something and I felt that that was the thing that I could do best to help. That's why I went in and became a WASP.

QUESTION: Why were the WASP created?

DEANIE: They were created because during the first few months of World War II the Army Air Forces had lost so many male pilots over North Africa until they were desperate for pilots. And that's when Jacqueline Cochran talked to President Roosevelt's wife about having women fly and she agreed with her. She went to General Arnold and with his help the WASP were created.

QUESTION: What does it stand for?

DEANIE: It stands for Women Airforce Service Pilots, the first women in history to fly America's military aircraft.

QUESTION: They were not allowed to be part of the official military team.

DEANIE: That is true. General Arnold and Ms. Cochran wanted us to be militarized, but he told her it would take too long to try to get the Congress to militarize them now. Lets just get them in and get them flying and then we'll go back to the Congress and get them militarized. And of course that's what they did. But when he finally went to Congress to try to get us militarized the Congress voted it down. So we were never militarized.

QUESTION: Why wouldn't the American government want women to serve in full military roles?

DEANIE: I think it was because it was a different time in our history. Women, before World War II started, did the smaller things. There was a difference between what men did and what women did. Women primarily were thought to be housewives and mothers, they weren't considered professionals like the men. When World War II started it became necessary for workers to build airplanes or to drive the fire trucks because so many of the males were going to combat, or were at least in military service soon after World War II began. So then women began to take over some of the jobs that men had had and that's why eventually, of course, we we're almost on equal status.

QUESTION: How many miles did the WASP log?

DEANIE: We logged 60 million miles.

QUESTION: How many women served as WASP?

DEANIE: Well, there were 1,074 of us. There were 25,000 women who applied to go into the WASP training, but they only accepted 1,830 of them. Of that 1,830, there were 1,074 of us who completed the training and became WASP.

QUESTION: This was kind of dangerous business?

DEANIE: Well, any time you get off the ground isn't it a little dangerous? [LAUGHS] But well, yeah, I would say it was dangerous. We lost 38 of our girls either in training or after they had graduated. We had one of the girls in my flight. She came from I think New Hampshire or somewhere. We were within three weeks of graduating when we had to take cross-country flights. We had to fly less than 1,000 miles in a primary trainer and then another cross-country of over 1,000 miles in the advanced trainer. Well, this was our trip in the primary trainer. We were flying up to I believe it was Amarillo and back to Avenger field in Texas. We all took off and

when we came back I was amazed, many of my classmates ran out to see who it was. Then they told me that there had been a mid-air collision. Somebody from my class had been killed. So we waited. As each plane came in we were so anxious to see who it was. Finally, there was only one of our airplanes missing, it was Mary. There had been a mid-air collision with a girl who was flying an advanced trainer for her first solo flight. We don't know what happened, but we took up a collection because we were not militarized so the government wouldn't pay to send a body home. I guess they would pay to send the body but they would not pay for an escort. We wanted to have one of our classmates accompany her body home. Then we found out they would not let us put an American flag on her coffin, but we sent her home and about three months later we went ahead and graduated. Her mother requested of the commanding officer at Avenger Field that she wanted to come and talk to all of the young women who were in training still. So he gave her that permission and she came and she talked to them. She said I'm here because I want you to tell your parents what will happen if something happens to you. With that, she pulled out a yellow telegram. She said, this is the telegram that I received from the War Department when Mary was killed. She read them that telegram and all it said was, your daughter was killed this morning. Where do you want us to ship the body?

QUESTION: You were not required to have a flag draped over the coffin?

DEANIE: You're right. We were not allowed to have a flag.

QUESTION: How did that make you feel?

DEANIE: Well, I was proud of what we did to help and I think that I'm sure if our government could do it over they would do it differently. I pray they would.

QUESTION: Why would someone risk their neck when the Nation didn't treat you as equal partners?

DEANIE: Well, I don't know. We loved our country. I think there was a sense of patriotism then that maybe we've lost a little bit of it now. I would hope not, but we loved our country. We wanted to do whatever we could to help because our brothers, our fathers, were getting killed and we wanted to do something. We even had little children that would gather any kind of chewing gum wrappers that had foil on them because they needed foil. Housewives would save the grease from cooking because it was needed. Everybody did something. And to me what I could do best was to fly.

QUESTION: Everyone was involved.

DEANIE: You are so right. I think we were probably the best-kept secret of World War II.

QUESTION: What values did the WASP have?

DEANIE: Oh, those values were something we learned from the time we were born and we kept those values. And I pray we still have them; honor, integrity, patriotism, service, commitment, and faith. When my class arrived, I don't know what other classes did, but when we arrived at Avenger Field to begin training we were taken into the gym and when we walked in Ms. Cochran was there, the founder of the WASP. And I'll never forget what she said to us. First we had to take the oath of office, which every person who serves in the military must take. But after we took the oath, she said to us, you may be living in a man's world, and you may be flying a man's airplane, but I want you to remember when you get out of that airplane, you're a lady. I

want you to look like a lady, and I want you to act like a lady. And don't you ever forget it. I have never forgotten it.

QUESTION: What did your family and friends think?

DEANIE: Well, I think they were a little overwhelmed when I decided to learn to fly, but I had a very patriotic family. Both of my brothers, one brother was a Marine, the other brother was in the Air National Guard. And my two sisters were both secretaries out at an Army bombing range. So we were all doing something. I think my parents expected us to be patriotic and to do whatever we could. But not only my family, every family I think felt the same way. That's why we all pulled together. That's how we won World War II.

QUESTION: Was there sabotage of WASP planes?

DEANIE: Well, I was blessed because I wasn't at that air base where that happened, but I know from having interviewed WASP who were stationed at Camp Davis, North Carolina. At that air base were the first girls that were doing something other than ferrying aircraft. The first classes were just sent to the ferry command, but this class was the first class to be assigned other than just the ferry airplanes. They were sent to Camp Davis, North Carolina. They flew targets, they did anything that any male pilot did. But during the first week they were there, they had two airplanes that cracked up that two WASP were killed. Immediately the girls were a little bit skeptical of flying those airplanes, so they notified Ms. Cochran and she came. While she was there, the next week, another girl was killed. She flew many of the airplanes the girls had been flying. When they inspected this one, they found sugar in the gasoline tank. They don't know if those ones that had been fatally killed had sugar in their tanks. They didn't know. But she said they found sugar in one of the tanks.

QUESTION: What are your thoughts on women flying today?

DEANIE: I think it's wonderful. If that's what they choose to do, I think it's fantastic. And yes, they fly everything that they Army, Air Force, and I'm sure there are many in the Navy also. But hey, we paved the way [LAUGHS].

QUESTION: Following the war, were the WASP records sealed?

DEANIE: Yes. Once we were disbanded on the 20th of December in 1944, they sealed all of our records and they sent them to the government archives. They stayed there for 33 years, unopened, and that's at the end of the time I believe the Air Force Academy, somebody, put out a statement that they were graduating ten women pilots, the first women in history to fly military aircraft. And we said not true. A group of WASP went to Washington and with the help of Barry Goldwater they went to the Congress to ask them to give us the veteran status that we had earned 33 years earlier. So finally it took almost a year before the Congress gave us veteran status.

QUESTION: So you had not received the traditional veteran's benefits?

DEANIE: No, we did not. I paid for my own college education after I got out of the WASPs.

QUESTION: What affect did this exposure have on the public?

DEANIE: The public didn't know. I know that when my daughter decided to make a documentary on the WASP, she went to every school in Waco and to Baylor University library.

She checked everywhere. She found two footnotes about the WASP. This was about 17 years ago. And that's when she decided she was going to help tell the history of the WASP. So she quit her job and since then that's what we have been trying to do.

QUESTION: Why do you think that is so important?

DEANIE: I think it's important for children to know that there were people who came before them that were patriotic and what they did to help keep this country free. I think every child should know about everyone who has served their country. I think it's an inspirational thing for kids. It's not only educational, it's inspirational and it's motivational, especially for young girls to know that they too can do whatever they want to do if they put their mind to it and keep persevering, because with God's help nothing is impossible.

QUESTION: Why is the Women's Memorial so important?

DEANIE: Well, I think it's important especially for the young people. I know that we had our WASP exhibit that my daughter and I put together that was in that memorial for a year and a half and just the times that we visited the number of people who would come through and they had never heard of the WASP. And here was an exhibit about these women. I think it's important for kids to study history because from history we learn and it just amazes me that they would disregard something as important as the people of the greatest generation who kept this country free.

QUESTION: Were you at the memorial when it was dedicated?

DEANIE: No. But we were there when we had our exhibit shipped there. They were going to keep it for six months, and they kept it for about a year and a half.

QUESTION: How did that feel when the president finally recognized the service of the WASP?

DEANIE: Well, I didn't go to the White House. Evidently they were very strict on who would be there, so I was not there for that signing. In fact, I believe there were only three WASP who were allowed to be at that signing. As far as I know, he didn't know anything about the bill until it came to his desk.

QUESTION: It must have felt pretty good to finally get that recognition.

DEANIE: That felt good. But it was not for the medal. When I began the quest for that Congressional Gold Medal, it was a way of educating America about the history of this group of women that most of America had never heard of. I felt if we could get the Congress to approve that and have a national ceremony, that there would be news people there that would spread this word all over America, and educate the American people. And I believe that's exactly what happened. I know that there were many, many news people there with their cameras, and I challenged them to get that history out across America. I believe that is what that accomplished.

QUESTION: Not getting recognition must have been awful.

DEANIE: Well, we didn't do it for publicity. We did it to serve our country. But I'm so pleased now that at least some of the schools perhaps have put that history in the history book, because I think that as I say, I believe that it's educational, it's motivational and it's inspirational. And I know even at the Women's Memorial in Washington one day when I was there, a little boy came in with his parents and he was amazed that women flew airplanes so many years ago. And I

think it encouraged him. I said to him, you can do anything you want to do if you put your mind to it. And it may not be flying airplanes, but don't ever give up on whatever your dream is of what you want to become.

QUESTION: What does that struggle say about their determination?

DEANIE: Well, evidently women are pretty determined. I don't think women do things for glory. I think they do things that help other people, I don't know. That's a difficult question for me to answer.

QUESTION: Was everything you did an experiment?

DEANIE: Well, sure, because when we became WASP and started doing different missions, I think each new mission they felt that women couldn't do that. But I think we proved that women are as capable as men. They may not be as strong, but their minds are just as capable as the minds of men. And I think women have proved that over and over again. You know, airplanes don't know the difference between a man and woman, they just know the difference in a good pilot or a bad pilot.

QUESTION: What can we do as a Nation to better recognize the service of American women?

DEANIE: Well, I'm glad you asked that question, because I have been trying for several years to have some kind of a statue in Washington on the mall where all the other statues are that would commemorate the WASP. I even went to the Air Force Association because the Air Force, of course, has a big memorial there. And I said, could you just give us a little teeny piece of land, just enough to put a statue that represents the WASP. But they said they couldn't because somebody else owns the land. So America if you're listening [LAUGHS], could you help us build a memorial to the WASP someplace in Washington? I know there's one for the nurses, and that's wonderful, but could you help us build one for the WASPs?

QUESTION: They say women aren't the best leaders.

DEANIE: I think women can be leaders just like men.

QUESTION: What did you sacrifice?

DEANIE: I don't think I sacrificed anything. I think I gained. I gained tremendous knowledge. I think just knowing what all the other WASP did, we did so many different things. We didn't all just ferry airplanes. We did many different things. As for myself, I was sent first to Greensboro Air Force Base in Mississippi as an engineering test pilot and that was a big job. You would take an airplane that had been wrecked or had major repair and then before the cadets or the instructors could fly it, we would have to take it up and test fly it to make sure that the controls and everything on it worked. I did that for about two months and then I was sent down to Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida to B26 training. It was also called the Baltimore prostitute. It was built in Baltimore and it had no visible means of support. At one point some of the men were a little bit skeptical about flying it. Ms. Cochran got 25 women that went to Dodge City and learned to fly that airplane so that the men then would not be hesitant about flying it. But when I was at Tyndall I went to training for several weeks and then I checked out in the B26 and flew them as a tow target pilot. We would fly out over the Gulf of Mexico with a crew of four and with a tow operator we would let out a tow behind the airplane. And a B24 had I believe seven turrets on it. They were training gunners for combat. Those gunners would shoot live

ammunition at that target with color-coded bullet. They had dipped the bullets in wax of different colors so that they could test how accurate each gunner was. When we would finish the flight we'd go back over and drop the target and then the instructors could check it and see how accurate those gunners were. That was what I was doing when the WASP were disbanded.