

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

NELL BRIGHT

An interview conducted on

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Interviewer: Mark Howell

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

“George Ricks Memorial WWII Oral History Archive”

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BRIGHT: My name is Nell Bright, I was a WASP, a Women Airforce Service Pilot, during World War II. We were the best kept secret of World War II. Uh, there were a thousand women pilots during World War II, but very few people knew about it, because they figured if the enemy knew that we were in bad enough shape to have to have the women fly the airplanes, why, they could defeat us just pretty quick. Anyway, that's uh, so that's who I am. I got interested in flying when I was eight years old and my dad took me out to, uh, out to a pasture where there was an old plane landed and was taking people up, and he asked me if I wanted to go up, and I said yes. So I got to go up in an open cockpit airplane when I was eight years old, and I must have put that in the back of my mind, because after I finished college I started taking flying lessons. So, by the time of Pearl Harbor, and all that, I already had my private license and enough hours to qualify, and at that time, I was, uh, waiting to fly one morning out at English Field there in Amarillo, and I saw this article, and at the end of the article about the Women Flying Training Service [Women's Flying Training Detachment], and if I was interested to write to Jacqueline Cochran in Fort Worth- which I did. I got a letter from her saying "Come to Fort Worth to be interviewed," and I did, and we had to be 21, and have 75 hours, and a private pilot's license- which I had. So I was accepted into the seventh class. We had the same training as the men. We were the first women to be trained in flying military airplanes. In primary, we flew the PT-19. In basic, we flew the basic trainer, and then advanced, we flew the AT-6 and the twin engine C-78. I went in in May of 1943 and finished in November, got my wings. There were 20 out of our class to get picked to go to B-25 transition school. Girls hadn't flown B-25s before, maybe some of them had that were in the ferry command, I'm not sure about that, but we were the first ones to train to be in transition school. We logged about 165 hours between November and the middle of February, which was a lot of hours long, and that takes some time. We were attached to the Third Air Force, and uh , there we trained the boys at Fort Bliss when they went overseas. We were not allowed to go overseas . We did, uh, all of our flying here in the States. So, we flew almost night and day there in El Paso because we were flying B-25s and B-26s, towing the targets 2500 ft behind our airplanes, and the boys on the ground would shoot at the targets, and they shot colored bullets so that their officers could tell whether they hit the targets or not. And we flew strafing missions, and on the strafing missions we flew the P-47 , and we flew the two Navy Helldivers- the Dauntless A-24 and the Curtiss A-25. We would go up and, just practically over their heads, they were supposed to jump out of the truck and hit the ground, which sometimes they didn't, sometimes they did. It was a lot of fun for us to do that anyway. And then at night, we flew the twin-engine Beech, the AT-7 and the AT-11, to train the boys into using searchlights. We would fly a pattern, and then they would try to find it with the searchlights. One night we were towing targets at night for them to find the target, and the flag started breaking in front of us rather than behind us, which was not a very good idea. So, we called and told them we had to do a little evasive action to get away from where they were shooting and told them that we were going back to base, that we'd cut the target and let it go and we're going back to base and when they learned to shoot better we can come back. So, we were there until December 1944, when the war was winding down and they decided that they had enough pilots, a lot of the pilots were coming back from overseas, and so they needed to get rid of the women. Now, technically, we were with civil service, so we were technically not military, although everybody thought we were - we had all the respect of officers, everybody thought we were officers- but we were technically with civil service. Therefore, we didn't get any rides home or anything, but we were deactivated on December 20th, 1944. We had no veteran status because we were in civil service. Our files were sealed for over 30 years, and we finally got our veteran status after going through Congress

and really fighting for that in 1977 when they announced that they were now training women in the Air Force, and that was the first time women had flown military airplanes. Well, that kind of got our dander up and so we went to Washington, D.C. - several of the girls did, I did not go- but I sent some of my files and did what we had to do to get another bill through Congress, and Berry Goldwater helped us and finally got our veteran status. I had a brother who was also in the Air Force. He was not a pilot, he was a crew chief on a B-25 and he was stationed in Sicily. And when he was sent home to be mustered out, he had to come clear to El Paso where I was stationed so I met him. During those days, you mostly took Greyhound buses to go clear across the country, and I told him that I had arranged with my commanding officer that he would let me have a B-25 to take him home to Amarillo, and he said, "Oh no, I can just take the bus," so I said, "No, we're gonna fly you." I flown with the other girls that I flew with and, uh, he was not very happy to get into the B-25 with his little sister as pilot, but, uh, he sat back where the crew chief usually sat and did not look very comfortable at all. Tommy Thompson was with me so Tommy and I had decided that, unbeknownst to him, we would do the Doolittle takeoff. So, we tax it down to the end of the runway there, and, of course, with that kind of takeoff you hold the brakes really tight and then run the engines up almost full speed and then turn the brakes loose and you get off the ground pretty fast. That's what Doolittle had when he had the B-25s bombing Japan they had to take off the carrier so they had to learn to get those B-25s off the carrier real fast. Well, my brother was not too happy. He was just white, he was sitting back there thinking this was probably his last day on Earth. So, when we got over Canyon I told him I thought we ought to go down and buzz our hometown and he didn't think that was necessary, but we did it anyway. And [unintelligible - 9:42] and we're practically, by the time we got back to altitude, we were practically in the Amarillo Air Force Base. I have never seen anyone so glad to get off of an airplane in my life as my brother was when he did not have anything to say whatsoever, I think he was shocked that he was still alive [laughs]. So that was something that Tommy and I both enjoyed [laughs]. So, after, all of us, of course, just went home after we were deactivated in 1944- at the end of '44 before the war was over- we went back home and went about our lives. Some of the girls kept flying and some of us, another girl from Canyon and myself, we ferried some of the surplus airplanes from one base to the other. I don't know what the government was doing with them, but, for a while after, but we decided that we were pretty beat up [laughs] and not, not very well taken care of because we were just taking them to a graveyard. We took them to Wickenburg, Arizona and Tucson, Arizona. That was about it, but we didn't do that very long. But, some of the girls did keep on flying, and some of them were instructors, but it was very difficult because you go to the airlines- we went to the airlines because we had a lot of experience- and ones of us that were in the early classes and a lot of flying time, so that was something we thought we might do is get into flying with the airlines. Well, they wouldn't even talk to us, because women don't fly. So, that was about the end of most of us that, except every once in a while, you know, we got to fly. So, that's about the end of my story. I then became a stockbroker in Phoenix, Arizona. One of the first women stockbrokers in Phoenix. I was a stockbroker for 50 years and finally retired from that when I was 85. Right now, if I make it till June, I'll have my hundreds. Everybody during World War II wanted to do something for our country. People didn't really realize how close we were to Germans on the East Coast and the Japanese on the West Coast getting into our country, so we felt like we were doing our part anyway. Of course, we also enjoyed flying all those airplanes too. We flew about everything that the, uhm, the Air Force had, I was checked out on 12 different airplanes. So anyway, that's my story and thank you very much for inviting me to do this.