

# Virginia Aviation History Project Report



## Ann Tunner: A Life Well Lived

by Linda Burdette, Feature Article Editor

Margaret Ann Hamilton Tunner was born in Enid, Oklahoma, on September 3, 1917. Her first airplane ride was in a bi-wing plane for which she paid three dollars. Taking off from a dusty strip named Woodward Field in Enid, Oklahoma, she experienced the thrill of spins and stalls and wasn't certain she wanted to fly again.

Mrs. Tunner had attended three years of college at Oklahoma College for Women and Oklahoma University when she got what she considered a great summer job making \$90 a month for an oil company in Tulsa. Working the switchboard and doing general office work, she was thoroughly happy with her job and when summer became fall, she didn't return to Oklahoma University. Her mother encouraged her to continue her education, but didn't expect her to discover aviation. Like many WASPS, Tunner's decision to become a pilot was a surprise to her family. She decided to pursue her pilot training without telling her family. "I didn't tell anyone. I didn't want any opposition. I had to be sure." She was pleasantly surprised when, well into her training, she finally told her mother about it, and her mother was very supportive.



*photo courtesy of the Tunner Family*

WASP Margaret Ann Hamilton, circa 1943, after completing her training with the Women's Flying Training Detachment in Sweetwater, Texas

First she learned of an aviation school in Tulsa, the Spartan School of Aviation. She interviewed there, but became discouraged when informed that the tuition was a whopping \$750.

Then she mentioned her interest in aviation to a friend and was told that she should look into the brand-new Civilian Pilot Training Program at Tulsa University. This program was founded by the government, ostensibly to train more civilian pilots for the U.S. But in actuality, the War Department had already observed the military build-up occurring in Europe, especially the German emphasis on air power, and wanted to ensure that if the tensions in Europe erupted into war, the U.S. would have a ready supply of pilots for the military. The program required two years of college, a physical examination, and a completed application. She wanted to enter the program immediately, but was told there were no openings. She asked to be put on a waiting list and the very next morning, she received a call that someone had dropped out of the course.

“The classes were at night and flying was from a little dirt field” she said. She received her private pilot’s license upon completion of the program, but when she went to rent an airplane, she discovered that it cost \$1 per minute. Realizing that she would never be able to afford the costs unless she bought her own airplane, she joined with another woman in her class to buy a black Piper Cub. For the next two years, she continued to work in Tulsa for Standard Oil and Douglas Aircraft Company, flying her Piper as part of the job.

In 1942, while reading a magazine, she came across a notice about an Army training program for women pilots in Fort Worth, Texas, the Women’s Flying Training Detachment headed by Jacqueline Cochran. This program, part of the Army Air Force’s Training Command was intended to produce women pilots for the Air Transport Command and other AAF commands in the United States. She jumped in her Piper, flew to Fort Worth, and was immediately accepted. More than 25,000 women applied to the program; to qualify, each applicant needed 200 hours of certified flight time (later downscaled to 35 hours). Although Tunner was among the first trainees, eventually 1,830 women would be accepted into the program and would receive pilot training at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas.

As Cochran was setting up her program, Nancy Harkness Love was establishing the Women’s Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron in September 1942. Amazingly, one of the supporters of this program was Ann Tunner’s future husband. In 1942, Brigadier General William H. Tunner was commanding the Air Transport Command and its Ferrying Division and recognized the need to recruit civil service female pilots to shuttle planes from factory to Army airfields. The U.S. was in desperate need of pilots and just as Rosie the Riveter was called upon to fill in for the boys going to war, the women pilots of the WFTD and the WAFS took over the flight controls to free the men pilots for combat. The two programs merged in August 1943 to become the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPS).

The training was comparable to cadet training, Tunner said, and in addition to flying, they had classes in subjects like mechanics and navigation. Training was rigorous, and just over 50 percent of trainees made it to graduation. They then moved on to ferry aircraft from factories and airfields to military bases nationwide. Tunner graduated from the second training class, Class 43-W-2 on May 28, 1943. By this time, the WAFS had proven that women could fly pursuit aircraft and Tunner was sent to a special course at the pursuit school in Brownsville, Texas.

And so Mrs. Tunner became one of 1,078 WASPs who flew during a two-year period during World War II. Stationed in Romulus, Michigan, Tunner moved airplanes all over the U.S. stating that she spent a lot of time “criss-crossing” the country. “It seemed that if there was a plane in New York, it was needed in California, and vice versa.” The WASPS were limited to flying within the continental United States because they were civilians. Although some of the senior War Department officials, most notably General Hap Arnold, wanted to assimilate the women into the military, the organizers of the program quickly realized this move was politically untenable and they decided to bring the women on board as civil servants. They hoped to address the militarization of the

WASPS later. This decision had two major impacts on the women pilots. First, since they were civilian employees of the military, they received no military-type benefits. Although 38 WASPS lost their lives during World War II, their families received no compensation. Their fellow WASPS often took up collections to pay for transport of their bodies home for burial. Second, this issue would eventually contribute to the disbanding of the WASP program. In 1944, a law was introduced in Congress to transfer the WASPS to the military within a separate corps, similar to the WAC and the WAVES. Furor ensued. The War Department pushed to incorporate them into the Women's Army Corps (WAC) which was unacceptable to many WASPS. Some civilian male pilots, upset by the loss of civilian flight training schools and commissioning programs, lobbied against the bill. The House Committee on the Civil Service reported that the need for ferry and pursuit pilots had eased and the WASPS could be disbanded, which occurred in December 1944. So the WASPS were not recognized for their military service until 1977 when President Jimmy Carter signed legislation providing former WASPS with veterans' status. Ann Tunner was instrumental in that action, testifying before Congress along with her husband, other WASPS, and Senator Barry Goldwater.

It was not an easy life for the women pilots. Originally there were no uniforms for the WAFS pilots and Tunner bought and wore men's slacks and shoes to have comfortable flying gear. Uniforms were later issued when the WAFS merged with the WASPS, but when they finally got their first uniforms, they received the winter uniforms in July.

The pace of work was grueling. Tunner reported that even though the WASPS were a small group, they were far too busy to make close friends. For example, WASPs daily flew P-47s to Oakland for embarkation to the Pacific theaters of war. At Oakland the women pilots were picked up by a C-47 which flew most of the night back to Evansville. The aluminum bucket seats and the cold in the upper altitudes made for a miserable journey. On one such trip, Ann, to make the best of it, hunched in her parachute bag, knees against her chest, and another WASP zipped her in.

Tunner's major assignment was as a pursuit ferry pilot in the AAF's Air Transport Command, moving high-performance aircraft all over the continental United States. She bragged that there was almost no type of airplane headed for the war that she didn't fly at some time. She would routinely switch from the cockpit of P-40 Warhawks, P-39 Aircobras, P-63 Kingcobras, P-47 Thunderbolts, and P-51 Mustangs. She flew numerous assorted medium bombers and transports, everything from the DC-3, a cargo plane, to the B-25 and B-26, twin engine bombers. Only three WASPS flew the B-17s and B-24s, the largest planes at the time. She never flew those aircraft solo, but one of her most treasured memories is when she served as Nancy Love's co-pilot on the four-engine B-17 Flying Fortress.

One of her duties was ferrying Aircobras to embarkation points for further shipment to the Soviet Union, a feat which, 50 years later, resulted in her invitation to the White House to meet Presidents Yeltsin and Clinton in the Rose Garden.

One of Ann's favorite memories was her first flight in a P-51. "I was called to Base Operations at Romulus and instructed to fly a new aircraft to the Canadians near Hudson's Bay. It was a shiny new P-51 Mustang, I had never seen one before. They told me that I had to do two take-offs and landings for my check-out. So after a brief cockpit check, I took off, did two touch-and-goes, and was on my way to Hudson's Bay at 350 mph in the dead of winter with my compass and a road atlas." Did she land safely? "Of course, I did."

When asked about her favorite airplane to fly, she said "I can't choose one favorite. They were all special in their own way. In some ways, the P-47 was a dream to fly – hard to get into the cockpit, but extremely

comfortable to fly. But the most exciting was the P-51. But every airplane had its own personality and I loved all of them.”

As noted before, the WASP program was disbanded in December 1944. The decision to disband was particularly hard on many of the WASPS. The war was still ongoing and they rejected the excuse that there was no longer a need for ferry pilots. Many of them reported completing their last flight and walking away from the airfield, looking back at the dozens of aircraft sitting there, waiting to be delivered to points of embarkation, but no ferry pilots to fly them.

Never one to bow to difficulty, Tunner accepted the demise of the WASP program with the grace and dignity she showed throughout her life. Following her release, she attended Columbia University in New York City; served as secretary to the noted aeronautical innovator and theorist, Alexander P. de Seversky; ferried WWII planes from “graveyards” to new owners; and worked as a professional model for the John Powers Agency.

In 1948 she went to Japan as a civil servant with the occupation forces. There, she again encountered General Tunner, the “Father of the WAFS”, whose first wife had died in 1946. By this time, General Tunner was well-known for his accomplishments during World War II. He was the commander of the airlift that flew “over the Hump” between Assam and Kunming in China to supply American soldiers and Chinese armies fighting the Japanese and he masterminded the synchronization of the Berlin Airlift that supplied food and coal for 2.3 million Berliners for 15 months after the Soviet Union blockaded land routes to the city in 1948.

Following the Berlin Airlift, General Tunner was assigned to Japan with the occupation forces and no doubt

surprised to come across a former WASP there. But romance flourished and General Tunner and Ann Hamilton were married in 1951.



picture courtesy of “Tony” Botticello

On her 92nd birthday party, Ann Hamilton Tunner was honored by the Gloucester County Veterans of Foreign War. Here she is visiting with noted author, L.H. “Bucky” Burruss, a VFW Life Member, Vietnam Vet, writer of *All That Matters* and several other books.

From 1954-57, General Tunner served as the Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) and later assumed command of the Military Air Transport Service, the fore-runner of Military Airlift Command, a position from which he retired in 1960. Mrs. Tunner accompanied him to all these assignments and continued to be interested in aviation, although it was difficult to fly during these years.

Upon retirement from the military, she and General Tunner bought Hockley Farm in

Gloucester County, Virginia, and lived there for the rest of their lives. At Hockley, the Tunners enjoyed gardening, raising sheep, and were very active members of the community. General Tunner died in April 1983.

In 1993, Ann decided to get back into flying, starting by taking dual instruction in a Maxair Drifter ultralight trainer. For her 78<sup>th</sup> birthday she was granted Presidential permission to co-pilot an F-15 Eagle from Langley Air Force Base, Virginia. In the cockpit that day, she was asked if she would be more comfortable with a

normal takeoff or a rapid one that employed the after-burners. Her daughter, Suzanne Tunner Hudson, relates that she immediately answered “let’s go for it!” and the pilot shot off at full speed.

Ann Tunner died at the age of 92 on October 13, 2009, at Hockley Farm. One month earlier, she had been honored with a birthday party at the Gloucester County Chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. She was in fine form that day, opening presents and sharing stories with the members. She even compared notes with one of the members, a former P-51 pilot, trying to determine if she might have been the ferry pilot for the aircraft he flew during World War II. She and John G. Corley, II were unable to determine if she had flown his airplane, but both agreed that it was a definite possibility and laughed about the coincidence that brought them together.

She was an amazing lady, bright, energetic, gracious, and certainly courageous. One of her friends, Nancy L. Miller, summarized it as “a good life, well lived, and we will miss her greatly.”

It was in 1949, after the war, when Ann Hamilton was working in New York, that a photographer for Collier’s Magazine saw her at Roosevelt Field, Long Island, New York. The resulting picture graced the cover of Colliers on April 2, 1949. In their words: “As she strode away from her plane, he saw in the combination of space, strength and freedom, a suggestion of the spirit of America. And when he brought the picture to Collier’s we saw the same quality. We asked Miss Hamilton what America meant to her. This is what she told us:



On April 2, 1949, Ann Hamilton was featured on the cover of Collier’s Magazine, striding away from her airplane at Roosevelt Field, New York. At this time, she was working as an assistant to aeronautical innovator and theorist, Alexander P. de Seversky. Right after this picture was taken, she left for Japan to work with the occupation forces there.

As she strode away from her plane, he saw in the combination of space, strength and freedom, a suggestion of the spirit of America. And when he brought the picture to Collier’s we saw the same quality. We asked Miss Hamilton what America meant to her. This is what she told us:

“Say America to me and I see a great sweep of color that seems to fill the world. I was born in Enid, Oklahoma. Out there, everywhere a child turned, he faced the United States. For me there was never any end to America. There still isn’t.

“I’m a flier. As a WASP during the war, I flew just about everything they’d let a woman handle. I know what it is to sit in the sky feeling the thrill of power in your hands. By the time you read this, I’ll be in Japan with the military government helping to get the idea of democracy across to people who once were our enemies.

“For America, this job is something like sitting in the sky with tremendous power at your command. The U.S. could take advantage of its strength, but it doesn’t—for all of us have grown up with respect for the liberties of groups and individuals. If there are going to be storms ahead, it will be our duty to stay on the beam, to keep our sights on basic human rights. If we do that, we’ll continue to be

what I call the best bunch of people under God's blue sky.”

How else could one end the story of such an extraordinary life?

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Discussions with Ann Tunner, September 13, 2009

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## **Tell A Story! Leave Your Mark on Time!**

When you look at aviation history you always hear of the big names like Amelia Earhart or Charles Lindbergh. But aviation history is much more than the big names. Our Society's book project is the history of us. We need your stories about things aviation that inspired you, scared you, pleased you, made you learn, made you grateful, history you saw or took part in, non-history you saw or took part in and day-to-day aviation you enjoy. Its all good. Don't think you don't have anything important to say. Don't be afraid of being corny. This is going to be a mosaic of you Society and we need you all to contribute.

For just the effort of putting pen to paper or computerating to the tune of one or two pages you can be immortalized in this book. Bearing in mind the relationship of flying stories to fishing stories feel free to tell your story your way. To paraphrase Neil November, Chairman Emeritus, "Don't let the facts get in the way of a good story!" Whatever you write you will be able to tell your friends you are published! Most importantly, we get a good cross section of civil and military flying experiences of our membership and commit it on paper for the ages.

Several brave souls have responded to the call as this newsletter goes to print.

We need many more stories. Please add your name to this list. We will post additional names to this list in the next newsletter.

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David C. Hahn  
Chairman, Archives/Collections Committee