



LESSON 7.3.4 | ACTIVITY | Compare and Contrast: Female World War II Pilots & The Tuskegee Airmen

PURPOSE

This activity is designed to give students a better understanding of the ways in which women and African Americans played significant roles in the military effort. While both the WASPs and the Tuskegee Airmen are very specific examples of the contributions of these two large and important groups, their stories will still provide students with an understanding of the ways in which marginalized

groups were essential to the war effort. Students should also note how the respect shown to these service groups contrasted with the ways women and African Americans were often treated in American society. That contrast will be an important example of how experiences in World War II will impact postwar American ideals.

PROCESS

Give students access to both readings. They should mark up the texts and make an outline of the articles as they read. Once they are finished, they should write a 1-2 page comparison of the experiences of the WASPs and Tuskegee Airmen. The comparison should focus on their service, the challenges they faced, and the impact that they had.

Students should also consider how this fits into the context of America during the period discussed in Unit 7.

ATTACHMENTS

- [Female World War II Pilots: The Original Fly Girls](#)
- [The Tuskegee Airmen](#)



A few more than 1,100 young women, all civilian volunteers, flew almost every type of military aircraft — including the B-26 and B-29 bombers — as part of the WASP program. They ferried new planes long distances from factories to military bases and departure points across the country. They tested newly overhauled planes. And they towed targets to give ground and air gunners training shooting — with live ammunition. The WASP expected to become part of the military during their service. Instead, the program was canceled after just two years.

They weren't granted military status until the 1970s. And now, 65 years after their service, they will receive the highest civilian honor given by the U.S. Congress. Last July, President Obama signed a bill awarding the WASP the Congressional Gold Medal. The ceremony will take place on Wednesday on Capitol Hill.

Women with Moxie

Margaret Phelan Taylor grew up on a farm in Iowa. She was 19, had just completed two years of college and was ready for adventure in 1943 when a Life magazine cover story on the female pilots caught her eye. Her brother was training to be a pilot with the Army. Why not her? She asked her father to lend her money for a pilot's license — \$500, a huge amount then.

"I told him I had to do it," Taylor says. "And so he let me have the money. I don't think I ever did pay it back to him either."

But there was a problem. She was half an inch shorter than the 5-foot-2-inch requirement.

"I just stood on my tiptoes," she says. When she arrived at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, where most of the WASP were trained, "Well, there were a lot of other short ones just like me, and we laughed about how we got in."

Short, tall, slim, wide, they all came in knowing how to fly. The military trained male pilots from scratch, but not the female civilian volunteers.

"They didn't want to bring in a bunch of girls who didn't know how to fly an airplane," says Katherine Sharp Landdeck, associate professor of history at Texas Woman's University, who's writing a book about the WASP, tentatively called *Against Prevailing Winds: The Women Airforce Service Pilots and American Society*. "So you have women who are getting out of high school and taking every dime they had to learn how to fly so they could be a WASP."

A Dangerous Job

Once when Taylor was ferrying an aircraft cross-country, somewhere between Arizona and California, she saw smoke in the cockpit. Taylor was trained to bail out if anything went wrong. "But the parachutes were way too big. They weren't fitted to us," she says. "The force of that air and that speed and everything, why that just rips stuff off you. You'd slip right out."

So her plane was smoking and Taylor faced a defining moment.



"I thought, 'You know what? I'm not going until I see flame. When I see actual fire, why, then I'll jump.'"

Was she scared? "No. I was never scared. My husband used to say, 'It's pretty hard to scare you.'" The plane's problem turned out to be a burned-out instrument.

But 38 female pilots did lose their lives serving their country. One was 26-year-old Mabel Rawlinson from Kalamazoo, Mich.

"I've always known of her as the family hero," says Rawlinson's niece, Pam Pohly, who never knew her aunt. "The one we lost too soon, the one that everyone loved and wished were still around."

Rawlinson was stationed at Camp Davis in North Carolina. She was coming back from a night training exercise with her male instructor when the plane crashed. Marion Hanrahan, also a WASP at Camp Davis, wrote an eyewitness account:

I knew Mabel very well. We were both scheduled to check out on night flight in the A-24. My time preceded hers, but she offered to go first because I hadn't had dinner yet. We were in the dining room and heard the siren that indicated a crash. We ran out onto the field. We saw the front of her plane engulfed in fire, and we could hear Mabel screaming. It was a nightmare.

It's believed that Rawlinson's hatch malfunctioned, and she couldn't get out. The other pilot was thrown from the plane and suffered serious injuries. Because Rawlinson was a civilian, the military was not required to pay for her funeral or pay for

her remains to be sent home. So — and this is a common story — her fellow pilots pitched in.

"They collected enough money to ship her remains home by train," says Pohly. "And a couple of her fellow WASP accompanied her casket."

And, because Rawlinson wasn't considered military, the American flag could not be draped over her coffin. Her family did it anyway.

The Program is Pulled

The head of the WASP program was Jacqueline Cochran, a pioneering aviator. (After the war, she became the first woman to break the sound barrier.) Cochran's goal was to train thousands of women to fly for the Army, not just a few dozen integrated into the men's program. She wanted a separate women's organization and believed militarization would follow if the program was a success. And it was. The women's safety records were comparable and sometimes even better than their male counterparts doing the same jobs.

But in 1944, historian Landdeck says, the program came under threat. "It was a very controversial time for women flying aircraft. There was a debate about whether they were needed any longer," Landdeck says.

By the summer of 1944, the war seemed to be ending. Flight training programs were closing down, which meant that male civilian instructors were losing their jobs. Fearing the draft and being put into the ground Army, they lobbied for the women's jobs.

"It was unacceptable to have women replacing men. They could release men for duty — that





was patriotic — but they couldn't replace men," Landdeck says.

And so, Arnold announced the program would disband by December 1944, but those who were still in training could finish. The Lost Last Class, as it was dubbed, graduated, but served only 2 ½ weeks before being sent home on Dec. 20, along with all the other WASP.

Lillian Yonally served her country for more than a year as a WASP. When she was dismissed from her base in California, there was no ceremony. "Not a darn thing. It was told to us that we would be leaving the base. And we hopped airplanes to get back home." Home for Yonally was across the country in Massachusetts.

That was a familiar story, but Landdeck says there were some bases that did throw parties or had full reviews for their departing WASP.

Riling the Wasp's Nest

The women went on with their lives.

A few of them got piloting jobs after the war, but not with any of the major airlines. And some of them stayed in the air as airline stewardesses. In those days, no major commercial airline would hire these experienced women as pilots. Like many World War II veterans, most WASP never talked about their experiences.

And according to Taylor, they never expected anything either.

"We were children of the Depression. It was root hog or die. You had to take care of yourself. Nobody owed us anything," she says.

The WASP kept in touch for a while. They even formed a reunion group after the war. But that didn't last long. Then, in the 1960s, they began to find each other again. They had reunions. They started talking about pushing for military status. And then something happened in 1976 that riled the whole WASP's nest.

"The Air Force comes out and says that they are going to admit women to their flying program," Landdeck says. An Air Force statement says "it's the first time that the Air Force has allowed women to fly their aircraft."

Thirty years later, that comment still upsets former WASP Yonally.

"It was impossible for anybody to say that. That wasn't true. We were the first ones," Yonally says.

The fact that the WASP were forgotten by their own Air Force united the women. They lobbied Congress to be militarized. And they persuaded Sen. Barry Goldwater to help. He ferried planes during the war, just as the WASP did. And then, in 1977, the WASP were finally granted military status.

Over the years it has been reported that the WASP records were sealed, stamped classified and unavailable to historians who wrote histories about WWII. According to archivists at the National Archives, military records containing reports about



the WASP were treated no differently from other records from the war, which generally meant the WASP records weren't open to researchers for 30 years. But unlike other stories from the war, the WASP story was rarely told or reported until the 1970s.

"It's hard to understand that they would be forgotten and difficult to believe that they would be left out of those histories. But even they forgot themselves for a while," Landdeck says.

In 1992, to preserve their history, the WASP designated Texas Woman's University in Denton as their official archives.

Yonally is proud to be honored with the Congressional Gold Medal, 65 years after her service, but she's sad that fewer than 300 of her 1,100 fellow WASP are alive to receive it.

"I'm sorry that so many girls have passed on. It's nice the families will receive it, but it doesn't make up for the gals who knew what they did and weren't honored that way," Yonally says.

Taylor is also excited about the medal. She served her country out of loyalty, she says. That was certainly part of it. But the other reason? "I did it for the fun. I was a young girl and everybody had left and it was wartime. You didn't want to get stuck in a hole in Iowa; you wanted to see what was going on."



READING | Tuskegee Airmen — Jessica McBirney (2017)



The Tuskegee Airmen were a group of African-American fighter pilots and bomber pilots, including their support crew, who flew for the U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II. Despite facing racial discrimination, their missions were some of the most successful in the American military.

As you read, identify the challenges faced by the Tuskegee Airmen and then analyze the impact that this group had on race relations in America.

When most people think of the Civil Rights Movement and the end of legalized segregation in the U.S., they think of the 1960s. However, the movement did not start then, and it was not confined to the streets and diners in the South. One of the earliest successes for racial equality

actually occurred in the 1940s in the U.S. military, thanks to the hard work of a group known as the Tuskegee Airmen.

Tuskegee Airmen: An Early Civil Rights Success

The Tuskegee Airmen were a group of African American fighter pilots and bomber pilots, including their support crew, who trained at the Tuskegee Air Fields in Alabama during World War II. They became the 332nd Fighter Group and the 477th Bombardment Group in the U.S. Army Air Forces at the height of the war, and their missions were some of the most successful in the American military.

During World War I, several decades earlier, African Americans were denied the ability to become fighter ►



pilots and help the war effort. This sparked a growing controversy in the African American community. In April of 1939, after a 20-year battle, Congress finally allocated funds to set up a special division to train African American pilots to fly fighter planes.

Most people were highly skeptical of the new unit. Racism was still very present in and out of the military, and many Army officials did not believe African Americans had the skills or the intelligence to learn everything a pilot needs to know.

Training for Battle

Over 400 African Americans enlisted to be in the new division. The entrance requirements were very strict, including high experience requirements and a series of IQ and other intelligence tests. Because of discriminatory policies in the Army, all the officers in charge of the new recruits were white.

The practical training took place at the Tuskegee Air Fields in Alabama, and the trainees also took courses at Tuskegee University nearby. They quickly proved their personal drive to learn and their skills as pilots. Their proficiency struck blows at previous race-based policies in the military; they soon needed to undergo highly advanced training that African Americans had previously been barred from receiving.

The Tuskegee Air program gained national attention when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt paid them a visit in 1941. She rode as a passenger of pilot C. Alfred "Chief" Anderson, who had become an unofficial leader and tutor in the group because of his skills. After the trip, she remarked, "Well, you can fly all right."

Combat-Ready

By 1943, in the middle of the U.S.'s involvement in World War II, the Tuskegee Airmen were ready for combat. In one of their earliest missions, a group was assigned to attack a strategically located island in the Mediterranean Sea, near Italy. They successfully got over 1,000 Italian troops to surrender and were instrumental in the capture of the island.

In later assignments, they became most famous for their ability to escort larger bomber planes. The airmen became known as Red Tails, or Red Tailed Angels, because of the distinctive red markings on the tails of their small fighter planes. Soon the sight of a swarm of Red Tailed escort planes kept enemy fighters from trying to attack the bomber planes they protected.

The 332nd Fighter Group became one of the most successful squadrons of fighter planes in the Army. For example, in March of 1945, they destroyed three German fighter jets and damaged five more without losing any of their own planes to the enemy.

Continuum Racism

The 477th Bombardment Group faced more challenges, as one of their early commanders was an overt racial segregationist. The pilots wanted to be treated as well as their white counterparts, which included having access to an officer's club on their training base in Michigan. Their commander would not allow them to enter.

After two transfers to two different states and continuing discrimination, a large group of the pilots ►



forced their way into an officer's club in Indiana, and over 100 of them were arrested for disobeying orders. The charges were soon dropped because they were so unfair, but the events demonstrated the severe racism African American military personnel continued to face even though they were so successful.

Legacy and the End of Segregation

At the end of World War II the Tuskegee Airmen were well-known for being some of the best pilots in the military. The escort groups had among the lowest loss records in the Army Air Forces. Their success was due to their extensive pre-war experience and their personal strength and drive during training and combat.

In the years after the war, the U.S. Air Force became a separate entity from the Army, but many of its white squadrons were at least somewhat under-qualified for the tasks they needed to perform. However, they could not hire any experienced black airmen because of segregation policies. This eventually led President Truman to sign Executive Order 9981 in 1948, which called for equal treatment policies and effectively ended segregation in the military. This was one of the earliest steps to ending segregation across the country; it would not have been possible without the hard work and expertise of the Tuskegee Airmen.



LESSON 7.3.5 | READ | “The Death of Captain Waskow” — Ernie Pyle

PURPOSE

Ernie Pyle was the most famous American journalist covering World War II in Europe. Even today, his pieces from the front lines evoke countless emotions and images of Americans in physical and emotional combat on both the European and Pacific fronts. This short piece recounts soldiers’

reactions to the deaths of several compatriots, including a beloved officer. Later, World War II would take Ernie Pyle’s life. Stationed as a war correspondent near Okinawa, Japan, Pyle was shot and killed by a Japanese machine gunner a few months before his 45th birthday.

PROCESS

Share the attached reading with students. Remind them that they should read actively, marking the text as they go. After reading, students should write a short reflection, addressing the following questions.

- What were some of your initial reactions to the content of the piece?
- What are some of the examples of imagery that you think make Pyle’s piece effective?
- How do you think people on the homefront might view a piece

like this? Do you think this human retelling of the experience of war is important? Should journalists just stick to the facts instead?

- What do you think writings like this one can tell us about the importance of good journalism, generally?

ATTACHMENT

- “The Death of Captain Waskow”



HANDOUT | "The Death of Captain Waskow" – Ernie Pyle

AT THE FRONT LINES IN ITALY,
January 10, 1944

In this war I have known a lot of officers who were loved and respected by the soldiers under them. But never have I crossed the trail of any man as beloved as Capt. Henry T. Waskow of Belton, Texas.

Capt. Waskow was a company commander in the 36th Division. He had led his company since long before it left the States. He was very young, only in his middle twenties, but he carried in him a sincerity and gentleness that made people want to be guided by him.

"After my own father, he came next,"
a sergeant told me.

"He always looked after us," a soldier said.
"He'd go to bat for us every time."

"I've never knowed him to do anything unfair,"
another one said.

I was at the foot of the mule trail the night they brought Capt. Waskow's body down. The moon was nearly full at the time, and you could see far up the trail, and even part way across the valley below. Soldiers made shadows in the moonlight as they walked.

Dead men had been coming down the mountain all evening, lashed onto the backs of mules. They came lying belly-down across the wooden pack-saddles,



their heads hanging down on the left side of the mule, their stiffened legs sticking out awkwardly from the other side, bobbing up and down as the mule walked.

The Italian mule-skinner were afraid to walk beside dead men, so Americans had to lead the mules down that night. Even the Americans were reluctant to unlash and lift off the bodies at the bottom, so an officer had to do it himself, and ask others to help.

The first one came early in the morning. They slid him down from the mule and stood him on his feet for a moment, while they got a new grip. In the half light he might have been merely a sick man standing there, leaning on the others. Then they laid him on the ground in the shadow of the low stone wall alongside the road.



I don't know who that first one was. You feel small in the presence of dead men, and ashamed at being alive, and you don't ask silly questions.

We left him there beside the road, that first one, and we all went back into the cowshed and sat on water cans or lay on the straw, waiting for the next batch of mules.

Somebody said the dead soldier had been dead for four days, and then nobody said anything more about it. We talked soldier talk for an hour or more. The dead man lay all alone outside in the shadow of the low stone wall.

Then a soldier came into the cowshed and said there were some more bodies outside. We went out into the road. Four mules stood there, in the moonlight, in the road where the trail came down off the mountain. The soldiers who led them stood there waiting. "This one is Captain Waskow," one of them said quietly.

Two men unlashed his body from the mule and lifted it off and laid it in the shadow beside the low stone wall. Other men took the other bodies off. Finally there were five lying end to end in a long row, alongside the road. You don't cover up dead men in the combat zone. They just lie there in the shadows until somebody else comes after them.

The unburdened mules moved off to their olive orchard. The men in the road seemed reluctant to leave. They stood around, and gradually one by one I could sense them moving close to Capt. Waskow's body. Not so much to look, I think, as to

say something in finality to him, and to themselves. I stood close by and I could hear.

One soldier came and looked down, and he said out loud, "God damn it." That's all he said, and then he walked away. Another one came. He said, "God damn it to hell anyway." He looked down for a few last moments, and then he turned and left.

Another man came; I think he was an officer. It was hard to tell officers from men in the half light, for all were bearded and grimy dirty. The man looked down into the dead captain's face, and then he spoke directly to him, as though he were alive. He said: "I'm sorry, old man."

Then a soldier came and stood beside the officer, and bent over, and he too spoke to his dead captain, not in a whisper but awfully tenderly, and he said:

"I sure am sorry, sir."

Then the first man squatted down, and he reached down and took the dead hand, and he sat there for a full five minutes, holding the dead hand in his own and looking intently into the dead face, and he never uttered a sound all the time he sat there.

And finally he put the hand down, and then reached up and gently straightened the points of the captain's shirt collar, and then he sort of rearranged the tattered edges of his uniform around the wound. And then he got up and walked away down the road in the moonlight, all alone. ►



After that the rest of us went back into the cowshed, leaving the five dead men lying in a line, end to end, in the shadow of the low stone wall. We lay down on the straw in the cowshed, and pretty soon we were all asleep.

Source:

Ernie's War: The Best of Ernie Pyle's World War II Dispatches, edited by David Nichols, pp. 195-97. Accessed via the Indiana University Media School. Image of Ernie Pyle is in Public Domain.