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# The History of Women at the Columbus Air Force Base: Is it a Blessing or a Curse to be the First?

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Women have been aiding in war efforts across the country for decades by being on site nurses in the First World War, to taking positions as pilots starting in the 1970s. There are many remarkable women to be recognized who made their way in the military. The focus of this research, however, is on the stories of female pilots in the Air Force, specifically those who trained at and worked with the Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi. The experiences of Mary Livingston, Cyndy Hubbard, Kelly Flinn, and several other women all connect to display their lasting impact in the Air Force from this small town in Mississippi, their motives for becoming pilots, and a tidal wave of side effects for being some of the first women to do these things. The purpose of this research is extremely multifaceted. When conducting preliminary research these two main questions arose: Were they aware of the impact and statement they would be making? When they became aware of it what did they think of the attention? The goal of this research is also to highlight the contribution of the women from the Columbus Air Force Base and to bring awareness to the mistreatment of women in the Air Force as well as other branches of the military. Through more research I found their goal was not to become the first female to accomplish something in the military, but to fly and serve because it is what they wanted to do. The publicity they received for being female was just an element that came along with that choice and in most cases, it was an unwanted addition. This publicity of women in the Air Force also led to the revealing of patterns of sexual assault and gender discrimination. While the achievements may be seen by some as a feminist statement, the women themselves never meant it to be viewed in that way. Those motivations were put on the women's actions by others—not themselves.

Women were making their way into the aviation field starting in the 1920s and 30s, but the time was approaching in which women would infiltrate the army air force field specifically. Women such as Amelia Earhart helped inspire other women to test out a life of flying.<sup>1</sup> WWII was breaking out in Europe in the 1940s, and Americans were waiting for it to be announced that they would be joining in the war. Following Pearl Harbor, in 1942, the air force sent out telegrams to women, stating they needed them to be pilots for various reasons. The 1948 Public Law 625 passed by the 80<sup>th</sup> Congress called for the full integration of women in the “Regular” branches of military, meaning there was not a separate service for women.<sup>2</sup> There was a slowly, but surely growing need for women to join the military and to serve in a higher capacity aside from nursing and office work. In *The Women With Silver Wings*, historian Katherine Landdeck showcases a few of the stories of women in the air force, how they began flying, prior aviation jobs, and a recap of their time and experience in service. She used their journals and diaries to get an authentic sense of how those women felt and what they were thinking. While none of the featured were from CAFB, this helps convey that what the women at CAFB went through was

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Landdeck, “Airminded”, *The Women With Silver Wings: The Inspiring True Story of the Women Air Force Service Pilots of World War II*, Crown New York, 2020, pp. 13.

<sup>2</sup> “Pub. L. 80-625”, U.S. Law, [uslaw.link](#).

happening across the nation. One of the first women that Landdeck talks about is Teresa James. Teresa James was an instructor pilot in the late 1930s and early 40s and joined the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron in 1942.<sup>3</sup> Landdeck wrote that "For a young woman living in the 1930s, when so much of what happened on the ground seemed intended to restrict or limit her scope, Teresa found a place of escape, empowerment, and freedom in the air."<sup>4</sup> Through Teresa James' experience, Landdeck shows that women joining the WAFS in this instance did not just work to bring equality among men and women, but also among different classes of women. She describes how Teresa was in the group with women who were, for the most part, at an advantage because of their family's wealthy social and economic standing. However, at the end of the day, she says their "makeshift bachelor's quarters and ill-fitting coveralls may not have been the most comfortable, but they did have a decidedly equalizing effect."<sup>5</sup>

In the early 1940s, the WAAC, or the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps was implemented, and the number of women recruited exceeded expectations.<sup>6</sup> The name of the group program soon changed to WAC or Women's Army Corps, then finally the name was officially settled on WASP or the Women Auxiliary Service Pilots.<sup>7</sup> The Columbus Air Force Base provided declassified documents on their own sector of the WASP's titled *History of Army Women's Service Pilots* around this time as well. While this set of documents seemed to be mainly for facts and record keeping, it paints an honorable picture of the earlier women who served at the CAFB and how women were hard working, important assets in the Air Force. The documents contain statistics and interviews with leaders at the CAFB. Many firsts for women in the Air Force came out of the Columbus Air Force Base. Eugenie B. Garvin and Doria V. Bristol were the first women to be a part of the Women's Army Service Pilots stationed at the Columbus Air Force Base in 1943.<sup>8</sup> Wilmer Hardesty, the CAFB Deputy For Training stated in an interview that "It was found that all WASPs were extremely interested in their work. They were especially desirous of obtaining as much flying time as possible in order to better prepare themselves for jobs in post war civil aviation."<sup>9</sup> Even at this time, the women at Columbus Air Force Base had a passion for flying and truly enjoyed it. They wanted to be the best that they could be to contribute to the Air Force as a whole, and they wanted to work. In another interview with Deputy Forrest Coons, he admitted that these women "conducted themselves in a manner which earned for them the respect and admiration of all personnel."<sup>10</sup> Amidst their hardships as females, the Columbus Air Force Base recognizes the importance of these women and Coons even states that when they leave the base it will be a great loss. Eugenia B. Garvin, Joy Dacoste, and a number of other women were interviewed. They only had good remarks to say about the

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<sup>3</sup> Katherine Landdeck "Airminded", *The Women With Silver Wings: The Inspiring True Story of the Women Air Force Service Pilots of World War II*, Crown New York, 2020, pp. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Landdeck, pp. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Katherine Landdeck, "The Experiment Begins", *The Women With Silver Wings*, 2020, MUW Fant Library, pp. 30-31

<sup>6</sup> Vance O. Mitchell, "Two Types of Integration: Gender and Race 1941-1973", *Air Force Officers Personnel Policy Development 1944-1974*, 1996, Air Force History and Museums Program, United States Air Force, Washington D.C. pp. 305.

<sup>7</sup> Vance O. Mitchell, pp. 307.

<sup>8</sup> "Women's Army Service Pilots," *History of Women's Army Service Pilots*, 23 December 1943, "Microfilm 598-627", CAFB Archives, CAFB, Columbus, Miss.,pp. 5.

<sup>9</sup> "Women's Army Service Pilots," *History of Women's Army Service Pilots*, 23 December 1943, "Microfilm 598-627", CAFB Archives, CAFB, Columbus, Miss, pp. 12.

<sup>10</sup> "Women's Army Service Pilots", pp. 13.

Columbus Air Field and training saying it was “the most excellent organization” with challenging yet moderate expectations.<sup>11</sup> Garvin claimed that through “WASP training” many women were built up to be an important contribution to the service.<sup>12</sup> Joy Dacosta said that it was such a “gratifying” opportunity that she would go through the training again.<sup>13</sup> Columbus proved to be an overall uplifting place for female pilots through this program early on in the 1940s.

By 1975, women were able to work in 236 positions in the air force, and the only jobs they lacked the opportunity to do were those in the combat field. They were, however, still given several other opportunities and worked nontraditional occupations such as aircraft and vehicle maintenance or communications operations. General Holm, Director of the Secretary of the Air Force Personnel Council and “the only woman in the Armed Forces to hold the rank of major general”, knew women could make significant contributions to the air force.<sup>14</sup> She could only hope to believe that women would soon be able to “attend the Service academies, fly Air Force planes, serve aboard Navy ships of the line, and have many combat fields open to them” in the coming years.<sup>15</sup> It wasn’t long before her hopes started to come to fruition, with a lot of female support and firsts happening at academies and bases across the nation and in a variety of fields for women in the air force, tripling jobs in only one fiscal year.<sup>16</sup>

In 1977, Mary Livingston became the first instructor pilot on the CAFB. In *The Blueprint*, a newspaper published on the CAFB, Livingston maintained a very positive perspective throughout her time at CAFB and after.<sup>17</sup> It was only a couple of years before, in 1975, when Col. Bianca D. Trimeloni wrote in *Commanders Digest*, women at this time were still “the smallest identifiable minority in the Armed Forces” and were finally being deemed of value.<sup>18</sup> Livingston said that she was not “the least bit intimidated” going into a field that was controlled by men and was a part of the first undergraduate pilot training class at the CAFB that included women.<sup>19</sup> She did not feel special either, despite being one of the few pilots who was a woman.

The WASPS, or Women’s Army/Air Force Service pilots, paved the way, according to Livingston, and she herself was not a pioneer.<sup>20</sup> She believed “Each person is a trailblazer in their own way.”<sup>21</sup> In an interview years after her time at the CAFB, Livingston recalled that her brother inspired her to pursue a position in the air force. Some of the women that inspired her were her grandmother and mother. She said “I never saw where women were held back so much

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<sup>11</sup> “Women’s Army Service Pilots,” pp. 24.

<sup>12</sup> “Women’s Army Service Pilots,” pp. 23.

<sup>13</sup> “Women’s Army Service Pilots,” Miss., pp. 24.

<sup>14</sup> “Women in the Air Force”, *Commanders Digest*, Mississippi State University Library, Starkville, Miss., 10 July 1975, pp. 13.

<sup>15</sup> “Women in the Air Force”, pp. 13.

<sup>16</sup> “Women in the Air Force”, pp. 14.

<sup>17</sup> “Wing gets woman IP”, *The Blueprint*, 4 September 1977, “10-B-09-03 Female Minority Attrition Folder”, “Photographs” Cabinet, Columbus Air Force Base Archives, Columbus Air Force Base, Columbus, Miss. Hereafter cited as CAFB Archives.

<sup>18</sup> “Women in the Air Force”, pp. 13.

<sup>19</sup> “Wing gets woman IP”, *The Blueprint*, 4 September 1977, “10-B-09-03 Female Minority Attrition Folder”, “Photographs” Cabinet, CAFB Archives, Columbus, Miss.

<sup>20</sup> “Wing gets woman IP”

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Blankinship, “First Female Pilots (Mary Livingston Interview)”, National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, October 2020, YouTube.

because of their {um} abilities. . . I had no concept of the barriers...because the women in my life seemed very capable.”<sup>22</sup> She simply loved flying and later enjoyed being able to inspire other women who wanted to be pilots. While it was peculiar that she was not aware of these gender barriers, it was also evidence that the women in her life did not make her hyper aware of them so that they just did not really become barriers at all. In addition to the previous statement, Livingston said “I would hope that they would learn that the air force has opportunities for everyone.”<sup>23</sup> She was a lieutenant colonel and served for 20 years herself. One of her most memorable assignments was as a manpower management officer which “set the tone” for the rest of her career because she had an excellent supervisor and commander.<sup>24</sup> Another unique experience she had was the opportunity to fly a TG-7A, which was a rarity.<sup>25</sup> Her view on the journey of becoming a pilot was one of pure intentions. A lot of women were not just trying to become pilots in the air force to make a statement and break barriers for other women, they just loved to fly and would do whatever it took to achieve their dreams. The fact that they had to overcome so many gender and social boundaries was an extra challenge.

While Livingston was serving, in 1976, following the Vietnam War, women began to be recognized more as being qualified for pilot positions. The publicity of the female students created some bad blood among the men who were doing the same work and mission that those women were doing. They did not think they deserved this excessive publicity while they were doing the same thing. Livingston agreed that they should rather create an atmosphere of teamwork with the men. When she became aware that wives were worried about their husbands being around the female pilots, she encouraged women pilots to “Break down barriers, men and women, one person at a time.”<sup>26</sup> She did not want this bad reputation or stigma to be put on female pilots. Overall, whether talking about male coworkers upset over women’s media attention, or wives worried about sexual tension between male and female pilots, Livingston kept her focus on the work saying, “It’s not about you it’s about the mission of the organization.”<sup>27</sup> She is ultimately saying don’t worry about who gets attention for the work because credit shall be given where credit is due, and according to the article in *The Blueprint*, the credit should be given to the WASP members. She did not want to think herself special and was constantly deflecting which is similar to other women that have been and will be discussed. Maybe she felt she had to overcompensate, or she quite possibly was just that confident and comfortable with herself.

Cyndy Hubbard, a cargo pilot who trained at CAFB in 1981, explained that from the start, as a woman she was having to make her own way. She was one of the first two women to become a female student pilot at the Columbus Air Force Base.<sup>28</sup> The other woman was Holly Wong, who left virtually no known trace of her experience as a pilot. This silence may speak to the fact that just like many other women, she did not desire the attention. There are only a few

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<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Blankinship.

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Blankinship, “First Female Pilots (Mary Livingston Interview)”, National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, October 2020, YouTube.

<sup>24</sup> Jennifer Blankinship.

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer Blankinship.

<sup>26</sup> Jennifer Blankinship, “First Female Pilots (Mary Livingston Interview)”, National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, October 2020, YouTube.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Blankinship.

<sup>28</sup> “Female Firsts”, “10-B-09-03 Female Minority Attrition Folder”, “Photographs” Cabinet, CAFB Archives, Columbus, Miss.

sources on Cyndy Hubbard herself. When Hubbard was in high school, recruiters came and gave out Air Force interest cards with job lists for men and women. She said, "I drew a box at the top of the woman's list, wrote 'pilot', checked it off and mailed in the post card."<sup>29</sup> The list for the men was extensive including the pilot position, whereas the women's list mainly consisted of nurse and clerical positions, and it definitely did not have a checkbox with "pilot" written next to it. Indeed, she questioned, "Why would anybody join the Air Force unless they could be a pilot?"<sup>30</sup> For her, a different occupation or position in the Air Force seemed absurd and flying came naturally.

In Vance O. Mitchell's *Air Force Officers: Personnel Policy Development* there is a chapter dedicated to discussing the integration of gender and race into the army. While not specifically focused on women who were affiliated with the CAFB, Mitchell demonstrates the state of the air force from 1944 to 1974. Transitioning women into the different branches of the military without discrimination was a slow and at times grueling process. Women have been volunteering their services to the armed forces since the civil war. As most people know, they were either nurses or carried out clerical work, and while these jobs were not unimportant, they still wanted to do more. This was to reduce the ostracizing of women in service. While it did make them somewhat less isolated, they were still not respected or fully accepted as "women in uniform."<sup>31</sup> Following that, Mitchell highlights two different approaches to assembling women pilots in 1942. The first was from Nancy Harkness Love who wanted to get together a small fleet consisting of women who were already trained pilots. The second was the proposal of Jacqueline Cochran who suggested they bring in even more women who were not as experienced and needed training.<sup>32</sup> Both of these women were very capable of leading a group, but Cochran, being very famous as a pilot and close friend of Amelia Earhart's, felt entitled to the position of leading the women who were a part of WASP. Jacqueline Cochran was one of very few who acted quite the opposite of women like Livingston. Nonetheless, even though these women just wanted to serve, Mitchell said "[m]ilitary women became the objects of male humor" and soon enough they "were the target of. . . the largest episode of slander during the war."<sup>33</sup> They were not only sexually and verbally assaulted, but also had limited opportunities for many years to follow.

All the way up to the 1990s there were "issues of women in combat".<sup>34</sup> As described in a *Silver Wings* article, the more recent name of the CAFB newspaper, the "advisory Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces" had concerns about women's combat abilities, possible backlash from the public, as well as additional spending that would need to take place if women were to join combat forces.<sup>35</sup> This Commission report was sent to and

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<sup>29</sup> Cyndy Hubbard, "Why would anybody join the Air Force unless they could be a pilot?", *Love Wisconsin*, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Cyndy Hubbard.

<sup>31</sup> Vance O. Mitchell, "Two Types of Integration: Gender and Race 1941-1973", *Air Force Officers Personnel Policy Development 1944-1974*, 1996, Air Force History and Museums Program, United States Air Force, Washington D.C. pp. 306.

<sup>32</sup> Vance O. Mitchell, "Two Types of Integration: Gender and Race 1941-1973", *Air Force Officers Personnel Policy Development 1944-1974*, 1996, Air Force History and Museums Program, United States Air Force, Washington D.C., pp. 307.

<sup>33</sup> Vance O. Mitchell, pp. 306.

<sup>34</sup> MSgt. Linda S. Lee, "Commission faces issue of women in combat", *Silver Wings*, 27 March 1992, "10-B-09-03 Female/Minority Attrition" Folder, "Photos" Cabinet, CAFB Archives, CAFB, Columbus, Miss.

<sup>35</sup> MSgt. Linda S. Lee.

reviewed by President George Bush in November of 1992 after being put together by retired Air Force members, both male and female.<sup>36</sup> In another *Silver Wings* article discussing policies regarding women, TSgt. Sarah Hood says that “women were excluded from fighter bombers, gunships, forward air control aircraft, most helicopters and some reconnaissance aircraft.”<sup>37</sup> A year after Hood’s 1992 article, the Defense Secretary Les Aspin lifted the regulation that prohibited women from joining in combat positions.<sup>38</sup> Though it reads as one small or simple change it made a great impact on the Air Force for all women who desired to serve their country in a different way.

The Columbus Air Force Base played an important part in encouraging the service of women in the military everywhere. In the 1982 issue of *The Blueprint*, there is an article in which the writer expresses a great need for more women to join the services and this is not the first one. The different available roles for women should be increasing because they are seen as included with “total-force capability”<sup>39</sup> While there are some roles available to them at this time it is still very limited. There were other small yet significant things being done for women who served such as military clothing exchange services including female clothes. This service was basically a place that military members could go to buy clothes on base. The CAFB was one of the first exchange services to implement this in order to be “providing better service to the female” customers. Other affiliated stores would “carry a full size range of female clothing.”<sup>40</sup> This is yet another instance in which CAFB was taking part in being an advocate for women.

A theme that has come up in a few different sources that is somewhat unexpected is the “effect” that this integration of women into the air force had on the men. Throughout these stories, whether directed at these particular women or said around their time frame, men had something to say or some opinion to give about women in the Air Force. It seems that no matter the situation, the media and public focus could be turned towards men who were either sacrificing or standing up for others to make it happen. Gaylor, one of the Chief Master Sergeants interviewed in *The Enlisted Experience*, stated he had “to work the emotional issues, plus the policy issues.”<sup>41</sup> Adjusting to having women around was supposedly an emotional process for men in that it was most likely affecting their pride and masculinity. It would also be an emotional transition for women for many reasons. Women became a target of verbal harassment, sexual harassment, etc. They would also eventually have to come face to face with the true violence of war and some thought this would be too much to handle. Gaylor walks a fine line of supporting the idea of women serving but giving the credit to other males. He said he admired the leaders “who’ve taken a stand and survived” as if the men would receive more backlash than the women for whom they were making changes.<sup>42</sup> It is a complex thought to consider whether this is actually a form of the men supporting the women or if they are just

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<sup>36</sup> MSgt. Linda S. Lee.

<sup>37</sup> TSgt. Sarah L. Hood, “AF reviews policy of combat roles for women”, *Silver Wings*, 7 February 1992, “10-B-09-03 Female/Minority Attrition” Folder, “Photos” Cabinet, CAFB Archives, CAFB, Columbus, Miss.

<sup>38</sup> Ban lifted on women flying in combat, “10-B-09-03 Female/Minority Attrition” Folder, “Photographs” Cabinet, CAFB Archives, CAFB, Columbus, Miss.

<sup>39</sup> “Increased demand for service women”, *The Blueprint*, 26 February 1982, “Silver Wings 1979-1999 The History of Air Training Command” Cabinet, CAFB, Columbus, Miss

<sup>40</sup> “BX improves service for military”, *The Blueprint*, September 27, 1979, “Silver Wings 1979-1999 The History of Air Training Command” Cabinet, CAFB, Columbus, Miss.

<sup>41</sup> Janet R. Bednarek, “The 1970s and Women in the Air Force”, *The Enlisted Experience: A Conversation with the Chief Master Sergeants Of the Air Force*, 1995, Air Force History and Museums Program, pp. 138.

<sup>42</sup> Janet R. Bednarek, pp. 141.

doing it to bolster their public image. Opinions even differed among women later on being considered for combat positions. In the February 1980 issue of *The Blueprint*, two male and two female air force members were asked these two questions: “Do you think women should be drafted for military service? If so, do you think they should be assigned for combat duty?”<sup>43</sup> One man, SSg. Kenneth Baldwin, expressed that he believed a woman’s place was to stay at home, or at least not in a combat position, and provide their husbands with “the moral and spiritual support necessary in keeping his will to live.”<sup>44</sup> He accredits women for being “the backbone of our nation”, but also goes on to say that women would be a distraction on the battlefield because the men would, by nature, seek to protect them rather than put their full attention on the enemy at hand.<sup>45</sup> Karen Dixon, an A1C also believes that women are not meant for combat positions, not because they are not “physically competent”, but because they are not psychologically prepared to face what war brings.<sup>46</sup> Though not a male opinion, it is interesting to include her contrary point of view because it brings a contradiction to what we see most women in the military tend to believe. On the other hand, SSMgt. Walter Zurek states simply that he believes women should be drafted and are capable of doing the job same as anyone else. He also voices that he thinks it will soon be a necessity to draft women in combat positions.<sup>47</sup> Finally, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Shelly M. Allen gives an answer that does not really go either way. She does not speak for anyone else, but does not think she, herself, could handle being in combat.<sup>48</sup> There are plenty of other women though who fully believe that they are all strong enough and qualified to be in combat. In another section of the interview in *The Enlisted Experience*, a Sergeant who was called Airy felt that “women were not getting a fair shake.”<sup>49</sup> There were still many men who were in support of women joining forces and were willing to make the changes work, but there were also many more others who saw it as too much of an inconvenience and a completely irrational movement.<sup>50</sup>

Kelly Flinn, a pilot trained at the Columbus Air Force Base, was the first woman in the country to fly a B-52 fighter plane.<sup>51</sup> In 1993, first class 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Kimberly Holman 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Jeannie M. Flynn became the first female pilot to complete training in order to fly an F-15E fighter bomber in the 1990s.<sup>52</sup> The year 1993 was also the year that the Air Force lifted the ban on women that restricted them from being combat pilots by the Defense Secretary, Les Aspin.<sup>53</sup> By this time, up to “97% of Air Force positions [were] open to women”, so much progress had been

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<sup>43</sup> “Viewpoint On the News”, *The Blueprint*, 8 February 1980, CAFB Archives, Columbus Miss.

<sup>44</sup> “Viewpoint On the News.”

<sup>45</sup> “Viewpoint On the News”, *The Blueprint*, 8 February 1980, CAFB Archives, Columbus Miss.

<sup>46</sup> “Viewpoint On the News.”

<sup>47</sup> “Viewpoint On the News.”

<sup>48</sup> “Viewpoint On the News.”

<sup>49</sup> Janet R. Bednarek, “The 1970s and Air Force Women”, *The Enlisted Experience*, 1975, Air Force History and Museums Program, Library of Congress Cataloging, CAFB Archives, Columbus, Miss., pp. 140.

<sup>50</sup> Janey R. Bednarek, pp. 139.

<sup>51</sup> Sgt. Debbie O’Leary, “Student becomes first woman to fly B-52”, *Silver Wings*, 20 January 1995, “10-B-09-03 Female/Minority Attrition” Folder, “Photographs” Cabinet, CAFB Archives, CAFB, Columbus, Miss.

<sup>52</sup> CMSgt Tom Kuhn, Historical Day for Air Guard, *Silver Wings*, 11 June 1993, “10-B-09-03 Female/Minority Attrition” Folder, “Photographs” Cabinet, Columbus Air Force Base Archives, Columbus Air Force Base, Columbus, Miss. Hereafter cited as CAFB Archive.

<sup>53</sup> Ban lifted on women flying in combat, “10-B-09-03 Female/Minority Attrition” Folder, “Photographs” Cabinet, CAFB Archives, CAFB, Columbus, Miss.



made through CAFB and a handful of others across the nation.<sup>54</sup> Many events, changes, and accomplishments began to unfold for and through women who were pilots, a lot of which were at Columbus Air Force Base.

Kelly Flinn's story adds another intriguing look into how women in the air force were treated, and in some ways, targeted. Since she was a young teen, she had made up her mind that she wanted to be an astronaut. Flinn quickly began to prepare herself and work hard to make it in the field of aviation. She excelled in academics and athletics, while also maintaining a part-time job in order to meet the preliminary requirements to train at the air force academy. This alone shows that even at a young age, women are capable of working hard in order to make their place in the armed forces. Later, Flinn in fact was a student that trained at and graduated from the Columbus Air Force Base in the 1990s. In 1995, she would go through the "formal training unit at the 11<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron", so that she could learn to be the first woman to fly a B-52.<sup>55</sup>

In her memoir *Proud to Be*, Flinn recalls her time in the Air Force academy and later, pilot training. During the end of her senior year, it came time to apply for what air force position the students were interested in and qualified for and in turn they had to be selected. Flinn was engulfed in nerves waiting for the day on which they would announce who was selected for pilot training. To her great relief, when their AOC (air officer commanding) handed out little slips of paper with their fate on it, she unrolled hers to reveal she had been selected. Only thirteen women were selected out of the two hundred and twenty-five total cadets.<sup>56</sup> Eventually it came time for Flinn to pick a base for pilot training and she chose Columbus Air Force. At the same time she was going to start training, Congress had approved the bill allowing women to fly in combat roles. At the Air Force Academy in Colorado, Flinn and the other women experienced significant sexual harassment without justice. Several women tried to speak up about their situations, but they were either blamed, not taken seriously, or simply given pity. The so-called 'justice' they were given in certain circumstances never had any lasting or significant impact. No real change was happening. There was a gang rape and more stories being told of "forced sex on campus."<sup>57</sup> Leaders concluded that both the men and women should be punished. The men for their obscene amount of sexual harassment cases and women for the occasional underage drinking.<sup>58</sup> Flinn says "It was as if the commanders could not let the hammer fall too heavily on the men. . . they couldn't come down too hard on their boys for just being boys."<sup>59</sup> After the academy attempted to crack down and preach on the atrocity that is sexual harassment, the males still seemed to avoid the blame. Flinn came back to her room one day to find "cunt" written on the board on her door. She reported it and just like before, instead of investigating they simply punished everybody.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, this did not stop when she made her way to the CAFB along with one other woman that would be in her squadron. Flinn and one other woman at the time made their way to Mississippi and the first thing the training class did as a "bonding

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<sup>54</sup>TSgt. Sarah L. Hood, "AF reviews policy of combat roles for women," 7 February 1992, "10-B-09-03 Female/Minority Attrition" Folder, "Photographs" Cabinet, CAFB Archives, CAFB, Columbus, Miss.

<sup>55</sup> Sgt. Debbie O'Leary, "Student becomes first woman to fly B-52", *Silver Wings*, 20 January 1995, "10-B-09-03 Female/Minority Attrition" Folder, "Photographs" Cabinet, CAFB Archives, CAFB, Columbus, Miss.

<sup>56</sup> Kelly Flinn, "Learning to Keep Quiet", *Proud to Be*, Random House New York, 1997.

<sup>57</sup> Kelly Flinn, "Learning To Keep Quiet", *Proud To Be*, Random House New York, 1997, pp. 86.

<sup>58</sup> Kelly Flinn, pp. 86.

<sup>59</sup> Kelly Flinn, pp. 87.

<sup>60</sup> Kelly Flinn, pp. 88.

experience” was draw up designs for their class patch.<sup>61</sup> A male student drew a patch that got the most attention and it was a drawing of a woman in suggestive or revealing clothing, bent over with a plane flying through her legs. There were previous class patches with “Big-breasted women sitting on top of airplanes” as well.<sup>62</sup> Flinn and her fellow female classmate, Tracy, felt embarrassed because of the demeaning picture of women they were portraying.<sup>63</sup> Though CAFB was making strides towards gender equality since the 1940s, unfortunately pilots were not above sexualizing women’s bodies.

As her time on the CAFB went on, the Air Force informed the base that they needed a certain number of pilots to fly a handful of planes at Columbus and one other base. Flinn was among those that were eligible to pick which craft they wanted to fly. Flinn knew without a doubt that she wanted to be able to fly the B-52. It had long been her desire to be the pilot of a combat plane where she could be in “the center of action” and “pulling [her] own weight.”<sup>64</sup> With little hope, she ended up getting her pick of the B-52 bomber. A few days later, she was informed by her squadron commander that she was about to be the first woman to fly a B-52 bomber. Flinn thought to herself, “being female wasn’t much of an achievement, but earning a bomber was.”<sup>65</sup> Similar to Mary Livingston, she was not looking to accomplish something in order to be the first female to do so, she just wanted to do what she loved and what she had a passion for. When the press heard about Flinn becoming the first woman to fly a B-52 bomber, the Air Force basically made her cooperate and share her story. She was asked questions such as “What’s it like to be the first female bomber pilot? What’s it like to fly with an all-male crew? What’s it like to be a female?” “I tried, as much as possible, to deflect attention from my gender”, Flinn said as she referred to being bombarded with these questions in press conferences.<sup>66</sup> She also stated that she would not claim herself to be a feminist.<sup>67</sup>

While she made some incredible feats and carried out a very successful and eye-catching career, Flinn’s story has another side to it. Once she completed her initial flight training at the Columbus Air Force Base and received the new position, she went to do additional training at the Minot Base. The struggles related to gender discrimination and assault that she would experience here were more personal and targeting than what she had experienced at the Columbus Air Force Base from fellow male pilots. It was not long after she had moved to Monet that she met a man named Marc Zigo. He approached her at a bar, and he started flirting with her, but she was aware that he was married.<sup>68</sup> She knew that it would be wrong, but at the same time he had a charming and welcoming personality that was difficult to resist. She was able to resist him though until he convinced her that his marriage was ending and soon enough, he claimed he had filed for divorce. Flinn gave in, but little did she know that her relationship with Marc would lead to the end of her career in the Air Force. In her memoir, she claimed Vigor was a pathological liar who knew exactly what to say to sweep Flinn off her feet and out of a career. He also had anger problems and was physically and verbally abusive and manipulative as displayed in Flinn’s personal account. The police got involved because of speculation and false accusations from

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<sup>61</sup> Kelly Flinn, “Too Close to the Sun”, *Proud To Be*, Random House New York, 1997, pp. 93

<sup>62</sup> Kelly Flinn, pp. 93.

<sup>63</sup> Kelly Flinn, pp. 93.

<sup>64</sup> Kelly Flinn, “Too Close To the Sun”, *Proud To Be*, Random House New York, 1997, pp. 117

<sup>65</sup> Kelly Flinn, pp. 118.

<sup>66</sup> Kelly Flinn, “Poster Girl”, *Proud To Be*, Random House New York, 1997, pp. 124

<sup>67</sup> Kelly Flinn, pp. 123.

<sup>68</sup> Kelly Flinn, “The Wrong Man”, *Proud To Be*, Random House New York, 1997, pp. 160-161.

another man that was in Flinn's wing and after a long investigation, falling back into a toxic cycle with Marc, threat of imprisonment, and a lack of understanding from the Air Force, Flinn resigned. Amid this she talks of a male friend she had who had slept with a married woman who was also enlisted in his squadron, who was only reprimanded.<sup>69</sup> While she was trying to make sense of her situation, Flinn's use of this anecdote is evidence that she was a victim of gender discrimination.

Kelly Flinn became an extremely skilled and well-known pilot in the air force. She had made a name for herself through perseverance and hard work, but this quickly changed when authorities and the public latched on her choice to have an affair with a married man. While most would not support this type of decision, that is not the point. The question to be made is, why was her situation hyper-focused on by the media and military officials instead of the assault and rape cases that were happening around the same time. Was it because she is a woman? Was it lack of cooperation in the investigation? Was it because of her high status in the air force and others thought she needed to be brought down? Roger Angell from "The New Yorker" wrote a story on the case of Kelly Flinn and brought to light some questions that bring a new and deeper perspective on this reasoning for targeting her.<sup>70</sup> Implications from the media suggest her personal choices affected her ability as a pilot, but there is no proper evidence of this considering she was publicly known as one of the best. She was being sought out for adultery while there were many males accused of rape. Most were not forced to discharge as Flinn was, at least not publicly. While there is no clear answer why women like Flinn are being targeted, it could very likely be because of their success as women in the Air Force. Adultery is considered a felony in several states, so though it is not condoned, Flinn's affair was still consensual which is why all of these speculations and discussions are raised in comparison to other scandals that occurred around the same time.<sup>71</sup> Her story is one of the most publicized within the Air Force, but even though other stories in the Air Force did not catch the media quite like this, the fact that other scandals were in the media showed that Flinn was not alone in her struggle for justice.

A couple of these other scandals included Operation Tailhook and The Citadel, both of which were on the issue of rape and sexual misconduct where victims did not receive proper justice.<sup>72</sup> A victim in the Tailhook scandal, Paula Coughlin, had been cornered and groped by multiple men at the same time during a three-day convention put on by the Tailhook Association. She was targeted by her fellow male armed force members and was not even the only one assaulted during that weekend. Her case made it to court, which was a feat, but it resulted in "no court-martial convictions" due to a claimed lack of credibility in Coughlin's evidence and testimony.<sup>73</sup> The Citadel scandal victims were actually males specifically younger boys assaulted by older alumni members in the early 2000s. Most of the guilty men were not really

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<sup>69</sup> Kelly Flinn, "The Wrong Man", "Falling In Love", *Proud To Be*, 1997, pp. 163-238. Everything in this paragraph before this footnote is a very summary of these chapters from Kelly Flinn's memoir. A lot of the events and concepts overlap and reoccur, so it is hard to pick and choose a small number of pages.

<sup>70</sup> Roger Angell, "Sin's Like Flinn's: What was the bomber pilot's real offense?", *The New Yorker*, 25 May 1997, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/06/02/sins-like-flinns>.

<sup>71</sup> Roger Angell, "Sin's Like Flinn's: What was the bomber pilot's real offense?", *The New Yorker*, 25 May 1997, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/06/02/sins-like-flinns>.

<sup>72</sup> Roger Angell.

<sup>73</sup> "The Tailhook Scandals", Center For Military Readiness, 14 January 2002, <https://www.cmrlink.org/issues/full/the-tailhook-scandals>.

being brought to media attention until years later.<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless this displayed a desperate need for every branch and academy of the military to take sexual assault, rape scandals, and other things related much more seriously. While these cases were not in the Air Force, it still goes to show that this was a major issue across the board that needed and still needs more attention. Another important question that could also be asked is as follows: Was her being discharged justified when comparing it to non-consenting, sexual assault cases in which the men should be in the wrong? Angell sums it up well in stating that “one must wonder whether Lieutenant Flinn would have been brought low in this fashion if her military specialty had been nutritionist, communications officer, systems analyst, or even transport pilot.”<sup>75</sup>

The personal experiences of these women affiliated with Columbus Air Force highlight the views of women through the media to be highlighted. At the start of this research, it was my goal to uncover the great impact that these women would have for other women to serve after them. While their impact was important, there was so much more to their stories than I expected. The women in this study did not want the attention for being women, they just wanted to be pilots. Most of them did not and most likely still do not want to be singled out for being the “first females” to be pilots. It could be noted that overtime, the number of stories about women’s experiences being covered has increased overtime, yet it was still difficult to uncover some of the smaller stories in this research. Kelly Flinn’s story became, in a way, the center piece for all the other women’s stories to come together and create a conversation of experiences and hardships from different eras and views.

Their stories allow people to see the true humanity of females as a whole instead of seeing their life and accomplishments through their gender. There is a sort of battle between the medias view and what feminism really meant to these women in the Air Force. Their experiences point towards the argument that the media and world view of feminism brought special attention to women when they were the first female to accomplish something even though men had already done it. Some women appreciate the recognition such as Jacqueline Cochran, but other women desperately tried to avoid it like Kelly Flinn. Either way the fame found its way to them whether they wanted it or not. Flinn’s story and even the witness of men in the military also prove that women were being sexually and verbally harassed or discriminated against because of their gender. Even through all these hardships, from the time of the WASPs to the time of WWII, these women gave credit to Columbus Air Force Base as a work environment that was, overall, a good place to learn and grow in the art of flying. That is what they truly cared about. Despite what their goals and motivations were, these women are still an inspiration for many reasons including the fact that they did not seek to be the first or the best, but instead sought to do what they loved no matter what.

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<sup>74</sup> “The Citadel Faces Abuse Scandal Similar to Penn State’s”, The Two-Way, 15 November 2011, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2011/11/15/142349930/the-citadel-faces-abuse-scandal-similar-to-penn-states>.

<sup>75</sup> Roger Angell, “Sin’s Like Flinn’s: What was the bomber pilot’s real offense?”, The New Yorker, 25 May 1997, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/06/02/sins-like-flinns>.

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