

America Celebrates Veterans Day

Welcome to This Is America from VOA Learning English. I'm Jim Tedder.

And I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

November 11 is Veterans Day in the United States. A veteran is anyone who has served in the armed forces. Veterans Day honors the living. A separate holiday, Memorial Day in May, honors those who died in military service.

This week on our program, we talk about Veterans Day. We also tell you about a group of women veterans who played a special part in American military history.

The United States has about 22 million veterans. The term "veteran" is not just for those who have served in wars. It describes anyone who has ever been in the military.

On November 11, communities hold ceremonies and parades to observe Veterans Day. Military bands play. The president and other public officials take part in the events. And soldiers fire guns into the air in a salute to remember those who died in service to their country.

The history of Veterans Day relates to World War I. Many people at the time called it "the war to end all wars."

The United States entered the fighting in Europe in 1917. But the United States armed forces were small. So the government began to draft men between the ages of 21 and 31.

The men came from cities and farms. Some were rich. Others were poor. There were doctors, lawyers, businessmen, professional athletes and college students. Many were married.

The following year, the government expanded the draft. Now it called on men between the ages of 18 and 45. More than 13 million reported for duty.

Many women joined the armed forces, too. Most got office jobs at military bases in the United States. Some, however, went to France to work as nurses in battlefield hospitals.

World War I ended when Germany surrendered at 11 o'clock in the morning on November 11, 1918 – in other words, at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month.

The following year, President Woodrow Wilson signed a declaration to observe November 11th as Armistice Day in the United States. It would be a day to honor the men and women who had served in the American armed forces during the war.

In 1926, Congress made Armistice Day a national holiday.

But new problems were on the way. Soon, everyone knew that World War I would not be the war to end all wars.

In all, more than four million Americans served in the armed forces during the First World War. Four times that many would serve during the second.

Germany surrendered in May 1945. Japan surrendered in August of that year.

Armistice Day in 1945 was a very special day in the United States. Most of the men and women who had served in the war were home.

So, instead of honoring just veterans of World War I, Americans also honored veterans of World War II.

In 1954, Congress decided to change the name of Armistice Day. The holiday became Veterans Day.

Airplanes Don't Know the Difference Between Men and Women

In the 1930s and '40s, many people did not believe women should be permitted to join the military. Even fewer thought women should serve as pilots.

But in the early days of World War II there was a severe shortage of male pilots.

Jacqueline Cochran was a well-known female pilot in the United States at that time. She believed that training women to serve as support pilots at home could free up men to fly combat operations overseas.

General Hap Arnold was chief of what was then called the Army Air Forces. Jackie Cochran persuaded him that women were just as able to fly planes as men.

The Army Air Forces created a program called Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP for short. The women themselves were known as WASPs.

They were required to take their own flying lessons before they could be admitted to the program. And they paid their own way to get to the training base in Sweetwater, Texas. In the end, over 1,000 women became members of the group.

In 1943, 25 women were trained to fly an airplane known as the "Widowmaker." Some male pilots had refused to fly it because so many of the planes crashed during training. Several pilots were killed.

The military believed the planes were safe if they were flown correctly. The women were asked to prove it. One of the WASP veterans is named Deanie Parrish. Her daughter Nancy says the women pilots knew the dangers, but volunteered anyway in what she called a very important experiment.

"Airplanes don't know the difference between men and women. They only know that you're a good pilot or you're not a good pilot. And these women were all very good pilots."

Thirty-eight women lost their lives in the WASP program. There were no military honors for these women. Their own families had to pay for their burials.

One of the pilots who died was named Mary Howson. Nancy Parrish retells the story of what Mary Howson's mother told WASP trainees in Texas shortly after her daughter's death.

"I came because I thought it was important. It's important for you to know so you can tell your families what to expect if something happens to you."

"She said 'I'm going to read you the telegram that I got from the United States government when Mary was killed.' And she pulled it out and she unfolded it and she read it to this group of trainees.

"And this is what it said, 'Your daughter was killed this morning. Where do you want us to ship the body?'"

The WASP program ended a few weeks after the last class graduated in 1944. WASP members had served their country by flying fighters, bombers and transport aircraft. They trained other pilots, flew test flights and pulled targets for shooting practice. They transported planes as well as troops and supplies, including parts of the atomic bomb.

In all, they flew more than 96 million kilometers.

For years, WASP members fought to get the recognition they had earned. Not until 1977 were the women fully recognized as military veterans.

In 2010, surviving members of the group received Congress' highest civilian honor, the Congressional Gold Medal. WASP veteran Deanie Parrish spoke at a ceremony held in the United States Capitol building.

"Over 65 years ago we each served our country without any expectation of recognition or glory. And we did it without compromising the values that we were taught as we grew up -- honor, integrity, patriotism, service, faith and commitment.

"We did it because our country needed us. I believe I speak for every WASP when I say that it was both a privilege and an honor to serve our country during some of the darkest days of World War II."

Fewer than 300 WASP members are still alive. More than 200 of them attended the Congressional Gold Medal ceremony. Some wore their old uniforms.

Deanie Parrish accepted the medal for the group. She said the award itself was not as important as what it represents.

"All we ever asked for is that our overlooked history would someday no longer be a missing chapter in the history World War II, in the history of the Air Force, in the history of aviation, and most especially the history of America."

Deanie Parrish and her daughter Nancy launched the organization Wings Across America. The purpose is to educate Americans about the WASP program.

They have interviewed more than 100 of the women who served. Parts of the interviews can be seen in a video at wingsacrossamerica.org.

“They can look at us and they can hear the words coming from us: go for it. Because that’s what we did. We went for it.”

“What we did was very hush-hush. No one knew. I couldn’t even tell Mother and Daddy what I was doing.”

“We realized the danger, the danger in anything that you attempt. But there was that camaraderie about the love of flying that drew us together.”

Our program was written by Jerilyn Watson and June Simms. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I'm Jim Tedder. You can read, download and comment on our programs at learningenglish.voanews.com.

And join us again next week for This Is America with VOA Learning English.