

## **Breaking Barriers: WASPs of Color**

By: Hannah Chan, FAA history intern

The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) were the first female military pilots. While they were classified as US federal civil service employees, they paved the way for women in military service and broke social barriers. The women completed dangerous missions such as testing new aircraft, ferrying planes across the country, and serving as live targets for ammunition practice. These brave women were long forgotten for their contributions to their country and were finally granted military status in 1977, 35 years after their service. However, the WASPs did not accurately represent the women pilot population of that time. The majority of the WASPs were white and wealthy. But in reality, the female pilot population also included pilots of color from different socio-economic backgrounds. The Army prevented African American pilots from joining the civilian organization because of segregation. Yet of the 1,074 WASPs, five were women of color: two Asian Americans, one Native American, and two Hispanic Americans.

### **Hazel Ying Lee**



Photo: U.S. Air Force

Hazel Ying Lee is credited as the first Chinese American woman to fly for the US military. Lee was born in Portland, Oregon in 1912 to Chinese immigrants, making her a first-generation Chinese American. At age 19, she developed an interest in flying after riding in a plane. She joined the Chinese Flying Club of Portland and took lessons from aviator Al Greenwood. One year later, in 1932, she became one of the first Chinese American women to receive a pilot's license. She went to China in 1933 hoping to serve as a pilot in the Chinese military, but she was turned down because of her gender. She remained in China and tried re-joining the Chinese Air Force at the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, but was rejected again. She returned to the US in 1938 and joined the WASPs in 1943, as part of the first graduating class. She reported to duty at Romulus Army Air Base in Michigan. Lee was part of the 132 women qualified to "fly pursuit," flying fast fighter jets. Her fellow WASPs described Lee as "a bubbly optimist with a mischievous streak." She educated her fellow pilots about Chinese culture and wrote their Chinese nicknames on the side of their planes with lipstick. She did experience racism. Ying once had to make an emergency landing in a field out in the Midwest. When she got out of her plane, she saw a farmer coming toward her with a pitchfork saying: "The Japs have landed, the Japs have landed." Lee had to reassure the farmer that she was a female Chinese American pilot in the US Army, not the enemy. A fellow pilot recalled that Lee "had the whole line in hysterics" when telling the other pilots about the incident. She took the situation lightly and did not let it affect her flying or deter her from her duty to the US. On November 25, 1944, Lee became the last WASP to die on duty, after crashing into another plane.

## **Margaret Gee**

Margaret “Maggie” Gee, a third-generation Chinese American, was born on August 5, 1923, in Berkeley, California. As a young girl, she would watch planes take off at Oakland Airport. She once saw Amelia Earhart, recalling: “When I waved, she saw me and waved back.” When the US entered the war, Gee dropped out of the University of California, Berkeley, to help out with the war effort. She worked in the drafting department at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard. Gee had always wanted to fly and jumped at the opportunity to do so. At age 19, she read about the WASPs and took it as an opportunity to fly for her country. She moved to Minden, Nevada, to attend flight school before being accepted as a WASP. After earning her military wings, she reported to Las Vegas Army Air Field and was assigned to Training Command, serving in a tow squadron. Like Lee, Gee had similar encounters where people mistook her for the enemy. At first, she would get angry, but over time she got used to the accusations. There was one encounter where she bumped into another American plane while on a runway. The male pilot mistook her as a Japanese enemy pilot and hesitated to believe that she was American. Gee handled the situation well but felt like “an exhibit at the country fair, a two-headed cow, the amazing Chinese-American WASP.” But once she got back into her aircraft, she felt free and powerful. After the Army disbanded the WASPs, she returned to UC Berkeley, earned a bachelor’s degree in physics, and worked at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory on weapons systems. She also had a passion for politics, serving on the Alameda County Democratic Central Committee, Berkeley Community Fund, Berkeley Democratic Club, California Democratic Party Executive Board, and Asian Pacific Islander Democratic Caucus. In 2010, Gee traveled to the White House where President Obama awarded her and living WASPs the Congressional Gold medal. She died three years later on February 1, 2013, at the age of 89. In 2014, the Nevada Aerospace Hall of Fame inducted her posthumously for her role as a WASP. Currently, there is a campaign to rename the Oakland International Airport “Maggie Gee International Airport.”

## **Ola Mildred Rexroat**



Photo: U.S. Army

Ola Mildred Rexroat, the only Native American WASP, was born on August 28, 1917, in Ogden, Kansas to a white father and an Oglala mother. During her childhood, she and her family moved to South Dakota and she grew up on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. After graduating high school, she enrolled in a teacher’s college but dropped out to work at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Gallup, New Mexico. She returned to school in 1939 and earned a bachelor’s degree in art. She continued working at the Bureau of Indian Affairs. While working at an airfield, she decided she wanted to learn how to fly to join the war effort. She joined the WASPs for flight instruction and after completing her training, was assigned to Training Command. She also towed targets for aerial gunnery students. She

never worried about getting shot down, stating “I never gave it a thought. You couldn't worry about things like that. ... You can't live forever.” Her fellow WASPs knew her as “Rexy” or “Sexy Rexy.” After the war, Rexroat joined the Air Force and worked as an Air Traffic Controller during the Korean War, earning the rank of captain. Later on in her life, she worked for the Federal Aviation Administration for 33 years. In 2007, she was inducted into the South Dakota Aviation Hall of Fame. Rexroat died on June 28, 2017, at 99-years-old. She was the last surviving WASP in South Dakota and one of the remaining 275 WASPs (during 2017). After her death, Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota renamed their airfield operations building “Millie Rexroat Building.”

### **Frances Dias Gustavson**

Frances Dias Gustavson was born on December 16, 1916. She applied for the WASPS in 1943. After completing her training at Houston Municipal Airport in Texas, she was assigned to the Love Field in Dallas, Texas. After the war, she competed in the All Women Transcontinental Air Race held by the Ninety-Nines in 1951. Dias died on February 5, 1994, at the age of 77.

### **Verneda Rodríguez McLean**

Verneda Rodríguez McLean was born on January 11, 1918, in Chicago, Illinois, to a Danish mother and a Guyanese father. Rodríguez was inspired to take flight by female aviation pioneers and the film Christopher Strong, where Katherine Hepburn played a female pilot. She graduated from WASPs training on August 4, 1944, and reported for duty at Moore Field in Texas as a tow pilot. Her fellow WASPs called her “Roddy” and described her as a good friend who was fond of poetry. It appears she took after her mother’s complexion, having blonde hair and fair skin. After the war, Rodríguez worked as an aircraft accident analyst at Longley Air Force Base in Virginia. During the 1970s, she was active in the fight for veteran status for the WASPs. She died on March 19, 1982, and was the first WASP to be buried with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery.