

Risky Business - Testing Rebuilt Aircraft: Betty Jane Hanson Erenberg – Minnesota WASP Pilot



“I wanted to help and I loved flying dearly.” Betty Jane Hanson was born in 1922 in Lakeville, MN. She grew up in Morris, MN and graduated from Morris High School in 1939.

Betty always wanted to be a pilot. In a 1979 interview she said: “When I saw Rufus Rand fly into Monticello, I made up my mind I was going to be a pilot someday. He was barnstorming. I was a little too bashful to ask for a ride, but my brother asked for a ride and he got in. But after Rufus had shut down for the day, I waited until everybody had gone and I climbed up on that ship of his, an old “War Jenny” and looked inside. I was maybe four years old.” (MN Historical Society Oral History Interview, 1979) The rest, as they say, is history.

As a teenager, Betty took her first ‘discovery’ flight at the Benson Airport. While in flight, the instructor asked Betty if she had many hours in the air. She replied, “No, this is my first time upstairs.” He told her “You’re handling the plane like someone with quite a bit of time.”

In 1941 at age 20 she graduated from the Civilian Pilot Training Program in Morris where she received her private pilot certificate. In April 1944 she graduated as a WASP in class ‘44-W-3’. She also served as a 2nd Lt. in the Air Corps Reserve. Her first assignment was in the Ferrying Division at Newcastle Army Air Base, Wilmington, DE. She ferried new planes from factories to embarkation points. She also flew planes to an aircraft graveyard in Brownsville, TX and evacuated airfields during hurricane alerts. She later transferred into engineering test flying which required slow timing new aircraft and testing rebuilt aircraft which involved performing aerobatic maneuvers. Betty described slow timing: “it meant you broke in the engine like you had to do years ago on a car. I’d have to get up there and slow time it, have the throttle way back and sit up there for a couple of hours, maybe.”

Images below: Courtesy WASP Archive, Texas Woman’s University, Denton, TX



Betty delivering at Newark, NJ



Nancy Batson, Betty Hanson & Shirley Haugan



Betty Jane Hanson



Betty Hanson and Vivian Gilchrist

Betty said a couple male pilots seemed to resent female pilots. "I was walking [from] a field into operations after I landed with my parachute. And this major or captain, he glared at me and said, "Oh, looks like we've got more women around here than pilots. And here I had my pilot's wings on and the whole uniform and officer insignia. They resented that sometimes, when they saw the officer insignia on our hats."

Betty shared a vivid WASP memory: "One time I was taking this beautiful aircraft, it was a forerunner of the AT6 and I was bringing it down to Brownsville, Texas. I didn't know that Brownsville was the graveyard, and boy, I could have cried when I got that beautiful flying aircraft down there and found out it was going just to the graveyard. And I told the company officer or the operations officer, I said, "Oh, that's a shame such a beautiful ship like this has to be destroyed." He said, "Well, if you like it so damn well, get in it and fly it. Have you got a place to land back in Minnesota?" (Because I told him I was from Minnesota.) I said, "Yes, I've a place to land it." "Well," he said, "get in it and fly it up to Minnesota." I had spent a lot of Uncle Sam's money on repairs while flying it down to Brownsville, which by then it was all in shape almost like a new aircraft." Betty thought it would be illegal to fly the plane back home and did not take the officer's offer.

As a WASP, Betty flew a variety of planes including UC-78, AT-6, BT-13, PT-17 and AT-10's.



Beechcraft AT-10



Vultee BT-13



Cessna UC-78 Bobcat



Avenger Field, Sweetwater, TX

Betty's thoughts on WASP service: "I wanted to help and I loved flying dearly. I was grateful to do this and to be able to fly the best aircraft that was ever built. That's the way I felt, and every time I did fly a plane from a factory, I was conscientious in testing it and making sure. I wrote down in my report everything that was wrong because I knew that plane was going to be flown by a pilot, a male pilot in combat, shortly thereafter. I wanted it in top condition." (MN Historical Society Oral History Interview, 1979)

She remained in the WASP until it was disbanded in December 1944. Betty flew 1,098 hours from Oct 1943 until Dec 1944.

After serving as a WASP, Betty got her commercial rating. Her flight examiner said she was qualified to also get an ATR (Airline Transport Rating), but then said "Women won't be hired as pilots by the airlines so you wouldn't have a use for this (ATR). She responded "Please give it to me. I can hang it on the wall and look at it anyway." She never got the ATR but did get a 'high horsepower rating' according to her 1979 interview.

In 1945 she married Richard Erenberg and they raised three children. Betty Jane passed away in 2002 at age 80 and is buried at Benson Cemetery, Benson, MN.

Over Memorial weekend, you'll have an opportunity to lay a wreath at the resting place of Betty Hanson Erenberg, or one of the other 5 amazing MN WASP, to honor their service and contributions to advancing women in aviation. Watch next month for another article on a special Minnesota WASP.

Special thanks to Texas Woman's University, Denton, TX, for their permission to use selected WASP Archive photos in this series of articles.

Thanks also to Minnesota Historical Society for their 1979 oral history interview of Betty Jane Hanson (Erenberg). Betty's quotes in this article and her full interview are found on the MN Historical Society website: collections.mnhs.org/voicesofmn/10002484