

Mark D. Noe

WASPs and Other Pilots: Historical Context in *Censored on Final Approach*

*History has a way of depleting the flavor of a time—facts
just don't allow for flavor,
and anyway, history doesn't
involve itself with details. (Noggle ix)*

There was hatred in America in 1943. The ethnic slurs embedded in everything from political speeches to song lyrics (and much other public discourse) serve as a clear reminder of the population's attitude toward other nationalities. But the hatred of outsiders only masked other forms of hate that are always part of a populous, diverse nation. In 1943, bigotry was such a part of the cultural fabric that exponents had trouble distancing themselves from it sufficiently to see it for what it was. To many citizens, prejudice was simply natural. Something has changed radically, then, when today an author of a play about World War II has to include an introductory note apologizing for letting characters use ethnic slurs . . . in reference to the then-enemy.¹ If the cultural milieu has changed so much that antagonistic language referring to the populations of nations that America went to war with requires explanation, surely those more subtle, internal biases will be even more difficult for twenty-first century audiences to grasp. Yet it is precisely the more subtle, internal biases that serve as a catalyst for the conflict provocatively portrayed in Phylis Ravel's² *Censored on Final Approach*.

A drama about military women during the Second World War might seem a poor premise for a play, yet the territory is fertile for dramatic conflict. The women who were a part of the Women Airforce Service Pilots program of more than half a century ago wanted merely to serve their country in time of war. To do so, they endured bigotry that was not only routinely demeaning but occasionally fatal. That they also might, years later (as some characters in this play do) choose to forget how their colleagues died and concentrate instead on memories of good times with youthful friends is perhaps natural. The fact is, however, that this play about the American military's first women fliers does not focus on relatively tame late-century sex-

ual problems resembling the Tailhook or Kelly Flinn fiascoes but rather on homicidal sabotage and consequent cover-ups. The result is not a simple good-versus-evil scenario. Instead, *Censored* brings a nearly forgotten history to life as it shows the three-dimensional conflict implied and expressed among the males and females, the non-coms and the officers, the staffers and the pilots and the commanders in the American military (and American society) of 1943-45.

The play tells the story of incidents that took place at Camp Davis, North Carolina, in 1943. Several planes from that field, piloted by women, crashed for reasons other than pilot error; in a number of cases, the official crash reports were then censored, sections literally chopped out so possible reasons or significant contributing factors were and are unavailable, out of reach for critical scrutiny. What all this says about male commanders' and male pilots' attitudes toward women pilots, about the priorities of Jackie Cochran (the leader of the women's force), and even about the women pilots themselves—both in 1943 and years later—is what gives the play depth and substance.

The play's grounding in historical incident is a major element of its success. Over the last quarter of a century, participants and historians have been thorough in recounting the days of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program. Yet, except among students of the period, many of the details of that history are today at best vague. *Censored's* author Phylis Ravel herself points out that even the actors playing the roles would have trouble accurately recreating the world of the play without a reasonably thorough study of the war era (see the following interview). The prejudices and jealousies of the early forties are largely lost to us, since our much more open society today has covered over, if not eliminated, many of them. Thus, it might be valuable first to review a few historical specifics tied directly to the events of the play.

There is, for one thing, the context of women in the war itself. D'Ann Campbell has argued that, "To win a war on the scale of the two World Wars of the twentieth century, every man, woman, and child of a nation must be involved . . ." (19). In her study, "Servicewomen and the American Military Experience," she claims the allies were much more successful in mobilizing women than were the axis powers, at least until it was too late for such action to help the axis (19-20). As a result, she says, in the U. S. alone, "over 350,000 women served in uniform during World War II with a peak strength of 271,000" (18). Mary V. Stremlow describes women's enlistments being "in unprecedented numbers." They had incentive, certainly, to join the military. After all, "they received more training, more responsibility, and more freedom in the armed forces than they would ever have received at home or in private industry" (360).³ "But over and above all other reasons" for their

enlisting, says Anne Noggle, echoing character Mary O'Connor's line in the play, "was the feeling that they were making a direct and useful contribution—that they were able to do something for the war effort" (12).

But these accomplishments came at a price. Social attitudes guaranteed a monstrous clash between patriotism and opportunity. And, while opportunities for women opened up generally throughout the military services, relatively few spaces appeared, and then somewhat belatedly, for women pilots. The subtle jockeying for position by two leading women pilots, Jacqueline Cochran and Nancy Harkness Love, today the subject of legend, certainly contributed to the problem. Still, the fractured approach these two leaders took to building a program was not the primary problem. Ultimately, 25,000 women applied for slots in just the flying programs, and 1830 well-qualified female pilots were accepted in them, of whom 1074 actually received their wings (Noggle 6).

No, the problem of letting women join the fight of the greatest generation went beyond any conflict of individual egos. The Army Air Forces itself was conflicted in its handling of this integration. The initial impetus, explained by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Olds of Air Corps Plans Division in 1942, called for a test with 100 women pilots to serve as co-pilots in transport and ferry work. Through such a seemingly simple action, "an equal number of male pilots might be made available for combat duty" (Gomez 98). In a July 1942 memo, General H. L. George, Commander of the Ferrying Command, argued for this plan as an experiment, keeping to quite stringent prerequisites for any applicants (99-100). Though initially against the proposal, General Hap Arnold, the Army Air Forces Commander, changed his view and backed the proposal when, in September 1942, there were significant increases in both aircraft production numbers and reports of a male pilot shortage (100-01). That same month saw the first small contingent of women pilots hired (102). By April 1943, the program began a major expansion, as the need for pilots was yet greater (105).

Using any yardstick, the gamble was a success. The graduation rate for women candidates in 1943 was 74%, especially high because the system was loaded in favor of getting candidates through programs successfully: the minimum quantity of flying experience required was significantly higher for women pilot candidates than for men. By 1944, when the requirements were more nearly parallel, the women's graduation rate was still 53%, which was "actually considerably better than the attrition rate for male trainees in the Central Flying Training Command" in that same year (Noggle 8). Training successes led to a broadening of flying jobs given to women. "Faced with increasing wartime demands for manpower, [General Arnold] ordered that women pilots perform practically all the noncombat flying jobs in the continental United States" (Gomez 107). Ultimately, "WASP pilots flew

a total of 77 types of aircraft throughout the war” (Weatherford 68). Stacking up the raw statistics, everything from operational hours to accident rates shows WASPs performing as well as or better than male pilots performing comparable duties.⁴ Said a converted Arnold: “It is on the record that women can fly as well as men” (Noggle 13).

History, however, is more than statistics, and American society as a whole was less convinced than some Army Air Forces’ brass. Simply getting women into uniform was tough. Across the services, there was some difficulty in recruiting women, since they “did not receive the same pay, rank, legal protection, or dependent benefits” as men (Herbert 55). The WASPs were set up initially to be “Civil Pilots,” the same designation given male pilots working for, but not actually in, the Army (Gomez 102). Plans called for eventual militarization and commissioning, and General Arnold himself quickly came around to supporting that option. But it didn’t happen: “The WASPs remained employed under the Civil Service program” (Noggle 8). Though not accepted as military personnel, they were still subject to the military justice system, just as if they had been placed on full-fledged active duty (61). In December 1944, when Congress closed down the WASP program, it had never achieved full incorporation into the military system.

Society just didn’t accept the idea of women as defenders of the nation: people were uncomfortable violating such ingrained stereotypes. Contemporary reports published in newsmagazines and newspapers often treated the program successes as circus freaks, taking a Johnsonian “it’s a wonder she can do it at all” perspective. Kay Kyser’s Orchestra had a hit in 1942 with “He Wears a Pair of Silver Wings,” a song about a man who does his duty for his country as he goes off to fight and about a woman who does her duty for her country by staying home to wait for him. She is his personal cheerleader, relegated to the sidelines while he does the dirty work on the field of battle. The January 1944 issue of *Air Force Magazine* includes an article titled “She Wears a Pair of Silver Wings,” seemingly co-opting the very idea presented in the popular song. But that would be too much. In fact, the article offers a stereotyped view of a “feminized” program, emphasizing fashionable clothing, make-up, domesticated barracks, and in general a watered-down and clearly non-combatant military lifestyle (Knight).

Such stereotypes were readily recognized and used by those in power on both sides of the issue. Doris Weatherford’s impressive study of women in the war, with several chapters devoted to attitudes in America in the 1940s, acknowledges that “WASP leadership was so keenly aware of the potential jealousy of male would-be pilots that they kept publicity to such a minimum that some people believed that existence of the WASP was a military secret” (44). Leisa D. Meyer explains why, claiming “women’s mil-

itary service during World War II had the potential to explode gender norms and hierarchies based on the male protector/female protected paradigm” (41). Thus, those pushing for a women’s role within the military had to make that role come across to the public as non-threatening to the male ego. Congressional legislation had to be written in a way that would take into account potential “implications of women’s military service for American ‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood’” (Meyer 28). In attempting to downplay the advantage of having additional personnel to perform the jobs necessary for the war effort, the House Civil Service Committee, chaired by Congressman Robert Ramspeck, took an antagonistic approach that played up these worries about exceeding the stereotypes. A May 29, 1944, *Time* article on the subject explained the battle brewing between Ramspeck and General Arnold. “Said the report acidly: the need ‘to recruit teen-aged schoolgirls, stenographers, clerks, beauticians, housewives and factory workers to pilot the military planes of this Government is as startling as it is invalid’; the militarization of Cochran’s WASPs is not necessary or desirable; the present program should be immediately and sharply curtailed” (“Women: Unnecessary . . .” 66). Melissa S. Herbert similarly phrases the attitude of those in Congress who worried about what women in uniform might mean to the country as a whole. She quotes a syntactically obtuse *New York Times* item from 1945 that says, “Opponents of the bill [to establish women’s military branches] feared that the women of America would come out of uniform barking like drill sergeants and as unfit companions for civilian men, never being able to settle down to being wives and mothers, not to mention their morals” (53). Such attitudes, though often better phrased, were hardly unusual. Herbert describes a common rumor holding that women in uniform would contract venereal disease and loosen the morals of male soldiers. When someone in government suggested that such a rumor might be axis-inspired, Herbert says, the War Department had military intelligence units check into it. The intelligence specialists found no connection to the axis powers, though, reporting instead that the information seemed to stem primarily from uniformed American personnel (56-57). The problem was internal, not external: women in uniform “violated a sacred preserve, a male privilege, namely the right to serve in the nation’s defense” (51). Women should be protected, not protectors.

Military recruiters did their best to spin the women’s enlistment option in a way acceptable to the general public. An early recruiting theme was “Free a Man to Fight” (Herbert 54). The idea seemed more acceptable when, as Meyer phrases it, “it did not disrupt systems of male dominance and power.” If this posed a problem in admin sections of headquarters units (where many servicewomen were allowed to perform clerical work), imagine the increased effect in the macho world of high flight. Women should

not be allowed to overturn society's norms, yet military women were "figure[s] whose potential sexual and economic independence from men subverted the 'natural order' and [who] usurped men's status and power, both within and outside of the home" (Meyer 26-27). The increasingly public debate highlighted a major social dilemma. In the eyes of many American citizens, women belonged in the home and men were supposed to defend them (Meyer 29). Those women who wanted to help the war effort by "freel[ing] a man to fight" were resented by "military men who preferred their typewriter to a foxhole and [by] family and friends who preferred that they [the men] remain safely behind the front lines" (Herbert 54).

Even the public representation of military women required special handling. War-era movies might show them in uniform, functioning in a quasi-masculine role, but they had to straddle the gender gap and maintain a visibly feminine side, too (Nelson 306). Contemporary sources, though presented as objective news reporting, often illustrated the kind of spin necessary to placate the American public. Herbert quotes two *New York Times* articles in which Women's Army Corps members long for peace so they can start homes and families (61-62). Knight's *Air Force Magazine* article stresses that "WASPs are both women *and* flyers"—and note the order Knight gives the two duties (51). A photo-oriented *Life* article titled "Girl Pilots" does much to emphasize the feminine, including closing with a full-page shot of women pilots sunbathing in swimsuits (81). A WASP quoted in a *Time* article from April 1944 probably helped discourage some candidates for the program (perhaps instigating anti-enlistment pressure from their families and their potential husbands) by providing an insider's warning "that the uncertain hours and nervous strain age [the women] fast" ("Women: Saved . . ." 64). Certainly much emphasis in journalistic reports on women in the military is focused on domestic issues. Meyer's research shows that Army public relations stressed military women's tendency to make barracks homey (35). Photos in many contemporary articles show women performing calisthenics in clean and pressed gym gear, but they show no bayonet drills; they show lipstick-perfect smiles in the cockpit (and note that Jackie Cochran came to the Army Air Forces from the cosmetics industry), but they show no crash sites.

A tame representation, though, was not enough to keep the WASP program alive even to the cessation of hostilities. The proponents of all-male flying operations won out as the war effort neared completion. In December 1944, against the wishes of a now-strongly supportive Hap Arnold, the government closed down the WASP program. "The legislation in Congress to retain the WASP in the military had failed after encountering a strong opposing lobby from male flight instructors, who became eligible for the draft as their government-contract flight schools closed and who

understandably coveted the flight assignments given to the WASP” (Noggle 13). Fulfilling their military duties was obviously only part of the issue. By late 1944, society’s hope was that life would soon return to its pre-war status quo. The government, says Campbell, emphasized women as secondary, now needed at home (21-22). The catch is that, by then, the women who were flying had proved their equal ability. Unfortunately, “The military experience itself [had] made it clear from the beginning that women were not precisely members of the armed forces in the same way as men” (Stremlow 359). Despite such political decisions, however, the WASPs had clearly done their part—which was all the women, including one of the characters in *Censored*, had insisted so many wanted to do—to help win the war.

Such a history is ripe for dramatic interpretation. *Censored on Final Approach* uses incidents from that history to capture both the war and its effects on surviving participants a decade later. The play is a flashback, beginning in 1955, as two of the women who flew together meet again. Catherine Watts and Gerry Henson have avoided each other since the war because of disagreements about decisions made during the war. They’re still arguing over their experiences in the program, angry over what it did or didn’t do. These were two of four friends who completed WASP training and were then put into Jackie Cochran’s low-visibility mission of flying tow targets at Camp Davis, North Carolina, in 1943. The other two of this group were killed in suspicious crashes that evoked ambiguous responses from brass and flyers alike. These responses become the focus of the play’s flashbacks.

The first act sets up the conflict, introducing the four women flyers, along with Jackie Cochran and the various males working airfield and training operations (meant to represent the views of a cross-section of males in the Army Air Forces). Here, we also get Cochran’s perspective on the flying program, a significant shift from the relatively simple and publicly accepted ferrying operation run by Nancy Harkness Love. This program is troubled by the indefinite status of the WASPs, who are still technically civilian, even though all the other tow pilots at Camp Davis (male, of course) are military officers. The men’s responses are decidedly unfavorable, ranging from outright antagonism (22) and bigotry (26) to sexual innuendo (22-23, 29). But the women also acknowledge among themselves that their presence complicates operations and leaves the ops officer, Major Stephenson, vulnerable to complaints from both sides. Stephenson can’t get the male pilots to fly tow missions because even women are now thought capable of flying them (34, 37, 39). Though Stephenson is portrayed as a Southern gentleman and a father figure, he also comes to accept (when his back is against the wall and he positively needs someone to tow the tar-

gets) the demonstrated abilities of the women. As these four women confront Stephenson, insisting on yet more flying opportunities, suggesting they are the answer to getting targets in the air for artillery trainees to fire at, one of the women phrases the situation this way: “One of two things will happen. We will do so poorly that we’ll prove our superiors correct in saying ‘Women don’t belong in the air.’ Or we do so well that you see our worth, and the men can be released in greater numbers to fly combat.” Stephenson is a sufficiently savvy realist to add a third option (and one that would work to his advantage): “Or you do so well, that the men will want their jobs back” (41).

Stephenson also shows his other side, however, explaining his personal view of the women and their situation. Calling them “powder-puff pilots,” he insists they really “do not belong here” (42). Frustrated by the machinations that put them at Camp Davis in the first place, he condemns civilian fiddling with the military, disgusted with “a President who has never seen combat, politicians who make decisions that will get them re-elected, and high-pressured businessmen who think that war is just another way to make money” (42). After assuring the women that he’ll follow orders and work with them, he baldly states his personal perspective (which is representative among many men on the base and, presumably, around the country): “But I want you to know that when you are on this base, there is an officer in charge of you that does not believe you belong here. I resent your presence, and I don’t give a damn if you turn out to be better than my men. You’re still women” (42). In response, the women, nonplussed, ask for only two things from Major Stephenson, the representative of military authority. “Please inform your men that we are fellow flyers—women, yes—but fellow flyers. We are doing our job for the war,” says Liz Langley. “And if any one of them asks ‘what we charge for our services’ ever again, and I’m around to hear, I will personally box the living day-lights out of him” (43).

All cards on the table, the act closes with the women pre-fighting their planes. The last words of the act are reserved for an older civilian, Wayne, the airfield’s head mechanic, who surprises himself by being impressed with the women’s flying. “Well, if that don’t beat all. They look like real fliers to me, sir. Flyin’ high . . . Flyin’ straight . . .” Lieutenant Ryder, the assistant operations officer, interjects, “Well, finish it, mister—smooth landing? Isn’t that the phrase?” The mechanic responds, “Sir, with these planes, smooth landin’s are between you and your Maker” (47-48). And it’s this possibility of mechanical problems rather than fundamental flying ability that presents the central dilemma of the rest of the play.

Act Two begins with several of the women reliving near-crashes—caused both by mechanical failure and sabotage. After one of these, we witness Major Stephenson in a “father-daughter” chat with the woman involved

in the most recent incident, Mary O'Connor. O'Connor is probably the youngest woman in the program, though she's also an experienced flyer. Stephenson talks her through the incident, then takes on a paternal role. He wonders how she learned to fly. "Weren't you suppose [sic] to be learning to can preserves and bake and sew and tend to the family?" "I can do all that, sir," she responds. "But I also fly" (62). When he then wonders how a woman who is voluntarily in a situation with many men around could be (as she claims to be) shy, the exchange may actually teach Stephenson something: "Oh, I'm not here for the men, sir. I'm here to fly." He replies, "And I'm here to win a war." "So am I, sir." "But you don't have to be." "I guess that's the difference, sir. Most men are here because they have to be. We're here because we want to be" (63).

The scene shifts quickly to the other women pilots grilling this same naïve young woman. They conclude that sabotage caused the accident. They also realize that, though the damage was slight in this case, Major Stephenson could easily trump things up and get the program shut down. Arguing among themselves, Mary O'Connor gets to the point—the women are too concerned with being perfect and are losing the ability to laugh or otherwise be human. She also defends Major Stephenson: ". . . I believe that he believes that in fighting against us, he's protecting us" (67). While she doesn't like it, she seems to understand the male tendency to offer women their protection.

After some further discussion, the scene shifts to a montage of dialogue centering on this same pilot's next flight. One burst of words finds the head mechanic chewing out trainees for leaving rags in gas tanks and for letting water get in carburetors. Similar bursts of words come from artillery trainees targeting the plane's tug, the control tower talking to O'Connor piloting the plane, and the pilot herself talking. Through these, we get an impressionistic view of the crash that will kill the first of these women. The mechanics belatedly discover O'Connor pre-flighted with a wrong mechanical report and that the plane she's in is redlined. The artillery trainees are overly enthusiastic in their firing. The artillery team sees rounds actually hit the plane, but the officer leading the training ignores reality and insists the nervous shooter didn't hit it. Tower advises bailout, but O'Connor can't because one of the unknown mechanical write-ups turns out to be an inoperative latch on the cockpit cover. Finally, the other women, unable to confirm all the details, acknowledge the basic problem was a stalled plane, recognizing that that was cause enough for the crash and that it put the crash beyond control. It's the mechanic who hints at more, echoing his own words from the end of the first act: "There are only about three planes fit to fly. Her plane hadn't had an overhaul in over 500 hours. That's about 200 tow-target missions and God knows what else. Not an overhaul in sight.

Hell, if it's not the lousy planes, it's trigger happy trainees. No wonder the men don't want to fly" (82).

This montage of voices, rapid-fire exchanges among a varied group of speakers, leaves an audience ready to catch its collective breath. The next scene is more subdued, as Jackie Cochran arrives in the aftermath of the crash. Instead of speakers scattered all over the stage, we see Cochran in the center, almost as if seated on the witness stand in a trial. Immediately, one of the women presses the issue of sabotage. Stressing mission first, Cochran says the report is "being drawn" and "There's no need for an investigation." When Gerry Henson suggests there's been a cover-up, Major Stephenson pipes in to say the crash was purely pilot error. Citing the inoperative canopy latch, Henson shows she doubts his answer. Cochran then shuts off debate, promising a full report (83-84).

Later, alone with the remaining women, Cochran stuns her pilots by telling them that an investigation would be inappropriate. When Henson asks her about the reports of rags in tanks and water in carburetors, Cochran calls such things "careless" and "dangerous" but hardly reason for an investigation (85-86). When the women then learn that the GI in the back seat of O'Connor's plane, flying in support of the tow target, survived the crash (his canopy worked), they ask to talk with him. Informed that he had already been transferred out of the unit, the astonished women again insist Cochran answer or get answers to their questions. In a series of virtual monologues, Cochran explains the reality of their situation. "There's no such thing as questions bein' answered in the military." "These men do not want women flying." "You've got to out think them, out do them, out show them. 'Cause if you don't, they'll say they were right. We don't have the fortitude, the guts. So you have to do it—you have to." When asked if she would fly the planes herself, she reminds them she already has. "And I'd fly them again. I'd just make damn sure everything is in the best working order as possible." She then reminds them that they're doing something on par with what the men are doing. Indeed, she stresses how that differs from the ferrying work of Nancy Harkness Love's pilots—the antagonism and competition between Cochran and Love come out several times in Cochran's speeches.⁵ As a final comment on the issue, Cochran tells the story of one of Love's fliers. A male pilot flying in formation with some female pilots initiated a sequence of events that ultimately caused one of the women to crash. "While it was his fault—his crime—he wasn't even court martialed, and why? Because he is a man, and they needed him for combat. Now, if Mrs. Love's WAFS can go on after experiencing that little episode—so can we" (87-89).

After further questions about O'Connor's crash, the report, and the possibility of an investigation, Henson asks Cochran for a transfer. Cochran

denies the transfer on the spot, instead offering a chance to resign: completely *in* this quasi-military program or completely *out* of it are the only two options she offers her pilots. If they want to fly for the military, they play by her rules. Cochran leaves, and the women, talking among themselves, acknowledge that if “One word gets to the press—they find out women have been flying semi-combat, this program will blow sky high” (90-91).

Still, they have doubts about safety. Their doubts increase when the assistant ops officer, Lieutenant Ryder, unintentionally hints that someone may have acted to sabotage a plane (92). Among themselves, the remaining women, after acknowledging the thousands dying in the war, wonder if the country would or should even notice a single death, whether by accident (errant artillery fire, mechanical failure) or contrivance (practical joke or sabotage). In doing so, they recognize their paradox. “If we make any move to find out what happened, we will lose our chance to fly—lose our chance to help win this war” (94). They reach an agreement to press on, no matter what happens, so the program survives. The individual might die, but the group will go on. “We have to fight in such a way that we do not jeopardize the ground we’ve gained” (95). Liz Langley, leading this side of the discussion, makes the commitment personal: “I am asking you to do exactly what the men are doing. To fight this war and cover your ass as best you can” (96). Though Henson and Watts don’t fully agree with this idea, they leave it at that for the time being, still mulling over a final decision. And then Langley dies in an accident caused by a mechanical malfunction.

Catching the head mechanic at a weak moment, Watts steals a look at the maintenance form for Langley’s ill-fated plane. Shortly thereafter, Jackie Cochran arrives at the base and destroys the form, an act she deems acceptable once Langley’s accident is rendered in a formal report. Cochran’s words to the mechanic echo Langley’s words just before she was killed, putting the program first. But they also imply a cover-up: “Mister, I want no one to see this. . . . I do not want my women getting excited about this incident. I want it kept quiet. The accident report has been filed” (99-100).⁶

The play’s closing scene returns to the 1955 setting of its opening. Catherine Watts explains to Gerry Henson her search for the truth, always stymied by non-answers from the participants. She went to all the participants in 1943. Cochran refused to talk about the program with her. The head mechanic compared events to college pranks, noting altered accident reports invariably settling on pilot error. In Langley’s case, the maintenance report, he added, never became part of the accident report: “Censored, ma’am” (101-02). He and Major Stephenson both reiterated their views that the women should never have been flying military planes in the first place (102).

Watts and Henson, at the end, have nearly reconciled. They know they need to “Pick up the pieces. Bits and pieces of our lives. Everybody does that after a war. Why should we be different?” (103). The play ends with the cast quietly, almost ghostily, reassembled on stage as Catherine Watts, in a voice-over, explains President Carter’s action in assigning these pilots veteran status in 1977, 32 years after the end of the war (104).

A note of anticlimax thus colors the ending of *Censored on Final Approach*. The dead are gone, the living remember them but also move on with their own lives, the guilty (assuming these weren’t all accidents) await some greater cosmic judgment day. But the nation itself mollifies its collective guilt as well, belatedly honoring a forgotten (or actively ignored) group of its citizen-soldiers as it turns to the daunting integration task it had deferred three decades earlier.

Censored on Final Approach proves to be not only an interesting but an accurate snapshot of the initial (and ultimately false) stab at a process of integrating women into the military. The inherent drama of the conflict it exposes makes it both an entertaining play to watch and an effective exposition of the breadth of the issue it discusses. The characters are human; many come across as figures of three dimensions, existing in and representing a world of conflict, from the international to the interpersonal. Their presentation in dialogue is sufficiently reasonable that a viewer can’t help but walk away with some sympathy for each of the various perspectives in the drama—the competing interests portrayed on stage reverberate in the gallery. The characters’ verisimilitude is reinforced through their contact with the history their actions depict. That history alone has long needed to be voiced, and not just in the memoirs and academic studies of recent years. Seeing the variety of attitudes held by Americans during a significant but rapidly disappearing era come to life on stage says much to twenty-first century citizens about the innate attitudes occasionally bubbling to the surface during our own age. *Censored on Final Approach* is a play worth watching.

A Conversation with Phylis Ravel

This interview began as an email exchange and concluded in person, in Milwaukee, late in the fall of 2000. Phylis Ravel is the Artistic Director of the Department of Performing Arts at Marquette University.

Mark D. Noe: What was your inspiration to do this particular story?

Phylis Ravel: The Canadian John Murrell wrote *Waiting for the Parade* (Vancouver: Talon, 1980). I directed it. About the same time, I read Marge

Piercy's *Gone to Soldiers* (New York: Fawcett/Ballantine, 1988), recommended by my husband. Then I read Sally Keil's *Wonderful Women in their Flying Machines* (New York: Four Directions Press, 1994). One paragraph in that book, about a sabotage incident involving sugar in a gas tank at Camp Davis, led me on. By chance, an advanced student, at about this same time, wanted to do a senior project, and I put her on the task of helping me with some of the initial research. It all gave me enough to get started.

MDN: You picture several crashes in the play. Are they based on the Rawlinson and Wood crashes at Camp Davis in the second half of 1943 [see Verges 131]?

PR: Exactly—one was friendly fire; the other, to me, is a possible joke that went wrong—or the carelessness of a mechanic. For the women who felt marginalized and who were, to some men, a threat to their jobs, it would appear frightening, since thoughts of sabotage certainly crossed their minds.

MDN: Have you seen the actual reports of any crashes?

PR: I saw and have a copy of the actual accident where sugar was found in the tank. Certain parts were censored (literally cut out), and the accident was attributed to pilot error.

MDN: Have women veterans suggested the problems you depict in the last Camp Davis scene, following Liz Langley's accident?

PR: Yes, and worse.

MDN: Did you talk with the "Gerrys" and "Catherines" who claimed to have seen Forms 1 before their destruction or censoring.

PR: My notes are buried deep. I'd have to dig them out. However, in the book *The Wonderful Women and Their Flying Machines*, a flyer describes seeing the Form 1. However, when I wrote to her, she didn't "remember."

MDN: How did you locate the women who had participated in the WASP program?

PR: I started by calling the University of Texas for information on the

women [Texas Woman's University has a substantial collection devoted to the WASPs at <www.twu.edu/wasp/>]. From there, I tracked a few of them. Then I saw Betty Wood's heavily censored accident report in the university files.

MDN: How did the women veterans you interviewed respond to your research? Were there instances of lingering disagreement such as that you depict between Catherine and Gerry?

PR: When you first interview the veterans they are very closed. They want to remember the country they served. As they get to know you, their feelings of betrayal by their country are monumental. The women of the 40s were very discreet, very concerned about their image. In my materials I have some letters that are very vitriolic towards Jackie Cochran, particularly when she reported to Congress that women shouldn't be militarized because "they'll only get pregnant and leave."

MDN: How did the women respond to you?

PR: Today, on the talk shows, everything hangs out. In the 40s, things were still private. The women didn't talk about the private. That's why the WASPs were successful. And that's also, by the way, why children-actors need an explanation of the past before they can attempt to recreate it on stage.

MDN: There's a lot of ambiguity in this play

PR: These women have walked into a man's world. During the war, the country needed the women. Though they were from that private world, they were suddenly pushed into the public world. This wasn't a big problem for Rosie the Riveter, but it was for the WASPs. Rosie was a civilian. WASPs were military, yet they were not military. They had no safety net from the military. Jackie Cochran should have been their safety net, but she drew back. Also, Rosie knew it was back to the kitchen after the war, when the men came back. The WASPs wanted to fly.

MDN: Speaking of Cochran, at the time of the integration of the service academies in the mid-70s, she became an icon for the first women cadets at the Air Force Academy. Does the Jackie Cochran you've come to know rate iconic status?

PR: Any person, man or woman, who is a leader will have the good

and the bad. Jackie was a pioneer—her class was against her, and she was manipulative and self-serving . . . however, so was Patton. She's like any other icon—she supports herself with clay feet.

MDN: Did any of the women veterans speak of their view of the full-fledged sexual integration of today's military?

PR: That subject never came up. However, in Grand Forks [where the play was presented in late 90s], I was surprised to learn that the women pilots did not know Jackie Cochran or the women who flew in World War II.

MDN: We've talked about the genesis of the play and your research for it. But you not only wrote it—you've also directed it. Describe that side of things.

PR: The story was there. After putting it together, it's up to the actors. Choosing the actors is 80% of the play. If you don't have the right Jackie Cochran, you don't have a good play. You make the right choices, and you play the given circumstances.

When we presented the play the first time, I took the original actors to an airport on Long Island, to fly in similar aircraft and to sit in the simulators. In fact, it was there, when I talked to an old mechanic, that I learned about the vacuum cleaner incident—and I inserted it into the play.

The key is to remember: It's always personal for the artists.

MDN: Have any of the women veterans seen the play performed?

PR: Yes, many of them have. When Peggy Gilman, who had towed targets, saw it, she talked. Her daughters hadn't known about her wartime experiences. The whole family came to the play and celebrated with her. Her plane, by the way, ended up in Gimbel's Department Store, where she later worked.

MDN: How did others react to it?

PR: With tears, with standing ovations, with letters of thanks that they were remembered.

Notes

1. "Special Note: The word 'Jap' is used by characters in the play. This term refers to the Japanese. It is a reflection of a time in history when the United States was at war with Japan. There is no intention to insult or diminish anyone of Japanese heritage" (ii).
2. Originally published under the pseudonym Hazel Snee.
3. Many other commentators also delineate the variety of reasons women had for enlistment. For excellent, detailed discussions, see especially Weatherford (Chapter 3) and Herbert (passim).
4. The statistics are available in many places, but the primary source for all of them is probably Jackie Cochran's final report on the WASP program (see the Works Cited entry). In the same report, there are plenty of additional statistics, many of them comparing flying data categorized by male and female pilots, further demonstrating the same point.
5. In fact, Cochran had serious difficulties working with both Love and Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, head of the Women's Army Corps (WACs). The fact that the government chose to militarize the WACs but never militarized either of the flying elements always angered Cochran.
6. Marianne Verges provides details of two actual crashes at Camp Davis that parallel very closely the two crashes described in the play's narrative (131).

Works Cited

- Campbell, D'Ann. "Servicewomen and the American Military Experience." In Poulos, 15-25.
- Cochran, Jacqueline. *Final Report on the Women Pilot Program*. Wings Across America. WASP on the Web. <www.wasp-wwii.org/wasp/final_report.htm>.
- "Girl Pilots." *Life*. July 19, 1943: 73-81.
- Gomez, RitaVictoria. "'Angels Calling From the Sky': The Women Pilots of World War II." In Poulos, 98-111.
- Herbert, Melissa S. "Amazons or Butterflies: The Recruitment of Women into the Military During World War II." *MINERVA: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military*: IX:2 (Summer 1991): 50-68.
- Knight, Charlotte. "She Wears a Pair of Silver Wings." *Air Force*, January 1944: 49-51.
- Kyser, Kay, and his Orchestra. "He Wears a Pair of Silver Wings." By Eric Maschwitz and Michael Carr. London, 1941.
- Meyer, Leisa D. "Creating a Women's Corps: Public Response to the WAAC/WAC and Questions of Citizenship." In Poulos, 26-46.
- Nelson, Jennifer A. "Reading Cultural Text in Government Films: Women, Image, and the World War II Experience." In Poulos, 304-324.
- Noggle, Anne. *For God, Country, and the Thrill of It: Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II*. College Station: Texas A&M UP, 1990.
- Poulos, Paula Nassen, ed. *A Woman's War Too: U. S. Women in the Military in World War II*. Washington: National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1996.
- Snee, Hazel [Phylis Ravel]. *Censored on Final Approach*. Privately published, 1998.
- Stremlow, Mary V. "Women as Veterans: Historical Perspective and Expectations." In Poulos, 355-366.
- Verges, Marianne. *On Silver Wings*. New York: Fawcett/Ballantine, 1995.
- Weatherford, Doris. *American Women and World War II*. NY: Facts on File, 1990.

"Women: Saved from Official Fate." *Time*. 3 Apr. 1944: 63.

"Women: Unnecessary and Undesirable." *Time*. 29 May 1944: 66.

Mark D. Noe is a professor of English at Pennsylvania College of Technology in Williamsport. A career officer, he retired as associate chair of the Air Force Academy Department of English.