

They were well-kept secrets when 1943 began: the 1,830 top female civilian pilots (selected from over 25,000 applicants) who reported for military training and stateside duty so that their male counterparts could go to war. They were such well-kept secrets that, in a great many families, their own mothers and fathers didn't tell the grandparents that Florence had dropped out of college or that Cornelia had quit that nice stenography job; and no one was talking to the neighbors. They were such well-kept secrets that three of the young pilots, on assignment, were once arrested in Americus, Georgia, for wearing slacks in town after sundown. ("Our C.O., Jacqueline Cochran, got the sheriff on the phone and bent his ear," said Madge Rutherford Minton, a company-mate of the arrested pilots; "she told him he was sabotaging the entire war effort.") They were such very well-kept secrets that when the first truckloads of wavy-haired, slim-waisted, lovely young women disembarked with their suitcases at Avenger Field outside Sweetwater, Texas, in December 1942 to report for flight training, the base commander exploded: "What in the hell are you women doing on my airbase? Get out of here!" Flustered and angry, the flyers hoisted their suitcases back onto the trucks, rode back into Sweetwater, checked into the Blue Bonnet Hotel, and sat there until the orders of General H. "Hap" Arnold reached Texas.

The gates finally, grudgingly, opened to them, but the women were ordered into an immediate 45 minutes of calisthenics. "I was in a suit and high-heels," said Madge Rutherford Minton. "But I would have done anything. I just wanted to fly."

When the young ladies were permitted to limp into the barracks and unpack, Avenger Field became, for a month-and-a-half, America's first and only co-ed airbase. Now the young women themselves began keeping the secret: who could not picture several hundred pairs of outraged parents storming across the Texas desert to extricate their daughters from such an indelicate placement? "The cadets treated us like college men treated college girls," says Minton. "It was like a college campus in which any attempt to keep the men from talking to the women was completely ineffectual. Oh yes. Husbands were found."

Then the army cadets shipped out, leaving behind an all-female airbase, an even more wonderful novelty. That was the end of the secret, as word spread through the ranks of enlisted men. Legend has it that over the next several weeks, a hundred male pilots found themselves in the airspace over Sweetwater, Texas, suddenly compelled to make "emergency" landings. Miraculously, each plane landed safely and taxied in, the cockpit opened, and a grinning pilot popped up and looked around.

In July 1943, Life Magazine ran a cover story on the "GIRL PILOTS" at Avenger Field, giving the WASPS (Women Airforce Service Pilots) their first public recognition. But it was 1943, so it seemed the story had to be reported as a "puff piece," a bit of levity amidst the war news, with the tone of Readers Digest's "Humor in Uniform." "Girls are very serious about their chance to fly for the Army at Avenger Field," the piece began, "even when it means giving up nail polish, beauty parlors, and dates..." Photographs focused on hairstyle choices favored by the pilots: "Feminine locks constantly creep into girl fliers' eyes at Avenger Field..." reads one caption. "Florence Knight of Valhalla, N.Y. uses a hairnet." "...Joan Pearson of Detroit, Mich. favors a combination beret and ribbon-tied hair knot."

Because it was 1943, the final shot of these WWII pilots-in-training was — what else? — a bathing suit candid. A dozen women lolled on thin towels spread upon the Texas scrub, with jeeps and propeller planes parked a hundred yards away. The caption reads: "A Sunday Sunbath for Avenger Pilots."

Hairnets and pigtails and swimsuits were the subject of the Life article in part to give relief from the war news — in July 1943, General Douglas MacArthur opened the combined Army and Navy offensive against the Japanese in the Pacific, Flying Fortresses raided Le Mans in France, and the RAF hit targets in western Europe — and in part because the visual and print vocabularies barely existed yet

which could have conveyed the moral seriousness, patriotism, and love of danger in a group of people who looked like Hollywood starlets. Before the war was over, the WASPS piloted every model of military plane: they ferried them from factory to air-base or back again, served as test-pilots and flight instructors for new, old, and experimental aircraft, and towed targets for live artillery practice. Some would die in service — a few as the result of sabotaged aircraft — and none were given funerals with military honors. But in the 1940 photograph, there they recline, in skirted one-piece swimsuits, with knotted kerchiefs in their hair, reading magazines and painting their nails. They can be seen there as the public imagined them: young and giggly, full of secrets and spunk.

Among the many changes in the world observed by the veteran WASPS over the last 56 years, chief among them is the slow acquisition of the world's respect, and the likelihood that a magazine story on women Air Force pilots today would not conclude with a spread of the pilots as bathing beauties.

In her little old tin-can of a car, she grips the wheel with knobby fingers, backs out of her driveway, and plunges into a rainstorm and up onto the Indiana highway. The car is lashed by the brown wakes of passing trucks and the windshield wipers aren't keeping up with the downpour — they're shoving plates of water from side to side rather than disposing of any of it. Visibility's zero, she's going 70, she's nearly 80, so naturally Madge Rutherford Minton steps on the gas. Erect in the driver's seat, head up, long grey hair carelessly knotted at the nape of her neck, a WASP patch on the breast of her brown leather zipper jacket, she's thoroughly enjoying the ride. She has affixed to her car's dashboard both a compass and an altimeter. Is that how she's navigating? The long-distance truckers don't know whom they're up against. She steers straight into the storm without flinching, flashes past the trucks, gives them scarcely a glance in her rearview mirror, smooths a few wayward strands of wiry hair from her forehead, and never stops talking.

A life lived at full-throttle beats within every story she tells, while her sweet husband, Professor Sherman Minton, Jr., an internationally recognized herpetologist, medical zoologist, and professor, retired from the Indiana University School of Medicine, listens adoringly from the backseat, offering the occasional correction. As they soar down the wet highway — where lesser traffic thrash about in the wind and rain — their reminiscences are sprinkled with names like Amelia Earhart (Madge's hero), and Harry S Truman (who appointed U.S. Senator Sherman Minton, Sr., to the U.S. Supreme Court), and Hitler (who employed a woman as one of his personal pilots), and Orville Wright (whose nephew's widow championed the WASPs), and many other WASPS ("I guess I pretty much only made friends with women with flew," Madge realizes). They happily recall moments in their life together like the time they got so lost in the west Pakistani wilderness, on foot, while hunting for Sherman's specimens, that they had to navigate along the stars in Orion's belt to find their way back to the car. Also in the timeline of their long and happy 55 years of marriage are the several occasions Dr. Minton was bitten by poisonous snakes.

"The sea-snake, on the boat, off Australia," remembers Madge.

"No, that wasn't a bite. The boat rocked and I jammed my thumb onto his fang," says the husky-voiced, gentle professor, not wishing to assign blame to an entirely guiltless snake.

In her thirties, forties, and fifties, the joy that for Madge came close to equaling the thrill of flying — her passion in her twenties — was deep-sea diving, as Sherman's assistant, in search of poisonous snakes. "We were catching sea-snakes with tongs and hooks," she says. "You go flying along with your fins beside the coral reef about 60 feet down and all of a sudden you have the feeling, 'Something's following me.' You roll over and there is a big venomous sea-snake threading in and out of your legs and fins and, you know, that's a rush." Currently, in the garage of their modest brick house in Indianapolis, 2,000 snakes float in formaldehyde. In the half of their kitchen converted to Sherman's office, several live specimens doze; and a couple of tortoises roam freely about the house. "We've had that one 27 years," says Sherman, of The Venerable Bede napping on the livingroom rug near a fire in the open hearth. "And I don't know how old he was when he brought him home. It's hard," sighs the old man, "to outlive a tortoise."

Beautiful, fiery Madge Rutherford was a junior at Butler University in Indianapolis when she met graduate student Sherman Minton at a tea-party given by the Delta Gammas at Indiana University. “It was November 13, 1937,” says Dr. Minton.

“He has total recall,” Madge points out.

“I thought she was gorgeous,” he says. “And she was. And she still is. And she wrote very decent poetry, too. Our first conversation was about snakes: she said, ‘I understand you collect snakes.’ But then we argued about the difference between an Eastern and Western painted turtle. It turned out we were both wrong, but she was just about the first girl who ever talked to me about snakes who seemed to know anything.”

They fell in love, were engaged to be married. But the war in Europe pulled the rug out from under them, as it did so many of their generation.

Madge had planned to be a journalist, hoped to cover China (she’d had two years as a reporter on the school paper and a summer course in journalism, naturally she assumed she’d be assigned by a top paper to China) when the war in Europe opened up a unique opportunity for a young woman to learn to fly. Butler was the first university in the state of Indiana to be chosen for the Civilian Pilot Training Program. “There was a war going on,” she says. “Everyone knew we’d get into it. By allowing girls into flight training, it allowed them to pretend it was just a civilian program, but the long-term goal was to prepare men for flying duty. I’d always wanted to fly. I went to sign up, didn’t have the \$35 fee, asked my parents, and they said, ‘You’re going to have to find that money yourself, dear.’ I had to wear slacks to the training. Well, you couldn’t buy a pair of womens’ slacks in the state of Indiana in 1943. I had to go to a local tailor and he very nervously made me a handsome pair of slack. I was so pleased, I felt I looked like a pilot.” The professor of one of her college courses promptly evicted Madge from class. “He said, ‘Miss Rutherford, you are not properly dressed. You are to go home and change your costume.’ I stormed into the office of the Dean of Women, shouting, ‘I simply cannot do aerobatic flying in a skirt.’” Permission to return to class in slacks was granted.

“87 of us signed up for the course at Butler,” she says. “23 of us got our wings. I finished third in the class. The top ten were offered the opportunity to study advanced aerobatics in heavier planes and I rushed to sign up. But the Dean said, ‘Miss Rutherford, this course is to train men to fly in combat.’ I went home in a rage. I was so angry at the injustice — probably the first injustice I was aware of in my whole life.”

Nothing in her upbringing had prepared her to be discriminated against on the basis of her gender. “Not in my immediate family, no,” she says. “I was an only child. My father treated me like a son.”

What was an angry young woman to do? Write to the new champion of women and equal rights, of course.

“Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,” she wrote on August 7, 1940, this smart, lovely, daring, and self-confident 20-year-old brimming with righteous indignation.

“Approximately 487 girls received flight training under the C.A.A. private pilot training program during this past school year,” she wrote. “Like the other 486 girls, I have wind in my veins... Mrs. Roosevelt, could you help us?”

Remarkably — though nothing felt impossible to that particular young lady at that particular hour in history — a reply came nine days later. Under the letterhead of the Civil Aeronautics Authority in Washington, D.C., came a letter that began: “Dear Miss Rutherford: Mrs. Roosevelt has requested that we make direct reply to your letter...” and concluded: “...no discrimination will be made against pilots of your sex.” Madge Rutherford was admitted to advanced aeronautics training.

With that degree earned, there was “no more free flying,” says Madge.

In January 1943, she received a telegram inviting her to apply to be a WASP. “I told my parents I was joining the Air Force and they said, ‘Are you, dear?’ They were very wonderful people.”

She phoned Sherman and breathlessly explained that the wedding would have to be postponed: “I have a chance to go fly for the Army Air Corps and I’m going to go.”

“Well, it was consistent with her personality — always in the forefront of things,” says the soft-spoken professor, seated at breakfast 56 years after receiving the news. “But there were several things that bothered me. First: up to that point, I’d never been anything but Senator Minton’s son, and I

could see another role coming — Madge’s husband. Second: I was scared about her getting killed. Third: I was afraid she’d meet someone else.”

“Oh ye of little faith!” she scolds, serving him biscuits.

The AT-6 was Madge’s favorite plane at Avenger Field. The girls sat in class in Ground School all morning, then flew all afternoon, every day, weather permitting. “I wanted to fly any airplane I could put my hands on; felt I could; nearly did. With 600 horsepower, the AT-6, which we called the Texan, was a very powerful airplane. It made a very satisfactory roar when you took off — like a roar of lions — and I liked the power and the potential for acrobatics. Particularly marvelous was rolling out at the top of a loop: you’re upside-down, you usually stall out, and it gets all wishy-washy and feels for a moment like you’ll fall out of the sky belly-first, then you pick up speed again. I loved chandelles: swinging from side to side in the air. It was like rocking a baby. I loved barrel rolls: wing over wing over wing.

“I had one accident. I was taking off. The woman in the tower was screaming for me to stop — another plane was landing. I stood on the brakes, pulled back hard, the plane fell forward and I bent a propeller. (Later, WASP Ah-Ying Lee was killed in just such an accident.) I knew they were going to send me home. I was devastated, felt I deserved it. But I was forgiven.

“West Texas was lovely, it was empty in 1943. I didn’t ever really get lost that I didn’t find my way back; I liked almost getting lost. I used the compass, I could see the airbase from 12 to 15 miles out. At night, beacons flashed Morse code.”

Madge’s letters home were full of joy and adventure. “Today the skies are a soft velvety blue, the wind is South Southwest and I can hardly wait to go upstairs,” she wrote to her parents in March 1943. “I’ll bet it’s bumpy, but it’s so warm and lovely that I won’t have to wear a jacket, just my army coveralls which fit me like a Zoot suit.”

“First period this morning I went up solo,” she wrote on another day. “It was just after dawn and the sunrise was still lovely. There was a light overcast of cumulus and stratus clouds about 5,000 ft. and upstairs it was light while downstairs it had been barely dawn. It was so lovely that after practicing spins, chandelles, steep turns, stalls, etc., very diligently, I cleared myself several times, prayed no flight Lt. was around and treated myself to a couple of loops. These ships are might sweet at acrobatics. I admit I’ve not been given instructions in looping yet but I just read ahead of the class...”

And later: “Two more girls washed out today. It’s getting rough.”

To Sherman she sent a poem. While the lines speak of honeysuckle, sycamores, and hummingbirds, the title reads: “APOLOGY: WEDDING POSTPONED.”

Madge requested assignment, after training, to the Air Transport Command ferrying division. In the course of delivering planes from factories to air bases, or returning used planes to factories for repair, she flew the C-36, the C-47, the C-46, the C-54, the B-51 Mustang, the B-17, the B-24, the P-39, “a ratty old P-40,” and the C-47. “I ran a shuttle of P-52 Mustangs from California to Newark, N.J. I’d head back to base by commercial airline; I had a little chit that allowed me to bump anyone from a commercial flight except the President and four members of his Cabinet. I had the best of all possible worlds. I was in the middle of it. I was doing it because I just loved to fly. I was patriotic. I’ve always believed if it had come to our country being invaded by a foreign power, I could have flown in combat.”

In between two assigned flights, Madge married Sherman. In between another two, she conceived her first daughter and, excited about the pregnancy, resigned from the Air Corps. At home several months later, rocking on her front porch, nursing Brooke, one of her fellow WASPs flew over Indianapolis, circled over Madge’s house, and dipped a wing in salute.

Her bookshelves at home are crammed with titles like *Wind, Sand and Stars* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, and *Duel of Eagles*, and *Straight on Till Morning*, and *I Was A Nazi Flyer*. To this day she congratulates the women pilots she encounters when shuffling single-file off a commercial flight.

“If I see a woman in the cockpit, I always introduce myself — ‘It’s just great to see you in the cockpit!’ — and I give her my P-47 Thunderbolt Pilot’s Association card.

“Until a few years ago, I had a terrible habit of visiting the cockpit in the middle of the flight: you know, ‘Mind if I look?’

“‘Oh!’ the pilots will say, ‘Were you one of those gals?’ On an El-Al flight to Israel a few years ago (we were going to an animal toxin conference), the pilots asked if I wanted to fly the plane. ‘Oh, could I?’ When my turn was over, one of them said, ‘Now you will have something to tell the ladies of Hadassah!’ Sherm and I laughed and laughed about that.”

Madge Rutherford Minton says she always wanted to fly, and recalls with clarity the day the desire bloomed in her, somewhere around 1924. “We were living in a little country cottage and I was sitting outside near the well eating a piece of my grandmother’s sugar pie. I saw a thing in the air, and called, ‘Mother! There’s something up there — I need you to get it for me so I can play with it.’ It landed in a pasture not far from us and when we got there, there was this open-cockpit bi-plane and a barnstorming pilot in his hot pilot’s scarf and goggles. He was selling rides for a dollar and a half. I desperately wanted to go. Mother said, ‘I’m sorry, Madge, you can’t.’ I threw a terrible fit and grabbed the airplane by one of its wheels.

“It’s one of those stories,” she adds, “if you’re not careful, it gets better every time you tell it.”

“This has been a marvelous life,” she says in summary, and reaches across the breakfast table to hold Sherman’s hand.