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Susan Grace talks about Nancy Baker

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Series: Pioneer Park Aviation Museum Lectures

Pete Haggland said Susan Grace will be talking about Nancy Baker. He said Nancy flew in the WASP program during WWII and contributed to Fairbanks.

Susan Grace said she interviewed Nancy Baker a couple of years ago out at Fort Wainwright for StoryCorps.

The following section is the interview Susan Grace conducted with Nancy Lee Baker on February 17, 2014. Nancy said she grew up in Cincinnati and White Plains, New York. Nancy had always wanted to fly and thought traditional roles for women were boring. Nancy talked about learning to fly with the Civil Pilot Training Program. The program was started at certain colleges in the United States and at first was only offered to men. Eleanor Roosevelt wanted women trained, too. She attended a junior college in New Jersey and learned to fly. She built up flying time. She got a job as a welder for Piper Aviation and was allowed to fly. She flew finished planes to their customers. Nancy heard about the Women Air Service Pilots program (WASP) and signed up. The requirements were high. She joined in 1942 and met Ginny Wood. Susan Grace talked about the minimum requirements for getting into the WASPs. Nancy said she was the minimum height for getting into the program and had to pad her shoes to get the proper height. Grace asked Nancy about training in Sweetwater, Texas. Nancy said there wasn't much reaction in town to the women. Nancy talked about the archives in Texas. Nancy said they were supposed to keep in step with their instructor. Her instructor would intentionally try to get her out of step. Grace asked her what was the best part about being in the WASPs. Nancy said the best part was flying and after they got out of training they were all sent to different places. She was not sure if they had a choice. They did different things like ferrying airplanes. They had four bases in the United States. She was sent to the ferry command in Wilmington, Delaware. She liked ferrying. Susan said that sounded dangerous. They were flying planes right off the assembly line. Nancy said there were thirty-eight women who died. That was out of 1,000 women in the program. Susan Grace said they weren't part of the official Air Force and the women in the program would chip in to ship home the body of women killed in action because the government didn't take care of that. Nancy said they were civilian employees. They did not ferry airplanes up to Alaska. The women would ferry the planes to Great Falls, Montana and then men would fly them up to Alaska. Nancy talked about the "pickled" planes which were carried on aircraft carriers. Susan asked her about her favorite planes to fly. Nancy quickly said a P-51 Mustang and the P-47 was good, too. She said the P-47 was a big pursuit plane. It was called the Thunderbolt. One time someone reported a P-47 being flown without a pilot. It was actually Nancy flying the plane and she was so small they couldn't see her. They had a lot of ground school instruction. They started them with AT6s. When you got into the airplane it was something you flew for the first time. Nancy compared driving a plane to driving a car and you didn't forget how to fly it. Grace commented that the program ended when the war ended. Nancy said yes and talked about the different groups that had been trained.

Susan Grace stopped the recording. She said she could just see Nancy talking. Grace said after Nancy's WASP career she headed out west. Nancy had met Ginny Wood in Sweetwater. Grace said she heard stories from Ginny and Nancy about their experiences in Texas. Celia Hunter had been based out of Delaware where Nancy was flying. Grace said Nancy ended up doing training and teaching flying around Palm Springs, California. Grace said Nancy always wanted to be out west where women could wear jeans and boots. Nancy had kept contact with Ginny and Celia. Nancy asked to go to Alaska with Ginny and Celia. Nancy started working for Wien Air in Kotzebue. They were flying people out there to visit the village. They drove them around Fairbanks, too. Ginny and Celia started working on Camp Denali. Grace showed a photo of Nancy at Camp Denali with one of her dogs named Rags. Nancy had a business degree. Nancy was always thinking of things people needed. She sold World Book Encyclopedias around the Interior of Alaska. She also sold socks and stockings. She had a business selling parkas from Wainwright. Nancy provided the materials and the women in Wainwright would sew them. Nancy sold them to visitors. Grace said Nancy wrote articles for the Milepost. Grace said she made the yellow map of Fairbanks. Nancy also made eye covers for visitors. She included information about Fairbanks.

Grace said the discharge papers for WASP participants were from the Army. Later it became the Air Force. In the 2000s the WASPs were given the Medal of Honor. Grace showed a photo of Nancy receiving her medal. Grace said Lisa Murkowski came to Fairbanks to present Ginny Wood with her medal since she was not able to travel at that time. Grace talked about some of the material she brought. Grace said a couple of years ago she did the honor flight to Washington, D.C. with Nancy. She said it meant a lot to Nancy. Grace said Ginny, Celia and Nancy have inspired her. Grace said she brought Nancy over to Ginny's house so they could visit. Grace said Nancy would call 800 numbers to give them advice about their product. Grace told a story about Nancy speaking her mind.

Grace invited people to come up to see Nancy's materials. She said Nancy loved wine. Grace said Nancy moved into the Pioneer Home and was happy she was still able to have her wine every night.