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Ruth Clifford, a member of the Civil Air Patrol, posing with a banner showing the number of *Lakeland Ledger* employees serving in the military.

Photography courtesy of Ruth Clifford Hubert.

RUTH CLIFFORD AND DOROTHY EBERSBACH: FLORIDA FLIERS DURING WORLD WAR II

by Thomas Reilly and Lynn Homan

As World War II dawned, few women in the United States had more flying experience than two Florida pilots, Ruth Clifford and Dorothy Ebersbach. When war became a reality, both women took steps to serve their country; they first became members of the Civil Air Patrol and then served as Women Airforce Service Pilots. Their pioneer efforts reveal a little known aspect of aviation history during World War II.

Dorothy Ebersbach learned to fly in Tampa. Born in 1914, she attended Ohio State University and graduated with a degree in English. Her first taste of flying came at the Chicago World Fair, when she and her father took a ride in a hydroplane. Subsequently, Ebersbach's father, a Tampa road contractor, worked on the construction of the runways at MacDill Army Air Field. Returning home after college, Dorothy Ebersbach gave in to her interest in aviation and enrolled in the Civilian Pilot Training Program offered by the University of Tampa in 1939. Her flight instructor was Lewis Lee. Following completion of the training program, Ebersbach got her own airplane, a three-passenger Piper Cruiser, which her father purchased. She took her new

avocation seriously, successfully passing her commercial license and logging over 300 flight hours at Tampa's Drew Field and Peter O. Knight Airport. When war struck, she sold her airplane since gas rationing curtailed civilian flying.¹

Ruth Clifford, born in 1917, was fortunate to have parents who believed women were capable of anything a man could do. She and her two sisters were encouraged to make their way in life and look for positive results. Clifford was equally fortunate to grow up in Lakeland, a hotbed of aviation, where frequent air shows featured local fliers Clem Whittenbeck and Charles F. Abel. Whittenbeck was self-proclaimed as "America's Champion Inverted Flier." Abel called himself "America's Champion Stunt Glider Pilot." Ruth Clifford was raised on the family strawberry farm in Lakeland, where she and her two sisters helped to pick berries in the fields. Graduating from high school in 1935, she went into typical female employment as a secretary with the *Lakeland Ledger*, but wanted something different. In 1939, the Haldeman Flying Service operated by Walter Haldeman offered a prize for the best aerial photograph of Lakeland. Long interested in photography, Clifford entered the contest, hiring a plane and pilot to take her up to achieve the aerial shots. She did not win the contest, but her lifelong love of flying was born. While Ebersbach was taking lessons from Lewis Lee in Tampa, Clifford began taking flying lessons in May 1939, at Lakeland's Haldeman-Elder Field. Her instructor was Walter Haldeman, brother of George Haldeman who had unsuccessfully attempted to cross the Atlantic Ocean in 1927 with Ruth Elder. On January 21, 1940, flying out of the Lakeland Municipal Airport, Ruth Clifford made her first solo flight in a Taylorcraft. While involved with the practical aspects of learning to fly, Clifford also kept busy in ground school learning the theory of flight. In a course taught by Rupert Keene and John Roberts at the Lakeland Municipal Airport, twenty-three potential fliers learned about navigation and the fundamentals of flight. Clifford easily passed the course with the highest grade.²

Long before America entered World War II, Florida fliers had begun preparing for the seemingly inevitable conflict. One of the earliest precursors of the Civil Air Patrol was Florida's First Defense Force, with units throughout the state. The Polk County Air Defense Unit consisted of twenty-two men and women.³ Among those nearly two-dozen Florida fliers were the Clifford sisters, Ruth and Mary, of Lakeland. The purpose of the Polk County Air Defense Unit was "to coordinate all private and nonscheduled flying activities in Florida with the state and national defense program, to guard against sabotage, espionage or other subversive activities and to prohibit violations of any air corps, CAA or national defense regulations."⁴ Service in the unit



Dorothy Ebersbach as a member of the Tampa squadron of the Civil Air Patrol.

Photograph courtesy of Dorothy Ebersbach.

was strictly voluntary; no salaries were paid. Members were required to have a private pilot's and a radio operator's license.

In 1942, both Dorothy Ebersbach and Ruth Clifford joined the Civil Air Patrol (CAP). Clifford obviously felt very strongly about her role and that of women generally in World War II. On December 11, 1942, she wrote, "If, in my small way, I could contribute some little bit to the final success of the United Nations in this war I would not have lived in vain. If I could train even one of those few to whom 'so many owe so much' I would feel that I had a personal representative in the field of battle, and, God helping me, I will."⁵ Only a month earlier, on November 5, 1942, Clifford had received her first official appointment as a Civil Air Patrol officer, holding the rank of second lieutenant and serving as adjutant in Lakeland's Squadron 413-2 which was based at Bartow.⁶ Ebersbach became a member of a Civil Air Patrol squadron based at Tampa's Peter O. Knight Airport. "In England women help to ferry bombers to combat zones," she had stated even before joining the CAP. "We could well copy that idea. I hope the Civil Air Patrol becomes more active because I believe it offers a field in which women could be quite useful."⁷

Like other CAP groups, Lakeland's Squadron 413-2 set about preparing for whatever missions might arise. A hut was constructed at the airport and outfitted with emergency resources. Benches with folding desktops were built for ground school classes, with meteorology and navigation routinely taught. Each Sunday, flights were formed. Emergency landing fields and navigational landmarks were located. Clifford's contributions were recognized by her squadron commander who wrote that he was "deeply grateful to Ruth Clifford, Squadron Adjutant, for being so complete in her weekly reports. Thank you ever so much!"⁸

Members of the Lakeland and Tampa CAP squadrons frequently trained together. Certainly one of the most exciting meetings was a mock aerial bombing raid by CAP fliers against the city of Tampa on September 27, 1942. The attacking force was composed of pilots from Tampa, Lakeland, Sarasota, and Ft. Myers. Only after the raid ended did the pilots learn how dangerous their mission had been. "Some of the pilots who flew close to the shipyards may never know how near they came to having a few .50-caliber anti-aircraft machine gun slugs earmarked for them," the press reported. "Someone forgot to tell the gun crews that there was to be a practice air raid. When the sirens went off, they ran to their stations and unlimbered their guns. Fortunately, someone told them what was going on."⁹ This raid ended two days of aerial attacks against Tampa. The previous day, Ruth Clifford, Dr. H. S. McClamma, and Claude Pinkston had wrought havoc over Tampa, as each pilot dropped sixty flour-filled bombs. Few Florida cities escaped practice attacks by the Civil Air Patrol. Later that same month, thirteen private planes flown by CAP pilots from Tampa, Lakeland, and St. Petersburg attacked Ft. Myers. Ruth Clifford flew a Luscombe and dropped "bombs" containing several thousand leaflets that explained the need for volunteer Civil Air Patrol pilots.¹⁰

Proposals to utilize women in the United States Army Air Forces met stiff resistance. In the summer of 1941, Jacqueline Cochran of Pensacola served as a civilian consultant to the staff of the Commanding Officer of the Ferry Command, and she investigated the possibility of using women pilots. Cochran studied the flying and medical records of all licensed women pilots in the files of the Civil Aeronautics Administration. Several months later, she recommended the use of women pilots in the Army Air Forces, but her suggestions were rejected because "there were

more than sufficient male pilots to handle available planes, and no provision was made in the recommendations for organization and supervision of the women pilots.”¹¹ At the time, the idea of women joining the military was opposed by many men, including one who in 1941 declared in the *Congressional Record*: “Take the women into the Armed Service, who then will do the cooking, the washing, the mending, the humble homey tasks to which every woman has devoted herself?...Think of the humiliation! What has become of the manhood of America!”¹²

This attitude was undermined by the efforts of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Just as she had assisted the cause of black fliers in becoming part of the Army Air Corps, she used her influence to help women fliers. On September 1, 1942, she wrote in her newspaper column:

We know that in England, where the need is great, women are ferrying planes and freeing innumerable men for combat service. It seems to me that in the Civil Air Patrol and in our own Ferry Command, women, if they can pass the tests imposed upon our men, should have an equal opportunity for noncombat service. This is not a time when women should be patient. We are in a war and we need to fight it with all our ability and every weapon possible. Women pilots, in this particular case, are a weapon waiting to be used.¹³

The United States War Department and the generals of the Army Air Forces eventually realized the need for women pilots. When the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) organization was activated in the fall of 1942, more than 25,000 women applied for the few available slots in the program. The original requirements included age limits of twenty-one to thirty-five, high school education or equivalent, minimum height of sixty inches, 200 hours of flying time, medical examination by an Army flight surgeon, American citizenship, and a personal interview with an authorized recruiting officer. Eventually the required flight hours were reduced to 100, then 75, and finally 35.¹⁴

The first class of WASP fliers reported for duty at Howard Hughes Airport in Houston, Texas. A civilian contractor, Aviation Enterprises, was hired to provide training for Cochran’s “girls.” The women fliers were not members of the military, but were instead rated as Civil Service employees. Trainees were paid \$150 per month; with regulation overtime, they received \$172.50. Following their assignment to operational duties, the fliers were paid approximately \$290 per month. However, they received few benefits; there was no government life insurance, military funerals, burial expense, or G.I. benefits. Nevertheless, their training was a carbon copy of that received by male Air Corps flight cadets. They were instructed in military courtesy and customs, Articles of War, safeguarding of military information, drill and ceremonies, Army orientation, organization, military correspondence, chemical warfare, and personal affairs. The ground school phase of flight training included mathematics, physics, maps and charts, navigation, principles of flight, engines and propellers, weather, Morse code, instrument flying, communications, and first aid training. Practical flying ranged from primary through advanced. In the beginning of the program, the women received twenty-three weeks of training which included 115 hours of flying and 180 hours of ground school. By the program’s end, the women received thirty weeks of training, including 210 hours of flight instruction and 393 hours of ground school. The first WASP group began training at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, in February 1943. Of the 25,000 applicants, only 1,834 were accepted as trainees. Of that number, only 1,074 graduated.¹⁵



Dorothy Ebersbach (right) during WASP training at Avenger Field, Texas.

Photograph (originally printed in reverse) courtesy of Dorothy Ebersbach.

Dorothy Ebersbach of Tampa and Ruth Clifford of Lakeland were two who made it through the rigorous training to wear the gold WASP insignia on their uniform lapels. Even before the WASP program, Ebersbach had sent letters to both the Navy and the Army Air Corps in late 1942. When the WASP program became a reality, she applied, and in January 1943, she learned that she had been accepted for the February class, but she could not leave until the following month. On March 23, 1943, Ebersbach became a member of the fifth class of WASP trainees to go through the program. Arrival at Avenger Field, Texas, was like entering a different world from Florida. The flat dry wasteland seemed to go on forever, broken only by mesquite brush. Trainees were transported between auxiliary fields in cattle wagons. Sweetwater, the largest nearby town, contained only 10,000 residents. From the front gate of Avenger Field, the first building to be seen was the administration building. Atop the building stood Fifinella, the symbolic mascot of the WASP. A large cartoon character designed by Walt Disney, Fifinella was a female gremlin whose job was to thwart the male gremlins who allegedly caused airplane malfunctions.¹⁶

The exacting training was tough, and nearly thirty-one percent of the trainees were eliminated for flying deficiencies. The rate was high, but no higher than for their male counterparts.¹⁷ The women who made it through the program were ready for anything. Ebersbach recorded some of her experiences in several tiny blue spiral notebooks. In September 1943, she wrote: “Jumping – on right side of Am. [American] planes except P-38 jump from inside of spin. Seat pack – jump

head first. Chest pack – keep head back. Pull shroud lines in direction you wish to go. Face downwind. Land with legs bent up and feet apart.”¹⁸ Training was also dangerous. Two of her classmates, Margaret J. Seip and Helen Jo Severson, were killed in a training accident at Avenger Field. Ebersbach graduated from the school at Sweetwater on September 11, 1943.¹⁹

Described as Tampa’s only WASP, Ebersbach was based first at Love Field in Dallas, Texas, and then at Marana Field, Arizona, where she served most of her tour of duty.²⁰ Assigned as a utility pilot in the engineering department, Ebersbach took airplanes up for a test flight whenever maintenance work was performed. It was dangerous and frequently monotonous work, especially when putting an airplane through slow timing (flying at the minimum power setting). Minor mishaps were routine; as a type of quality control, the mechanic who had worked on the airplane frequently flew along on the test flight. While testing an AT-6 fresh out of maintenance at Marana Field, Ebersbach recalled, “Somebody had left the oil cap off. As soon as we got going good, the oil began to go all over the windshield, all over the plane. We headed back for the field but it was hard to see. He [the mechanic] opened the canopy. It made the wind worse and I kept yelling at him to close the canopy. He finally did and we got back in okay and we were covered with oil.”²¹

After her work at Marana Field, Ebersbach had several other assignments. She spent the month of May 1944 in Orlando undergoing officer’s training. Shortly afterward, she was transferred to Yuma, Arizona, to serve as a copilot on a TB-26 bomber that had been stripped of most of its armor. Her job was to tow targets so that artillery and pursuit aircraft could practice their gunnery. In November she received instrument training in Sweetwater, before returning to Yuma.²²

By the time Ruth Clifford became a WASP in March 1944, she had what few of her classmates had – flying experience and almost 450 flight hours in her logbook.²³ She also held a commercial pilot’s license with an instructor rating. Upon arrival at Avenger Field, Clifford and her fellow cadets were issued oversized men’s size 44 fatigues, affectionately called “Zoot Suits.” Like Ebersbach before her, Clifford learned to fly the Army way in a double-winged open-cockpit Stearman P-17 in primary training. The more advanced closed-cockpit North American AT-6, complete with flaps and retractable landing gear, was used for transition and cross-country training. Along with the other women cadets in her class, Clifford was required to wear a turban while working around machinery to ensure that her hair did not get caught. Because the order had come from the commanding officer, Major Robert Urban, the white hand-towels became known as “Urban’s turbans.”²⁴

Ruth Clifford became a graduate of the sixteenth class of women pilots at Avenger Field on October 9, 1944. The going had been tough; elimination from the program was very high. Of 108 women in her class, only 49 graduated. On October 17, 1944, Clifford received a telegram, ordering her to Cochran Field in Macon, Georgia, where she served with seven other women in the flight test section. “After a plane was worked on in maintenance, I’d take it up to see if it was working properly,” she explained.²⁵ Thus, in a role similar to that of Ebersbach, Clifford’s job was to test fly the airplanes after maintenance. “It was routine,” she declared. “I don’t think it was any more dangerous than any other flying.”²⁶



Ruth Clifford beside a AT-6, which she flew during WASP training.

Photograph courtesy of Ruth Clifford Hubert.



Ruth Clifford in her WASP uniform at the time her 1944 graduation.

Photograph courtesy of Ruth Clifford Hubert.

As the war wound down, the War Department decided to put an end to a program that it had never wanted. Many of the women were caught by surprise when on October 3, 1944, the order for deactivation of the WASP, effective December 20, 1944, was issued. In his press release, General Henry H. Arnold tried to justify replacing the women fliers with male pilots.

The WASP became part of the Air Forces because we had to explore the nation's total manpower resources and in order to release male pilots for other duties. Their very successful record of accomplishment has proved that in any future total effort the nation can count on thousands of its young women to fly any of its aircraft. You have freed male pilots for other work, but now the war situation has changed and the time has come when your volunteered services are no longer needed. The situation is that, if you continue in service, you will be replacing instead of releasing our young men. I know that the WASP wouldn't want that. So, I have directed that the WASP program be inactivated and all WASP be released on 20 December 1944. I want you to know that I appreciate your war service and that the AAF will miss you. I also know that you will join us in being thankful that our combat losses have proved to be much lower than anticipated, even though it means inactivation of the WASP.²⁷

The WASP pilots had performed magnificently during their nearly two years of service. In all, they logged more than 60 million miles as they performed aircraft ferrying service, target towing, aircraft administrative test flying, and instructing. The cost had been high; thirty-eight of Ebersbach and Clifford's fellow WASP died while in the service of their country. Since the WASP were not considered to be members of the military, they were denied even the traditional benefits of a military funeral or an American flag for the coffin. With a stroke of the pen, the



Dorothy Ebersbach (standing left) at Yuma Army Air Field, Arizona, shortly before deactivation of the Women Airforce Service Pilots in 1944.

Photograph courtesy of Dorothy Ebersbach.

military flying careers of almost a thousand women were effectively ended. Dorothy Ebersbach resigned from the Women Airforce Service Pilots and was discharged at Yuma Army Air Field on December 5, 1944, and she returned to Tampa. Ruth Clifford waited until the deactivation became official and then returned to Lakeland. Despite having served their country in time of war, both women were forced to pay the cost of their transportation home.²⁸

The lives of the two women diverged after the war. Having sold her airplane before entering the WASP, Ebersbach flew infrequently. In contrast, Clifford began the second phase of her flying career, finding a job teaching flying at Johnson Aero Services at Gilbert Field near Winter Haven. With nearly 900 hours of flying experience, Clifford was one of four flight instructors and the only woman instructor employed by the company. In a dual control airplane she flew almost every day. Within a year after the war, she relocated to the Tampa Bay area and began teaching for U.S. Flying Services at Albert Whitted Airport in St. Petersburg. There she met and eventually married Pete Hubert, owner of his own flying service and one of the original founders of National Airlines.²⁹

After the war, Ruth Clifford became a familiar face at local Tampa Bay air shows. In May 1946, she was one of only two women pilots who participated in a show at Drew Field sponsored by the local chapter of the National Aeronautic Association. Ruth Clifford, by then married to

Pete Hubert, flew her Stearman P-17, looping and rolling above more than 7,000 spectators, who turned out to see the U.S. Air Forces Tactical Air Command's B-25s, A-26s, P47s, and P-51 Mustangs. Six months later, the Ruth Hubert Event was one of a dozen attractions at the Tampa Air Maneuvers, held at Peter O. Knight Airport and sponsored by the Tampa Aero Club.³⁰

In 1947, Ruth Clifford Hubert served as the chair of the Florida chapter of the Ninety-Nines, a national women's flying organization. Formed in 1929 by licensed women pilots who gathered at Curtiss Field on New York's Long Island, the group had ninety-nine charter members. To qualify for membership, a woman needed a private pilot's certificate and her application needed to be approved by the membership committee. The Clifford sisters, Ruth and Mary, had been inducted into the Ninety-Nines on November 2, 1941, at a Florida chapter meeting held in Ft. Lauderdale. Ebersbach had been a member for just as long. The leaders of the Ninety-Nines had pushed hard for inclusion of women pilots in the Army Air Forces during World War II.³¹

As head of the Florida chapter of the Ninety-Nines in 1947, Ruth Clifford Hubert was in part responsible for staging the First All-Woman's [sic] Air Meet. Held at Tampa's Peter O. Knight Airport for two days in March 1947, the event was organized by women pilots who had been banned from competing in the Miami All-American Maneuvers in January 1947. Promoters heralded the Tampa event as the world's first all woman air meet. According to one of the headliners of the show, "It would be quite an achievement if this were the first All-woman Air Show in the U. S. or even in North America, but the first one in the world will truly be a memorable event, and should make a name for Tampa in aviation."³² Ruth Clifford Hubert had a very successful weekend of flying. She took third place in the aerobatic competition, Military Pilots Trophy Race, and the Free-For-All Race. The First All-Woman's Air Meet also attracted Dorothy Ebersbach, who served as a demonstration pilot flying a Navion. Later that year, Ebersbach finally ended her flying career. She went back to school, became a nurse, and spent over twenty years as a public health nurse in Tampa. To continue flying, Ruth Clifford Hubert rejoined the Civil Air Patrol, rising to become a lieutenant colonel and logging over 2,500 hours of flight time. She still flies her own Cessna 172.³³

It took more than thirty years, but the women who served as WASPs finally received recognition. The G.I. Improvement Act of 1977 authorized the Secretary of Defense to determine if certain types of civilian service during World War II could be classified as active duty. On March 8, 1979, it was announced that the service of the Women Airforce Service Pilots qualified as active military service. In May 1984, forty years after their service ended, Ruth Clifford Hubert, Dorothy Ebersbach, and the other WASPs were awarded the World War II Victory Medal and the American Campaign Medal.³⁴

Dorothy Ebersbach and Ruth Clifford should be credited for their accomplishments in general aviation, as well as their wartime service. These Florida fliers were legitimate pioneers in aviation, and they accomplished much in the face of adversity.

¹ Thomas Reilly, "Florida's Flying Minute Men: The Civil Air Patrol, 1941-1943," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 76 (Spring 1998), 423.

² *Lakeland Ledger*, February 18, 1940; *Lakeland Sunday Ledger and Star-Telegram*, May 9, 1941.

³ *Lakeland Ledger*, October 31, 1942.

⁴ *Ibid.*, October 19, 1941.

⁵ Ruth Clifford Scrapbook, in possession of Ruth Clifford Hubert, St. Petersburg, Florida.

⁶ Office of Civilian Defense, Washington, D.C. Civil Air Patrol, Appointment of Officer, November 5, 1942.

⁷ *Tampa Tribune*, 1941, clipping in Dorothy E. Ebersbach Scrapbook, in possession of Dorothy E. Ebersbach, Tampa, Florida.

⁸ Jean K. Fyfe, *The Pelican* (Civil Air Patrol, Intelligence Officer Group 413).

⁹ Jean K. Fyfe, *The Pelican* (Civil Air Patrol, Communications Officer 3rd Group), November 5, 1942.

¹⁰ *Ft. Myers News-Press*, September 29, 1942.

¹¹ Jacqueline Cochran, Director of Women Pilots, to Commanding General, Army Air Forces, in folder 1, Women Airforce Service Pilots, National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C.

¹² Marianne Verges, *On Silver Wings* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 28.

¹³ *Washington Daily News*, September 1, 1942.

¹⁴ Cochran, Final Report on Women Pilots Program.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Personal interview with Ruth Clifford Hubert, June 4, 1997; personal interview with Dorothy E. Ebersbach, June 18, 1997.

¹⁷ Cochran, Final Report on Women Pilots Program, 8.

¹⁸ Ebersbach notebooks, September 1943, in possession of Dorothy E. Ebersbach.

¹⁹ Department of Defense Form DD 214 (Report of Transfer or Discharge) for Dorothy E. Ebersbach, *ibid.*

²⁰ *Tampa Sunday Times*, May 21, 1944. Florence Maloof of Tampa later went into the WASP program but resigned after only a couple of months.

²¹ Interview with Ebersbach.

²² Department of Defense Form DD 214 for Ebersbach.

²³ Ruth Clifford's sister, Mary, joined the Women's Auxiliary Ferry Service in February 1943. After training in Texas, she was assigned as a ferry pilot at New Castle Army Air Forces Base, Wilmington, Delaware. Another sister, Margaret, served as a WAVE and was stationed at a naval air base at Lambert Field, St. Louis. Interview with Hubert; *Tampa Times*, August 12, 1943.

²⁴ Interview with Hubert; interview with Ebersbach.

²⁵ Interview with Hubert.

²⁶ CAP News, August 1977, 13.

²⁷ Press Release issued by General Henry H. Arnold, October 3, 1944.

²⁸ Department of Defense Form 214 for Ebersbach; Department of Defense Form 214 for Ruth Clifford, in possession of Ruth Clifford Hubert.

²⁹ Thomas Reilly, "The Birth of National Airlines: The St. Petersburg Years," *Tampa Bay History*, 19 (Spring/Summer 1997), 56.

³⁰ *Tampa Daily Times*, May 16, 1946; *Tampa Tribune*, May 16, 1946; Official Program and Log, Tampa Air Maneuvers, Sunday November 17, 1946, copy in possession of Ruth Clifford Hubert.

³¹ The Ninety-Nines All-Woman Air Show Program, March 15 & 16, 1947, 3, copy in possession of Ruth Clifford Hubert; Lakeland Ledger, November 3, 1941.

³² *St. Petersburg Times*, February 26, 1947.

³³ Personal flight log books in possession of Ruth Clifford Hubert; interview with Hubert.

³⁴ Department of Defense Form DD 214 for Clifford; Department of Defense Form DD 214 for Ebersbach.