

ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

DAWN SEYMOUR
INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA WRIGHT
COCOA BEACH, FLORIDA – 19 JULY 1999

WRIGHT: In 1942, the Army Air Forces created the Women Air Force Service Pilots, the WASP. Twenty-five thousand women offered their services for this program; 1,830 were accepted, and 1,074 graduated. Today we're going to speak with Dawn Seymour, a WASP.

This oral history is being conducted in Cocoa Beach, Florida, as part of NASA's oral history efforts. The interviewer is Rebecca Wright. Today is July 19, 1999.

We welcome you and thank you for your participation in today's program.

SEYMOUR: Thank you for inviting me, Rebecca and Carol [Butler]. It's a privilege, really, to be here, and I'm thrilled to attend this launch [STS-93] that's going to happen tonight, my first one, and I've looked forward to a launch since the original program started, the Mercury Program.

WRIGHT: And you've been here for a couple of days, visiting?

SEYMOUR: Yes, we came in Sunday, rented a car in Orlando, and we're over here on the beach. Yesterday we were at the complex, the [Kennedy] Space Center, and enjoyed the tours and the way people treated us. Absolutely amazed at the complexity of this operation.

WRIGHT: Did you have a chance to visit with anyone yesterday?

SEYMOUR: We had a briefing, and at the briefing we met very interesting people, including a representative who talked about the Chandra X-ray imaging telescope and the fact it's the only object really in the launch [STS-93], in the Shuttle, and they're carrying up at such a weight.

WRIGHT: Did you come yesterday as a WASP or as a visitor?

SEYMOUR: No, I come as a WASP.

WRIGHT: Good.

SEYMOUR: Yes, because my invitation from [STS-93 Commander] Eileen [Collins], which I was delighted to receive. And it was completely unexpected, it has "Dawn Seymour, WASP" on it, and that's how I registered on the database. I feel it's a personal honor to have this invitation.

I've corresponded with Eileen through the years, and she is a nearby neighbor, actually, because she came from Elmira, and we live on Canandaigua Lake in western New York. It's called the Finger Lakes, and it's only about maybe forty minutes away. So I've invited her to be a speaker at various events, which she was unable to do because of her heavy workload. But I've talked to her mother through the years.

Interestingly enough, on the third of February 1995, my daughter had a baby girl, the same moment, perhaps, that she [Eileen] launched into space. And the daughter's named Emma Louise Seymour Morse, and she's four years old. So when the anniversary comes around, this year I wrote her, because I'm thinking of her then, about this long delayed flight.

WRIGHT: She has such a historic moment tonight, but yet your history goes back a few years. Tell us how you became interested in aviation as a young girl.

SEYMOUR: Well, actually I wasn't so young. I had graduated from Cornell [University]. My class is 1939. In fact, I had my sixtieth reunion this year. This was 1939, and that fall I was an instructor. My job was as an instructor in the College of Home Economics. I was in the economics department. I had become a research subject in a fatigue study, believe it or not; volunteered for it. This man who was doing all the instrumentation for the study asked me one day, "The CPT program, the Civilian Pilot Training program, is coming to Cornell, and I've been asked to be the director of flight research. Would you like to be interested?"

I said, "Well, Dr. [Richard] Parmenter, I've never been up." [Laughter]

So he took me up in a yellow [Piper] Cub on an October day when, of course, the leaves have turned, and suddenly the world is completely different. There's a sense of freedom. I was hooked with this love of flying. He said, "All right, I'll see what I can do. You'll join the program?"

I said, "Yes." Then he found out that the dean of engineering of the college [of] mechanical engineering, would not accept women. So he went to Washington and he found that, sure enough, one out of every ten—nine men, one woman—was acceptable, and then I was accepted.

Then I went to my professor and said, "I'd like to learn to fly."

"Oh, Dawn, you cannot learn to fly," she said. "You have to be here between eight and five." [Laughter]

And so that put me in a dilemma. Ground school was at four o'clock. So I figured out a way. I was actually the weather ship. This was now getting into winter, November and December of '39, going into 1940. So I was learning to drive at the same time, and the snow came. Anyway, I found my way down to the field, and I was the first ship up. If it was too windy, everybody else was grounded, but in the meantime I'd had the experience. I soloed on skis. We did simulated forced landings on the frozen lake, Cayuga Lake, or on the inlet, and so I had a wonderful experience.

However, my ground school was lacking. I had to do it myself. Well, in a way the test is quite simple, in the sense that all the answers are there. It's selective answers. So that worked out fine.

WRIGHT: How did that lead you into becoming a WASP?

SEYMOUR: Then I received my private pilot's license, and from there my job took me to various places. I was working for Cornell. Eventually the war did come. '41 came along, December, and I found myself down in Poughkeepsie, New York...Dutchess and Columbia Counties. I was setting up New York [State] War Council work in home economics, nutrition, home bureau work, actually was the Extension Service I was working for, and the War Council, and Eleanor Roosevelt was on my committee. It was very fascinating. And also Eleanor Morgenthau...her husband was the Secretary of the Treasury. They would come without any escorts at all at that time. They were very free to move around the country.

Let's see what happens then. Then Jackie Cochran is setting up the program. In the meantime, I wasn't able to fly; I was too close to New York City and "they" had banned all

private flying within the coast. I think it was 100 to 200 miles of the coast. And I applied. I went down to New York City, had the interview, and, sure enough, she [Miss Ethel Sheehy] said to me—this was the beginning of March of 1943—she said, "I'm sure you're acceptable. All you have to do is pass the physical, and you look strong to me." [Laughter]

So I was on the sidewalk and I flipped a nickel. Heads, I go that month, or, tails, I stay home [and get more flying time]. And it was heads. So I quit my job and took the physical in Rome, New York, at the big base there. And came home and then I decided I had to get some more flying time. I took four and a half hours of flying time at Rochester Airport, to just be sure I could do it. Can you imagine? And I joined the class of '43-5.

So I had very little [current] flying experience to join, and I just kept my mouth shut when I arrived. I just dug into ground school and all the things that I hadn't learned, and went through the program and never had anything as rigorous or as centered as the five months we were there. We received our wings on September 11, I believe it was, of '43. But because of that, there was no distraction in your life. Very few dates because there were very few men around, and you had no responsibilities other than getting up and falling in line, going to breakfast, going to the flight line, going to ground school and to link training [and PT]. So at that time, when [I] graduated, I was flying twin-engine AT-17s. We called it the twin-breasted Cub. [Laughter] Twin-engine.

Just before we graduated, two of my very dear friends were killed in an AT-17 with their instructor on a CAVU day, which is "ceiling and visibility unlimited," just near Sweetwater, Texas. This one girl had a garden, and she was growing flowers. When she left—when anybody washed out, their mattress would be folded up and they'd disappear, you never even said goodbye to someone who washed out. But this time this girl left a flower garden in this

Texas sun. It was remarkable. Her name was Peggy Seip, Margaret Seip. She's in my book [*In Memoriam*]. Years later I [with help from Jeanette Jenkins and Sid Bergemann] was able to accumulate the information about thirty-eight women who were killed in World War II, flying for the WASP, and she's one of them. That's, I'm sure, my motivation.

WRIGHT: Was that your first trip away, so far from home, to go to Sweetwater, Texas?

SEYMOUR: Oh, no, I'd been away all through college and this job, as I explained to you. So I was used to being on my own.

WRIGHT: How was Avenger Field when you got there? Was it something that you had expected?

SEYMOUR: It was a program that was completely set up and it was smoothly running when I was there, in the '43-5 class. Helen Snapp, yesterday [interviewed July 18, 1999] was in '43-4. Half of that class was in Sweetwater and half were in Houston, of course, which is near Galveston. My good friend "Greenie," Frances Green, came from Galveston, and she was my buddy through the next phase of my work.

WRIGHT: Tell us about the planes that you learned to fly and then how that took you on into your assignments once you graduated.

SEYMOUR: I loved the twin-engine plane, and I loved the comraderie, having a co-pilot and talking to people and being in the air, so that was probably very easy for me then. After I graduated, Jacqueline Cochran gave me my wings, and that was a moment of great achievement. Believe it or not, they [the silver wings] were cold, and I don't know why. It was a hot day, because it was September 11th in Texas. She shook hands with her right hand, and then she presented the wings with the left hand, and I remember squeezing and saying, "I did it!" [Laughter] So it was a big moment.

Then I was sent to the Second Ferrying Command in [Wilmington] Delaware, and at that time I was only there two weeks, checked out, did ground school and checked out in the PT-19, which was our primary trainer, and received orders to proceed at once to Lockbourne Army Air Base, which is in Columbus, Ohio. At this time what do I find but the B-17s. There were a hundred or more on the flight line at that time. I was sent into the squadron, 1174th Squadron, and Major Freddy Wilson was our CO [commanding officer]. He had selected three married men as instructors [First Lieutenant Logue Mitchell was my instructor] for the WASP. There were seventeen of us started, and thirteen of us finished. The four who weren't able to finish, actually they were excellent pilots, it's just that the planes—sometimes a plane is more than a person wants to handle, and I'm sure that's probably what happened. But thirteen of us finished that course.

That was a rigorous course, but this time we had men in our world, and they were returning combat pilots from Europe. They'd had their twenty-five missions and they were coming back for advanced training. Some had gone over with very little training. We took the combat pilot training course. In other words, we had to know everything about the engines, everything about all the systems. We had a whole series. Every other night would be night

flying, so we had all that experience: day, night, and cross country. We got our instrument ticket, and we did that in the airplane, most of it. Some of it in the link, but most of it in the airplane.

I'll never forget my first night solo. Of course, you had a co-pilot. Here Greenie is mine and I'm hers. We had a crew chief who was a little apprehensive, I'm sure, at first, because he was the only man on board. It was one of these wonderful winter nights. The lights were sparkling and we saw the lights on the field, the blue lights on the runway. I remember coming down [final] and saying to myself, "I'm a pilot!" [Laughter] It was a wonderful feeling.

Then after that I was sent—Freddy Wilson gave us silver dollars, and on the silver dollar was embossed—was glued, actually—the small wings, and he called it our lucky piece. From there the orders were given to go to right near us here, Fort Myers, Florida, where there was a big gunnery school, flexible gunnery school, and the field was called Buckingham Army Air Field. Not a base; a field. There's a difference. Less protocol on a field than on a base.

Here we were, we were in the civilian women's quarters. They were barracks. This was our assignment. Now we're earning our pay. We were flying missions to train the gunners how to use the .50-caliber machine guns in the air. They had had all the ground school, all the ground shooting and so forth. And this was fun, because we were just five of us, I think five of us [WASPs]. Six of us altogether.

Should I go on?

WRIGHT: Please. Was there ever a typical day?

SEYMOUR: Oh, typical day. Yes. One day you'd fly from 6 a.m., you'd have to be at the flight line at 6 a.m., and you'd fly till noon. The next day would be from 12 o'clock until 5:30, 6:00. We'd fly over the gulf [Gulf of Mexico]. This was on the gulf side of Florida. The sky yesterday [July 18, 1999] reminded me of the skies that I was so used to. The clouds here are white, and they flower. They build up during the day until you have these anvil clouds, and they're exciting clouds to fly around.

We'd fly over Sanibel Island. You know where that is. There's a lighthouse. We would prearrange to meet a B-26 Marauder. They called them AT-23s. We would rendezvous and then go down the range toward Marco Island, over the water, and we flew over the water. I was reminded today of how flying over water is so much different than flying over land. The clouds and the sea meld together. Oftentimes there's no horizon. So you have a sense—vertigo is possible. And I was thinking of John F. Kennedy [Jr.]. We don't know what happened, of course, on that [airplane] accident Saturday. But it's a different kind of flying.

We'd fly on the sleeve, and the gunners would then have bullets different color-coded, and they would fire on the sleeve. Later, after the sleeve was dropped, they could see if they actually hit the target. We'd go down [range] until each gunner had a chance to fire. It's the first time they'd been in a moving platform. So the whole idea of aiming and distance is always more difficult.

Then we would go perhaps to altitude. We'd go to 23, 25,000 feet. This time we'd all put oxygen masks on at 10,000 feet, and the guns would get colder and colder the higher you went, and they had to learn the differences in temperatures and so forth. Then we'd come back down and fly over Naples—we're still over the water—at Naples, Florida, and the P-39s and old

P-40s would come up. Then we had film in the guns, and the boys would try to do simulated attack. That was the fun part for everybody. [Laughter]

...The other part of the mission you'd work in would be splash. You'd fly as close to the water as you could, and the boys would fire into the water and with a burst, and then they would try to hit that burst. So everything to learn on a moving target. They had two aerial missions. They were eighteen-, nineteen-year-old kids, and they were shipped overseas. The first batch we were training were going to Europe for D-Day, and the second batch we were training for B-29s. After that, they just picked up their crews, with further training, of course. But, I mean, they were on their way.

I'll never forget the first graduation. I realized, I guess, the importance not only that I was finally contributing to the war effort, because the training had taken so long, but would I be able to drop [bombs] on—would I be able to do a combat mission? And it's a consideration. You have to decide for yourself. Of course, that war was so—I mean, we were so willing to fight for freedom for people all around the world, that there's no question of what you'd do.

WRIGHT: The times that you were piloting the B-17 and had this line of ammo shooting at the target, but it was also near your plane, did you feel like you were at risk or in danger?

SEYMOUR: I also flew—I had had thirty hours in the B-26, pulling the sleeve, just as co-pilot now. Yes, sometimes I'd see tracers in the B-17 going toward the plane, the B-26, and you'd put on the mike and say, "The sleeve, guys!" [Laughter] "Aim at the sleeve!" But, no, I don't think I had any fear.

I'm thinking of fear now after going through Cape Canaveral yesterday, or the Kennedy Space Center, I call it, and seeing that huge, huge complex, the Shuttle arrangement that's going off tonight, and I wonder about fear. You have to cross the river and let the river drain your fear. I think Eileen Collins perhaps feels that way. We didn't have—why should that be fearful, what we did? I don't think so. But she's an unusual woman. I think it's her quiet confidence that affects me today. It permeates this whole mission.

WRIGHT: Was that a necessary ingredient for you and the rest of the WASP as you went through your journey, working on these bases? There were such few women surrounded by these men. I'm sure you got mixed attitudes and mixed perceptions and possibly mixed comments from different people that worked on the bases.

SEYMOUR: Oh, I think so. Oh, I think so. I think so. It's part of this change. When men accept women as partners, this is all going to change. We're partners in life.

WRIGHT: Did you feel that when you were on the bases?

SEYMOUR: I felt perfectly belonging. I had no sense of being an outsider. I think anyone who had a feeling I was an outsider, it's their problem.

WRIGHT: You were able to spend many months doing your service to your country, and at some point—in fact, it was in December of 1944 they disbanded the WASP. Tell us how you felt when you heard that there was going to be a program.

SEYMOUR: Oh, it was a kick. I mean, it was a blow, because, one, you had to be sent home. We had to pay our own transportation home, clear the base, and just—goodbye. No, actually I don't think it affected me until after I read Betty Friedan's book [*The Feminine Mystique*], that I realized. I had sent everything home. I wrote my family quite often, maybe every other day, so I have a complete record of how I felt at the time. I haven't reread all those letters. Too many other things to do to read them yet. [Laughter] But that's on my mind. That's another story. We'll get into that.

Let me just finish what else I did in the B-17, because I'd like you to know that when I was sent to our [next] base, for the gunners—was changed over from B-17s to 24s, B-24s, and I did have a ride, left seat, in the B-24, and I said, "Oh, I'll take my tail dragger anytime over the B-24." [Laughter]

I was sent to Roswell [Army Air Field], New Mexico, and there we were in engineering test flights, and we would do all the slow timing of the new engines and any components that were placed on the engine, or on the plane, from engineering. That was fun. We could do one and two a day, test flights. You waited around for your [B-17]—you know, there's a lot of waiting around to fly. There were only three of us [WASPs] at the base at Roswell, and we had an interesting time. Then, of course, this disbandment came along.

WRIGHT: Were you at Fort Myers longer than you were in New Mexico?

SEYMOUR: Yes, yes. I think from January of '44 until maybe [late] September of '44. Quite a few months.

WRIGHT: And then were you in New Mexico when the program—

SEYMOUR: Yes, to the last part of the program.

WRIGHT: Then as you mentioned, you had to pay your way back, but you also had to pay your own way to get to Sweetwater.

SEYMOUR: Yes, we were civilian employees. We were paid less than second lieutenants, which is interesting.

Now, one other thing I must tell you about. The WASP would never have been able to have their program if it hadn't been for a select group of American women pilots who joined the Air Transport Auxiliary [ATA]. They were recruited by Jackie Cochran in '42, 1942, early '42, and they were shipped in batches. They would go up to Dorval [near Montreal] in Canada and check out in an AT-6. If they were accepted, they were put on freighters and were sent overseas. And I'm [still]—I had known these girls for a long time, maybe since the end of the eighties, and I'm just now urging them to write their memoirs. Now they're saying yes, they'll work with me, and we're going to do a booklet, something like this [*In Memoriam to Thirty-Eight Women Pilots*], so that they'll be recorded, who, where, when, and how. That's my latest job to do.

One girl came over this last week, a couple of weeks ago. She flew her own plane, a Piper [Arrow], from Beverly, Massachusetts, to Canandaigua International Airport. We call it international airport. It's a nice airport. And she had a dog with her. She spent the night at the

lake, went back the next day. She brought me her letters, her diaries, actually, and some tapes, and we have a list of eight ATA women who are still alive today, and we're corresponding with them and hoping that they will cooperate and help us find out about the others, so we'll have twenty-three. Other American women joined this program, but they weren't recruited by Jackie Cochran.

The Air Transport Auxiliary had pilots from all over the world, men and women, paid the same amount of money, and it's a remarkable story. "Hap" [Henry] Arnold, who's the [commanding] General, the [US] Army Air Forces at this time, because these women did such a great job, he allowed Jackie Cochran to start her program. So we are indebted to them. And I hope some day you'll be able to have an interview with some of them.

WRIGHT: I do, too.

SEYMOUR: Because it's part of the history and it must not be left out. They call themselves "the forgotten pilots," but they cannot be forgotten pilots.

WRIGHT: Tell us about your relationship with Jackie Cochran. You mentioned that she recruited you. Did she also interview you and tell you about the program?

SEYMOUR: I wasn't interviewed by her, but I received my wings and later kept in touch with her through the program. If [we] had any problem during our time in Buckingham, I was able to write her a letter and say, "We aren't getting first pilot time," and she was a mover and a shaker, and I'm telling you we had a letter then from the CO saying, "Yes, on these flights you are first

pilots, and you can have first pilot time." That might have been the only time I had some discrimination, because we were qualified first pilots, and she was able to help us in that way. She did come twice to the base, to be sure everything was going well, and kept an eye on all of us.

Fascinating woman. Absolutely fascinating woman. In two short years, maybe two and a half years, she was able to accomplish more for women than anyone I know, and opened doors. She didn't really open the door; she opened the transom. We jumped in the transom. [Laughter] And then when that closed, military aviation was closed to women, you see, for many years, [many] years [1944 to the mid-1970s]. I think Eileen Collins understands this. She understands that she's part, just like I understand, we're just part of a continuum of women flying. Right near my home is the Glen Curtiss Museum [Hammondsport, NY]. And Blanche Stuart Scott was the first woman to solo. So that's maybe 191[0], and here we are 1999, we're going into space. It's exciting.

WRIGHT: It is exciting. And so many women wanted to be part of the WASP.

SEYMOUR: I think so, yes, and the qualifications were tough in a sense. When I joined, you had to be twenty-one and you had to have at least fifty hours of flying time. It gradually lowered—age and amount of time. The college degree was once used, or maybe some years of college. She [J.C.] liked to have—she thought education was important, because she had not had [formal] education in her lifetime.

WRIGHT: Was there a lot of competition among the women that were in Sweetwater, or did they all build together and help each other as a team?

SEYMOUR: I think we built. I think so. The competition was with yourself, because you wanted to succeed and you didn't want to wash out. [Laughter] Some people were washed out, I'm sure, who were very capable pilots, but it was just the timing, that particular timing. I think probably the program yesterday talked about our check rides. We had civilian check rides and we had military check rides. The military check rides were the tough ones to overcome if you had a pink slip.

WRIGHT: And a different type of person checking you out, I guess, on that military check ride.

SEYMOUR: And many of the military pilots wanted to be overseas. There was that point, too.

WRIGHT: Let's visit again some of the times that you were still a WASP, and I'm sure you had many, many nice memories. Can you share one or two memorable moments with us that seem to be so significant even today?

SEYMOUR: Well, perhaps—yes. One in Roswell, New Mexico. Roswell, New Mexico, is desert, high desert country, and you have tumbleweed every so often that will come rolling down the runway, and sometimes it can be a huge mass and you cannot get out of the way of the tumbleweed, and you go right through it, which is fun.

But perhaps the best landing I ever made was at Roswell. It had rained and the field was damp, so the runways were still damp. I came around and I remember coming in and getting the tail down just right and the wheels just right, and there was no squeak. [Laughter] No bounce. I kept saying to myself, "This is wonderful!" And it turned out to be my very last landing. So it's a wonderful memory to have. But because the field was wet and the wheels, you see, didn't stick and they came down. It was just one of those lucky landings.

Landings were important, because maybe you only made one or two a day, and if they were not a good landing, what you'd consider a good landing, I'd feel I had failed somehow. I wanted to get them and have a good landing. And you prided yourself on this. I think most pilots do.

WRIGHT: You had many continual hours sitting in that left seat.

SEYMOUR: Yes.

WRIGHT: While you were piloting.

SEYMOUR: Yes, yes, yes.

WRIGHT: And trying to focus.

SEYMOUR: You see, I was in the Training Command. I was not in the Ferrying Command. So that makes a big difference.

WRIGHT: Although those days of you being an active WASP stopped, you have continued working as a WASP, hoping to let other people know about the participation and the contributions that the WASP have given. Tell us about some of those activities.

SEYMOUR: That's interesting. That's a good question, how my interest renewed itself in the WASP. In 1972, I attended a reunion in Sweetwater, Texas, and Jackie Cochran came to this reunion. It's the last one she came to. She died in 1980. She had a heart monitor on at that time, and [she stayed] in a big motor home, air-conditioned motor home. I was found [I was lost on the WASP mailing roster until 1972]. I had been found. My names had been changed. I was Dawn Y. Rochow when I entered the WASP. I had married in the WASP. I was Dawn Y. Balden. And then actually later on when we had a militarization and became a veteran, I was Dawn Y. Seymour, which is, of course, my name today. So I had many names. Jackie Cochran was smart. She just kept her own name, and so did Amelia Earhart. That's my counsel to anyone who asks me today. So then I was found.

At that time, Bruce Arnold was there as a speaker. Bruce Arnold was the son of "Hap" Arnold, and he was at the podium. I remember we had had this meeting beforehand, and we were talking about the fact that some of the women didn't receive any veterans' benefits or health benefits, and they were needing help. I have a photo in my album about talking to him, Bruce Arnold, and saying would he do something to help us. This was just when our "militarization-renewed-interest" came about.

Then I went to another reunion in Colorado Springs. And [later] was asked to put my name in as presidential candidate for the National Board in 198[2]. You might look on my sheet

and see if that's correct. Then I had no opposition; no one wanted to be president. [Laughter] So I was elected. And suddenly I'm president of this organization and had little experience between the time I had left the WASP and at that time, and I had to catch up.

We had changed our bylaws from an organization called Order of Fifinella into the WASP World War II, Inc., and I was the first president to open that door. So because of that and because of our militarization having taken place in 1979, and the first WASP was given her veterans' benefits, we were just veterans now, you see. Had never become real military. That's another story.

So Pat Pateman and I went to Washington. She was a lieutenant colonel, had Vietnam experience, and lived nearby, and she had that little sticker on her car that let her go into all these bases and the Pentagon parking lots and all that kind of thing. But we became a true veterans' organization. We established ourselves as a veterans' organization, and that was 1982 or '84. I misspoke. I was elected in 1982. And since that time I've been on board the national organization, first as advisor to the next president and then as chairman of the memorial committee.

And through that I had this great opportunity to meet, just like I've met with you and your husband [Bobby Wright] in Galveston at the Lone Star [Flight] Museum, [Galveston, TX]. You have all these opportunities to speak to different groups and tell them about the WASP story, because we were unknown back in '82. Very little had been written about us. Sally Van Wagenen Keil had written her book, *Those Wonderful Women in their Flying Machine*, and there was one young man [Nelson Adams] outside of Washington who had a tape [PBS documentary, *Silver Wings and Santiago Blue*, 1981]. It's a very fine tape of the WASP, and that was the first really national publicity that had come about since the war, that I'm aware of.

Marty WYall, [WASP, 44-W-10], will be able to help you with that, too. She has a wonderful memory on those things, because she's been our historian.

So through that, to establish ourselves as a veterans' organization, that meant we were shoulder to shoulder with other World War II veterans. And then as the war—the anniversaries came about, we were more and more asked to participate, so that helped. That was fun.

Then for some reason I felt a great obligation to Jacqueline Cochran. Well, I know the reason; it's because of her opening this transom, as I call it, to women flying military airplanes. And I wanted recognition for Jackie. The first thing I was able to accomplish was to have her named—she was inducted [October 15, 1993] into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York, which is the birthplace of the Women's Rights Movement. As you know, last year was the 150th anniversary of the Women's Rights...the signing of the Bill of Sentiments, and that was in 1848 that this came about. It's a fascinating story. I was asked [November 15, 1988] to present Sally Ride, in absentia, her medal. I not only had counted down "ten, nine, eight, seven," I had everybody at the edge of their seats, I'm sure, but I also said that I would deliver her medal to her. And it took me a year or more, two years, perhaps, to find her at La Jolla [California] at NASA—I have it here. I think I wrote it down. She was working for NASA at the La Jolla University of California Lab...

Then coming back to Jackie Cochran, I became interested in stamps and first-day covers, and on March 9th—there we go, another 9...1996, we have the...set of first-day covers...I worked for the stamp for Jackie for ten years. That's an interesting story of how one gets a stamp through the United States Postal Service, and certainly they did a wonderful job. But I was asked where would we like the ceremony, and I chose Indio, California, where her ranch is located, and was able at that time to find people who knew her way back—Yvonne

Smith and Ann Wood-Kelly. So this is where we had our wonderful opening of the postal stamp.

WRIGHT: That seems very appropriate that you had them here.

SEYMOUR: Yes. Well, tonight I'm going to—I have other stamps and there will be a postmark, a commemorative postmark, cancellation, it's called, and I'll have these recanceled with Jackie, because she's the first woman to fly faster than sound, in 1953. So it's part of this same continuum that we talk about.

Now back to Jackie. Then the other thing that happened is, on my sixty-fifth birthday, my sister gave me a little statue, a seven-and-a-half-inch bronze statue of a WASP that was created by an artist and a WASP, Dorothy Swain Lewis, "Dottie" Swain Lewis. And I loved this little statue. I'd look at it on my desk and I thought how appropriate this is. When Sweetwater, Avenger Field, and people in Texas wanted to have a memorial to the WASP, they had a zigzag design that they had selected, and it just didn't seem appropriate to this flat land of Texas and the location of it. They were going to save the wishing well, where we used to dump people after they soloed.

So anyway, I had this statue in my pocketbook and showed it to the committee at the site, and everyone had goose bumps because it was so appropriate. So therefore, as memorial chair, I was able to ask Dottie if she would create this statue for the first WASP memorial, and that was in Sweetwater, Texas. And [U.S. Attorney General] Janet Reno came and Ann Richards, the governor of Texas, came. It was a big to-do in Texas, and that was a thrilling moment to have that [achieved].

The other memorials followed along. We had one at the United States Air Force Museum at Dayton, Wright-Patterson. It's in the courtyard and it's a testimony to the women who flew the first military aircraft or the first [women] military pilots. There's one now at the Jimmy Doolittle Memorial Garden in Midland, Texas, at the CAF Museum, which is just a lovely one. And there's one now at the United States Air Force Academy in the honor court. It is a beautiful one. So if you ever go in these places, you'll see these bronze memorials. [The statues were created by D. Swain Lewis.] They look skyward and they follow the motto of the WASP. The motto of the WASP at that time was "We live in the wind and the sand, and our eyes are on the stars." [Jewel Estes, a WASP, created a handsome bronze for the entrance to the WASP archives at Texas Women's University in Denton, Texas.] So those are the projects that we were able to complete. I feel good about those.

WRIGHT: If you could tell somebody what you would want them to know about the WASP, how would you sum up the feeling of these women, of their contributions to their country at this time? How could you, in a synopsis, tell somebody about the WASP and the sacrifices that they made so that they could do what they did?

SEYMOUR: Well, first of all, they're a happy group. They're a wonderfully happy group, and they don't think of themselves as having achieved anything but this wonderful ability to have flown the planes, these beautiful, wonderful airplanes, the opportunity we had to serve our country at the same time. [Interruption]

WRIGHT: I guess the question that we'd like to look at now would be, you mentioned Jackie Cochran opened the transom, not necessarily the door. Do you feel like the door is open now?

SEYMOUR: Oh, absolutely. Oh, today? Yes. Tonight? Yes. It took some time. Just like we talked about the Bill of Sentiments was 1848. Now here we are 151 years later and we have a woman going into space as commander of a space flight. So we're talking about—when I say the word "continuum," I mean years, decades, hundreds of years. I'm even thinking of a millennium of how women have been treated. American women have more opportunities today than they've ever had in history, that I can see. So we've always known we belonged in the world, but now we have the legal reasons to belong.

Now, I don't think that when you think about it, the right to vote was not as important as Title IX was. [Of course, I realize that legal progress for women is step by step, but Title IX affected me personally.] Title IX opened athletics to women. [Interruption]

WRIGHT: Title IX.

SEYMOUR: Title IX, which opened athletics to women, with the same amount of training, equipment, so forth, was more powerful than anything that's happened in...[my lifetime]. [Recently,] you saw that with the soccer game, the World Cup game, with American women. It [Title IX] affected my daughters' lives. My daughters were going out for cheerleading, and suddenly Title IX came along and they were playing soccer with the best coach and the best equipment. And they are powerful women. They're much different perhaps than I am. I mean, I have all the constraints of my mother, of my mother's generation. [Laughter]

But I also want to say there's quite a difference in the WASP story and Eileen's, because we did not fly under the glare of media cameras and press.

WRIGHT: No, you didn't.

SEYMOUR: We didn't. We might have had people make comments to us and stare at us, but I didn't have any discrimination of that sort.

WRIGHT: And yet it's a different pressure in a sense that you had a job to do.

SEYMOUR: Yes. As I said before, we felt confident we belonged. Isn't that great? Yesterday, I wore my WASP shirt yesterday, had just the WASP wings, and I was thinking, I wonder if anyone would recognize these wings. And I was at the [launch] Pad Number Six, [Kennedy Space Center], and who should come up to me but a good-looking red-haired lady who said her name, introduced herself as a 99 pilot from Washington, D.C., and she had two friends with her. Her name turns out to be Linn Buell. She's president of the National Soaring Museum, which is right near Elmira. She knows Eileen Collins well. They sponsor the Eileen Collins Camp Scholarship. We were delighted to meet each other.

The next person I met who recognized the wings was a Blake Wilson, who's head of the Chamber of Commerce in Mississippi, whose mother was the president of the WAVES in Delaware. So there's an interesting connection.

And the third person who recognized my wings was a person who was [shopping] in the Walgreen's [Drug Store] last night, who came up to me, recognized the wings, and she said,

"Oh, I would have loved to have been a WASP," she said, "but I joined the WAVES and I very early worked in San Diego," and so forth and so on. So we had a wonderful conversation.

I said, "Are you a member of WIMSA?" WIMSA is the Women in Military Service Museum in Washington, D.C., with the memorial. The best story, I guess, besides flying the B-17[G] at Lone Star [Flight Museum] in Texas would be flying in a C-141[B] with all-women crew, a flyover for the opening of this great memorial for women veterans. There was the pilot, the co-pilot, the navigator, the engineer, and a cadet from the Air Force Academy, and myself, all in one plane. It was just an absolutely smooth and beautiful, flawless ride. Something to remember all these years.

So I think my advice, as you asked me before, what difference—what were the WASPs and what was their meaning in this particular time? And I think it is they listened to a voice inside that urges each one of us—we each had this—urges us to try. Find a way. You do the hard work. And I think that's my message.

WRIGHT: That's a wonderful message, and you all left such a wonderful legacy.

SEYMOUR: Thank you.

WRIGHT: And we move on into another historic moment for women in aviation as we move into tomorrow and Commander Collins takes her place in history as well [launch of STS-93].

SEYMOUR: Takes her place and we all move up.

WRIGHT: We thank you for visiting with us today and sharing your memories with us.

SEYMOUR: I'm pleased to. I'm pleased to. I'm thrilled to be here.

WRIGHT: We'll just let the excitement of today and the event carry us on, and you'll have one more memory to add as you go and visit others.

SEYMOUR: I salute—all the WASPs salute Eileen Collins.

WRIGHT: Thank you so much.

SEYMOUR: I bring that message.

WRIGHT: Hopefully she'll get that before she goes, but we'll definitely make sure she gets it when she returns.

SEYMOUR: I know we're proud of her.

WRIGHT: Thank you.

[End of Interview]