

SOME MEMORABLE FLIGHTS OF MARGARET (MARGE) WATSON

As told to Ann Koenig at 99s South Central Section Meeting June 1996

I asked my parents if I could take flying lessons when I was 18 years old. They did not approve but assured me if I still wanted to fly when I was 21 years old I could. Two weeks after my 21st birthday I took my first lesson. I trained at Penn State University with the CPT (Civilian Pilot Training program). I received my Degree and my pilot's license in June of the same year. After graduation I returned home to New Castle, Pennsylvania and worked at the Alcoa plant. This was before Pearl Harbor. My brother had completed his degree the June before I started College in September. After graduation he had gone directly into the Armed Service and flew for the Marines and attained the rank of Major. He was killed at Midway long before the battle in which the US defeated Japan. After my brother's death I urgently felt I had to be more active in the defense effort. Jacqueline Cochran sent me a telegram and I went to Sweetwater, Texas for the WASP training in 1943. We were to be there only 6 months but were delayed a few weeks because of a big snow storm. I left there January 6, 1944 along with 8 or 9 others who were stationed at Las Vegas, Nevada. The commander at Las Vegas had informed the troops that 9 or 10 women pilots would be attached to the base and the women would be flying along side of the men. We were accepted very well. The second day we were there they had a parade including all the troops and bands. It was in the afternoon and cool, even with the sun out. We were assigned to the reviewing stand in our new tailored uniforms that we had gotten as we left Sweetwater. The shoes didn't necessarily fit too well and mine were too short. We stood for over two hours as the troops went by. We never had another parade and I finally realized that they were looking us over, rather than us looking them over!

I started out flying AT6s. I later flew the target airplane and the gunners of the B17 bombers would practice their anti-aircraft fire. At first they only took pictures of what they would have hit. Later they used live ammunition. With the B17 at 10,000-11,000 feet we would simulate attacks and evasive maneuvers. While maintaining my duties flying the AT6, I was being trained to fly the B26. My instructor had problems in that his wife was pregnant and he seemed very preoccupied. One night another girl and I were being instructed in the B26. I went through my lesson's maneuvers and it was the other girl's time. I went back and laid down to get some sleep. The next thing I knew the instructor came back and woke me. We were lost and he and the other girl panicked. They wanted me to take over and get us back. Of course I had to consider fuel and after a while I saw some movement. Remember this was war time and no lights or rotating beacons to attract the enemy! I started down and it started getting warm and humid. The movement that I had detected was the water off the coast of California and I was able to land at the Naval base near San Diego. There were many people all around. We sent word of where we had landed back to the Las Vegas base and were shown a place to sleep. It was filthy and there were lots of bugs but we were so tired we could sleep in our clothes with all the bugs. The next morning we flew home to the Las Vegas base. The base had not received our message and all were delighted to see us alive with the airplane intact. Neither the instructor nor the other girl was any help. The girl had panicked and I never saw her again. The base received our message about six hours after our arrival.

Later while flying with the B26 instructor, I was in the left seat and we took off and were about half way down the runway when the left engine started sputtering. The B26 was not supposed to be able to fly on only one engine. I put both feet on the left rudder and my back against the seat to keep the airplane flying straight. We were not very high or fast and there was not enough distance to stop on the runway. With full fuel and nothing but rocks ahead I had to try to nurse the airplane around and land. I reduced the power of the right engine to keep from turning into the building adjacent to the runway. The instructor panicked and insisted that I change seats. Here we were low and slow and there was nothing I could do but change seats. I had to adjust all the trim and move seats. All he did was sit in the left seat with his hands in his lap. He did not even touch the controls. I used the sputtering left engine very carefully to get what little power I could from it and with the reduced power on the right engine I finally got up to about 200 feet AGL. I had to make steep left turns because of the difference in power. With steep turns and low altitude and speed we finally made it around and landed safely. I don't remember but one more training session with another instructor in the B26 and I had earned the left seat. I never saw the first instructor again. I was the first woman at the Las Vegas base to be certified to fly the B26. I was 24 years old at the time. The B17 gunners would shoot live ammunition at the target banners being pulled by the B26 that had been stripped of its armament. They were supposed to hit the target banners but after landing I found four holes in the plane and the next time I found two holes. After that I didn't even look. All training maneuvers at the base were planned for the day and it was very important that every plane was in the air at the designated time. On one occasion a male pilot got in the left seat. He was a commissioned officer and I wasn't going to say any thing but after inhaling and finding him drunk I asked him to get in the right seat and take a nap. At first he resisted but we had a crew of four. There were gunners and bombardier / navigators. On this occasion one of the men stood behind me with a large metal rod that he just kept

tapping on his left hand. The drunken officer/pilot saw him and moved over and did not touch a thing. We departed on time and completed the day's assigned maneuvers. I did not report the pilot but he ended up in Leavenworth. The only problem was one of the girls was in love with him and she was very upset. My first assignment was to give instrument instruction. At that time instruments were taught with a canvas cover over the entire canopy and no one could see outside. One of my students was a first lieutenant that thought I didn't know anything and he did. He snapped the airplane and knocked us both unconscious. I woke up to the screaming noise the airplane was making and indicating we were pulling 8 or 9 g's and I was able to pull the nose up and trim it for a climb and I blacked out again. I woke up again when we were at high altitude and the plane was buffeting. I got control again and brought it down to normal altitude. He finally regained consciousness and since this was at the end of his training I had to make him go back through the maneuvers because I felt he must finish with the correct training. Several months later he and his wife came up to me at a party and they were both very solemn as if they were at a funeral. I had never told Elmer, my soon to be husband, about the incident.

Elmer was Director of Flying and my commanding officer. When we married I was shipped out to a Naval training base in the Mojave Desert. It was standard procedure to separate all married couples. I was flying Douglas Dauntless Dive Bombers that had been discarded by the Navy and given to us. The sailors were shooting heavy fast anti-aircraft guns from the ground and I was flying 400 to 500 feet high towing target banners. I was able to make good friends with several people including one of the flight commanders. Somehow I had received word that Elmer was sick and running a high fever. After the days practice runs, I asked for a plane to go see Elmer promising I would be back at the base for the next days maneuvers. They didn't want me to leave until they had made some radio repairs. However, they didn't have the part I needed for the repair. I could transmit but could not receive. Finally somehow I got them to let me go on up to see Elmer and make the repair there. My plan was to return before dark. When I got to Las Vegas I found Elmer was not there but at a smaller base farther north. I finally found Elmer at Indian Springs, Nevada.

I was right in front of the tower and there were people all around. While I was still in my seat Elmer was out kissing me! He certainly was not himself. He never showed affection in front of anyone. He was usually strictly military in front of others. Elmer couldn't repair the plane at that base and wanted me to go back to Las Vegas for the repair. I decided to go back without the repair because it was getting late and would soon be dark. I had promised to get the plane back for training maneuvers the next day and I did not want to get my friend in trouble for letting me borrow a plane. As it became dark I discovered the plane had no panel lights. I had to broadcast my location and I knew exactly where to go. I could see one light on the dry lake bed and I thought to myself, you don't know how far down to go. I could not tell where the ground was. I descended very slowly, as if I were ditching on the ocean, and made a fairly solid landing. The plane was made for carrier landings so the gear could take the stress. I then heard from the back seat "*We are not dead!*". I had forgotten there was a young enlisted man behind me that had some time off and had begged for a ride. He leaped out of the plane and was so happy! The friend who had loaned me the airplane came tearing down in his car and put the plane away and took us back. The young man went to the enlisted men's quarters and told the story to all!

We had a lot of Italian POWs on the base. They could not go anywhere and were given jobs and paid for their work. One man managed a restaurant that served excellent French food. We walked in and it was closing. There were a number of people still there. They had finished eating and were just talking. My friend told the Maitre d' about the hard time I had and how hungry I was. The rules were that after the restaurant had served all the customers, the staff could cook themselves whatever they wanted to eat. The chef and all the staff came in bringing the best Italian food I ever had in my life! My friend did not get in trouble and Elmer got better and he had been happy to see me. It all worked out and I never got in trouble for leaving.