

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Juliette Jenner Stege

Conducted by Deb Barrett

October 5, 2007

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This interview is being conducted on October 5, 2007, with Juliette Jenner Stege at her home in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mrs. Stege was born on January 7, 1912, in New York City, New York. She is a homemaker who was contacted by the staff of the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. Also with us today is her son, Tony. Mrs. Stege has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is her story.

So, Julie, just before you entered the service you were living at home? You were in school – high school?

It might have been high school.

Tony: No, you were in show business.

Oh, yes. I was in show business. I forgot that. I was a dancer.

You were a dancer! Okay. Were you a dancer with a review?

Yes, in reviews.

How old were you when you went into the service?

I must have been 16.

Tony: No, you weren't Mom. You were in high school at 16. You were a chorus girl when you were 24. You didn't join the service until – do the math; you were born in 1912 and you joined up in 1943 or something.

1943?

Tony: Something like that.

You were 31 years old?

Tony: Yeah, about. Maybe 30, 29 – she was one of the older ones. She was in the Ziegfeld Follies.

You were a Ziegfeld Follies girl?

Tony: Yes. Earl Carroll's Vanities or something.

Yes. All the glamour shows.

All the glamour shows. Well that was quite a switch to go from glamour shows to the military.

Yes, it was quite a switch.

Why did you decide to go into the military?

Because I was patriotic. I wanted to help the United States.

And we were already at war. And you didn't tell anybody or ask anybody – you just went and did it.

Yes.

Tony: What did Ed Sullivan tell you when you went into the war?

He told me I was making a big mistake because I'd be killed.

Ed Sullivan told you that?

Yes.

Tony: He said you were a dumb chorus girl.

That's what I was considered because I was in the chorus. I was a dumb chorus girl.

They thought you didn't know what you were doing.

Right.

Tony: And you wanted to go kill Hitler. Isn't that why you joined the Army – to go kill Hitler?

I wanted to kill Hitler.

I think there were a lot of people who felt the same way. So you went into the Army ...

Tony: The Air Force.

Was it the Army Air Force at the time?

Tony: I don't know.

I think it was the Air Force.

I think it was the Army Air Corps at that time. I don't think the Air Force had been started yet. But you went into the air service because you said you liked to fly. And you had flown before?

I guess so.

As a passenger?

Yes.

Tony: No. You had a pilot's license.

Really. When did you get a pilot's license?

Tony: Before then.

Just before then. What encouraged you to get a pilot's license? I mean, did you just like the idea of flying, or was there something you wanted to accomplish?

I was patriotic, and that was the branch I picked out to be in.

But before that you had gotten a private pilot's license.

Yes.

Just because you wanted to learn how to fly.

Well, I had to learn. You had to have eight hours to get a license. And I had the eight hours, so I got a license.

Okay. Had there been people in your family who had been pilots?

No.

You just decided to do this on your own?

Yes.

Okay. So you went into the air service, and you said there were probably three to six other women doing the same thing. And you said you were one of the oldest in the group?

Yes. I think so.

So the others were more in their earlier twenties, or late teens maybe?

Yes.

Tell me about your barracks. You said you shared a room, and you had a bed and a chair.

There were rooms, and each two rooms had a bathroom in between. So you were using a bathroom that twelve other people were using.

So there were about a dozen women in this house.

Yes, in each building. There were six beds.

Do you remember the name of the base that you were at?

Tony: Wasn't one of them Sweetwater?

Yes, it could have been Sweetwater.

Where is Sweetwater?

In Texas.

Okay. So what do you remember of the training you got at that base?

It was just normal training – whatever they were teaching you to fly. They were military planes, and we were the first women to fly the military planes.

Julie has an afghan hanging over her fireplace that shows a military plane and says: “We live in the wind and sand, but our eyes are on the stars.” And it’s “Women’s Air Force Service Pilots, the first women in history to fly America’s military aircraft.” And that’s one of the women that you were.

Right.

So what can you tell me that was different about military aircraft instead of flying private planes?

Well, military planes you had to follow the military rules, which if you didn't have to fly military you could fly and land wherever you wanted. But you were limited to where you could land and fly.

So you had to learn the military rules for flying. Was there anything different in the equipment on the military plane?

No. There was just normal equipment on that type of plane.

And what type of missions were you being trained for?

I don't know what they were training me for.

Tony: The women, mostly what they did – if they had a plane in Detroit, and it was just coming off the assembly line and they wanted it flown to wherever, I think the women would take a bus to Detroit and then fly it back wherever the plane was supposed to be.

So basically it was getting the planes to where they needed to be because the men were doing combat missions.

Tony: Right. Or training pilots and stuff. If a general had to be flown Lubbock to Sacramento, the women would fly them there.

We did all the odd jobs.

Tony: All the things the men didn't want to do.

How did the men pilots react to you?

They didn't like it. They spit on the tarmac as we passed them.

Did they tell you what they didn't like? Did they ever say anything?

No. We didn't talk to them.

Tony: They were stealing their thunder is what you used to tell me.

They hated us!

Tony: Only macho men could fly, not women.

Not show girls (all chuckle).

Tony: My father was a pilot, and she married him. He was in the Air Force.

Did you meet him in the Air Force?

Yes.

Tony: That's what the women did. A lot of them did other stuff. But certain women, like my Mom did, some of them flew B29's and B24's and B25's. But that wasn't what she had done. Women probably flew the B24's from point A to point B to go over to Europe or something. My Mom's group – what she did – they would tow targets in the air and have the men practice shooting at them. [all chuckle] Some of the women got killed.

We flew with a flag flying from the tail of the plane. And the flag was always there so they could shoot at it.

So the men who weren't happy you were there were shooting at the target. Right? The men were shooting at the target you were pulling for practice? And some of the women got hurt or killed? Because they missed the target.

Yes.

Tony: They missed the target. They shot the plane instead.

Wow! So when they were teaching you what you were going to do, they taught you military protocol, they taught you what the military rules were for flying. What else did they teach you?

They taught us how to fly the plane.

Okay. But you already knew how to fly, pretty much.

Yes, but not a military plane. They were entirely different. They had guns, and they had ammunition, and they had flags to drag in back of you. It was a busy time.

Wow. That sounds like it wasn't quite as glamorous as being a chorus girl, but it was certainly a very different type of job!

Right.

Tony: I don't know about the commercial planes at that time, but they had to be a little bit better – more comfortable. We flew on a B24 last summer, and it almost takes basically two people to fly the thing. There are a lot of cables and stuff. But I don't think the pilots in commercial airplanes had all those problems, or all those physical things they had to do that the pilots in the military had to do.

There was a lot of extra equipment, and it takes a lot of maneuvering to manage everything.

Tony: Right.

So you had to be pretty smart to know what you're doing and take care of what you were doing and stay in the air.

Tony: You know, you see these pictures of World War II, and you see ten people in the cockpit, or ten people in where the nose gunner is or something. And there's only room for barely like a 5'6" guy. A B24 with four big engines, you had to walk sideways over the bomb bay because it wasn't that big. It's noisy and hot and cold – depending on how high you go.

So when you were flying these things, what did you wear? What was your uniform like for flying?

Just a khaki uniform.

Pants?

Pants and a top, a jacket.

It got cold up there?

Yes.

Did you have oxygen?

No.

Tony: They didn't go up that high.

You just went up high enough that the temperature changed for you.

Yes. The temperature changed. But we managed somehow. I don't know how we did it.

Well, if you were getting a lot of disrespect from the male pilots, there must have been something that kept you wanting to do this.

Well, you were flying for your country. It was the patriotic thing.

And so you wanted to do something.

Tony: My Mom would never let anything in her whole life discourage her from doing anything.

I kind of got that impression! (Tony and Deb chuckle) How long was your training? Was it ten weeks? Do you remember?

Until you could do it. And then you were released.

Did all the women in your group make it?

Yes.

Tony: No, Mom. I don't know – maybe in your group. But I think something like 10,000 applied and only like 1,000 got in. Something like that.

Wow. That's pretty impressive.

Tony: And there's only a couple a hundred left, I think.

And we don't hear about the women pilots. We never hear anything. That's why we were glad to hear about you! So you had the training. You graduated and were able to do this. What sort of flights did you take? What did you fly and where?

We flew with the tails for them to practice shooting.

Was that in Texas?

Yes, that was in Texas.

Did you fly planes from place to place to drop them off?

Yes, we ferried.

How long did you do this?

About two years.

Was your time in the service for two years?

Made it nine times. When you were dead, you were dead!

Tony: Around two years.

So you did the flying back and forth. What do you remember about the women who were in the service with you? Was there anything you remember, any jokes anybody played, any special times that you had?

Yes, I remember one girl in my bay – we had bays. In between the bays there was one bathroom. So we had a lot of sharing to do. And this one girl – her name was Joy Jeals (sp); two J's – she was always mad at me because my name was Julie Jenner. But anyway, she used to climb up on top of the lockers and walked up there. So I thought she was a little nutty. I mean, what did she gain. She'd climb up on top of the lockers and make all this noise.

Tony: I never heard that one.

Her name was Joy Jeals, JJ.

Tony: Like Julie Jenner.

Like my name, right. So we were very familiar. (Julie chuckles)

Did you have to learn how to work on your planes? Or were you just doing the flying?

No, we didn't work on the planes. We didn't do any mechanical stuff.

Did you have to learn some emergency procedures?

No. When you were dead, you were dead.

So you went in – you said you were about 30, 31 years old. Did the other women think you kind of old for this?

No, they knew how old I was. They didn't care.

It didn't matter to them.

They only worried about their own neck.

So you hadn't had any family yet.

No.

You were in there for the two years flying the planes back and forth. And you said your husband was in the Air Force. Did you meet him while you were there?

Yes. I met him and married him.

Where did you meet him?

In the Air Force.

Was this still in Texas?

Tony: Or California.

I think it was Texas.

So you went from Texas to California. And you met your husband some time in there. And he was a pilot?

Yes.

Did he act like the other male pilots? You said they didn't respect the women pilots.

No, they didn't. They didn't like us because they thought we were ruining their macho image.

But you said you met your future husband there and he was a pilot. Did he act the same way as those other pilots?

Yes! (All chuckle)

So. How did you get around that attitude? How did you get around that if he didn't respect you and all of a sudden you were dating?

We got married.

And Tony here is the result! So you apparently got around that attitude of disrespect to get to the point of dating. When you got married you were still in the Air Force? Did you have a civilian wedding or a military wedding? Do you remember?

It was just a paid wedding (Julie chuckles).

Tony: I think my father was in his uniform and she was just in a bride's dress. And their friends paid for it.

I know there used to be some rules for the women in the military as far as getting married. When you got married did you stay in the Air Force or were you done already?

No, I was still in the Air Force when I got married.

Tony: Didn't they discharge you guys before the war was over or something like that?

Yes.

Tony: I don't think you were still in the military then.

Well, I had to be living on the base.

Tony: I don't know – I wasn't around then!

So when you got married and you still lived on bases, where did you live?

In the barracks.

Tony: You didn't get married until after the war was over, Mom. Really?

Tony: Yes. Because you flew to New York, and he flew to Racine, and then you guys decided to raise a family in Los Angeles for some reason. So they weren't married when they were in the military. He might have been, but she wasn't.

Was your Dad a career military?

Tony: No.

He was just in longer.

Tony: Well, they disbanded the women like right away, you know, once the war was winding down I guess.

So you did about two years? Do you know when they were disbanded?

Tony: I don't know.

December 20.

Do you remember what year?

1940 something.

And you said December 20?

Tony: 1944. That's when the honorable discharge is.

You went in in 1943 and you were discharged in December, 1944. So a year and a half, maybe – almost two years?

Tony: Yes. About a year and eight months or so.

So, when you were discharged, where did you go?

I went back to New York.

Did you go back into a chorus line? What did you do?

No. I just went back to see my family and then I don't know, I got going again.

Tony: To California.

Yes.

Was your family happy that you were out of the military, or did they care?

It was none of their business. I didn't get their permission to go. I didn't ask them. I was my own person.

But they were probably happy to see you when you came back, right?

Yes. When I quit.

Okay. So you left the service and ended up getting married and moved to California?

I don't remember how I did it.

Tony: Yes.

Okay. What did you do in California?

Tony: Raised a family.

So you were a homemaker.

Tony: And she used to have plays on top of our garage, like the show business thing.

Show business was in your blood! So you used your talents raising your family.

Tony: She was a den mother, on the school board and whatever.

Okay. Do you ever keep in touch with any of the women that you were in the service with?

For what?

Tony: Yeah, Mom, you go to the reunions every two years. I'd say that was keeping in touch with them.

Yeah, I go to the reunions.

How many women show up at the reunions these days?

Oh, about 400.

And how many did you say there were originally?

Tony: I think about 1,000. You could look that up. She always talked about her show business career because – neither my Mom nor my Dad talked about flying airplanes. So you've got a lot of people over there – I don't know if you've seen in the pictures – but she goes, "Here's Joe Panner." I don't know who Joe Panner is. I wasn't the least bit

interested in her show business career, but that's what she always talked about. So I don't know that much about her military career.

So you go to these reunions every couple of years with the women. What do you talk about?

We joke about old times.

What it was like to be flying?

We never considered it fun. It was just a job.

How did your time in the military affect your life and the way you think about things?

I just volunteered and they took me.

Are there any stories or anything you want to talk about that we haven't discussed?

No.

Tony: How about that story of when the map got sucked out of the cockpit.

Oh, yeah. I had a flight and had a map with me to show me where to fly over. I was flying myself.

Tony: They had to take a map to fly from one city to another. She had to figure out how to get there with the map.

And how to land in the field – you just picked a field to land in, in the city where you were supposed to go. I had a map, and it started raining, and I couldn't see past the nose of the plane, so I took out my map and I opened the little window and it sucked my map.

Oh, no! So what did you do?

Well, I did the best I could.

Did you end up in the right city?

Tony: She got up on the radio and told them what happened. They said she should be around some railroad tracks or something, and to follow the railroad tracks to a red barn, make a left, go three miles and whatever. And she thought, 'Oh, the mayor of the city is ...

Come out and have a big key. I got a big zero!

No key to the city (all chuckle)!

Tony: And who came out?

A little old man with a mop in his hands! And he gave me the map. (all chuckle) And he ran away back to wherever he came from.

You must not have been the first one to land in his field! Anything else you would like to share with us?

I don't remember all the stories I made up.

Tony: All the stories that you made up? That's one of the stories she didn't make up!

Okay, in that case, thank you very much for sharing your story with us and we're going to go off line.