Nancy Love
and the
WASP Ferry Pilots
of World War II

by Sarah Byrn Rickman

Number 4 in the North Texas
Military Biography and Memoir Series

University of North Texas Press
Denton, Texas
Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of Joan Hrubec, director and later curator of the International Women’s Air and Space Museum (IWASM), who planted the seed that led to its creation and whose incredible aviation memory bank I mined as I researched and wrote.

We lost Joanie February 17, 2007.
Contents

List of Photographs of Nancy Harkness Love . . . . . . .  ix
Foreword by Deborah G. Douglas . . . . . . . . . . . . .  xi
Preface . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  xvii
Acknowledgments . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  xx
Prologue . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  1
Chapter 1: Learning to Fly . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  5
Chapter 2: Learning to Live . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  23
Chapter 3: Stretching Her Wings . . . . . . . . . . . . .  33
Chapter 4: Tricycle Gear Test Pilot . . . . . . . . . . . . .  45
Chapter 5: War in Europe! . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  60
Chapter 6: Wanted: Ferry Pilots . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  70
Chapter 7: Two Women Pilot Groups . . . . . . . . . . .  80
Chapter 8: The Originals Gather . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  91
Chapter 9: Growing Pains . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  103
Chapter 10: Killed in Service of Her Country. . . . . . .  116
Chapter 11: Transport and Transition . . . . . . . . . . .  121
Chapter 12: A B-17 Bound for England . . . . . . . . . .  134
Chapter 13: Change in the Air . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  147
Chapter 14: Pursuit School . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  157
Photographs of Nancy Harkness Love

Page
In WAFS flying gear ........................................ Frontispiece
Age three ......................................................... 7
With her horse, Daisy. ................................. 9
At age sixteen. .................................................. 12
With Jack Ray’s Great Lakes trainer .......... 19
Joins Airmarking team ................................. 38
With Bob and the Staggerwing .......................... 41
Steps out of the Gwinn Aircar ......................... 54
With Joseph Marr Gwinn and Frank Hawks .... 56
With Gen. Harold L. George ......................... 76
With Betty Gillies.............................................. 93
With Helen Mary Clark and Col. Robert M. Baker 94
In WAFS dress uniform .............................. 96
With Gertrude Meserve, Catherine Slocum, Del Scharr, and Barbara Towne 98
Five of her original WAFS: Barbara Towne, Cornelia Fort, Evelyn Sharp, B.J. Erickson, and Bernice Batten 108
On the wing of a P-51 Mustang .......................... 112
With Evelyn Sharp, Barbara Towne, B.J. Erickson
and P-51 .................................................. 113
With Evelyn Sharp, Barbara Towne, B.J. Erickson
and C-47 .................................................. 114
In front of a B-25 ......................................... 128
With Gen. William H. Tunner .......................... 131
She copiloted this Boeing B-17 ......................... 139
In the cockpit of the B-17, *Queen Bee* ............. 141
With Betty Gillies and their *Queen Bee* crew ....... 144
With Jackie Cochran, Gen. H.H. “Hap” Arnold, and
B.J. Erickson ............................................ 177
In WASP uniform ....................................... 179
With WASP Ann McClelland on ferrying assignment.... 183
With the first WASP Officer Training School class .... 191
With Nancy Batson and Betty Gillies .................. 193
At Pursuit School, Brownsville, Texas ................. 195
With Bea Medes in the cockpit of a C-54 .............. 217
At the Last Supper, the Officers Club in Wilmington .. 218
With WASP of the 2nd Ferrying Group ................ 219
Receives Air Medal from Gen. Harold L. George .... 237
With her daughters Marky, Hannah, and Allie ....... 244
With WASP Carolyn Cullen ........................... 252
The Army C-54 began its takeoff roll. The lumbering giant strained to gain momentum. Finally, the wind beneath its wings lifted the aircraft from the runway into the heavy humid air of Calcutta. Fully loaded, the four-engine beast of wartime burden climbed out and away from the airfield. Inside the cockpit, the pilot executed the prescribed turnout, took an east-by-northeast heading and flew out over the jungles of east India bound for Kunming, China.

The date was January 8, 1945. A woman’s hands held the controls of the big U.S. cargo/transport plane flying “the Hump”—that fabled World War II highway in the sky over the remote heights of the Himalayan Mountains and the impenetrable jungles of Burma, the all-important wartime supply route to China. The woman’s name was Nancy Harkness Love.

Flying the C-54, by now, was second nature to Love. She flew her first one as copilot on November 28, 1944, checked out satisfactorily in the aircraft two days later in Long Beach, California, and began ferrying the military version of the DC-4 airliner across the U.S. on December 2. After ten cross-country flights in just thirteen days, she had 46 hours and 15 minutes in that aircraft—ultimately the biggest bird she flew in her aviation career.
In spite of the airplane’s size, power, and heft, hydraulics assured that a woman could fly the 73,000-pound craft as readily as a man. The yoke—the half steering wheel that controlled the ailerons and the elevators, therefore the aircraft’s roll and pitch—was not unwieldy. Surprisingly, the four throttles, configured to take up a minimum of space, nested neatly under her hand. On takeoff and landing, her copilot’s hand would hover over hers, ready to assist if an unexpected problem surfaced. At five-feet-six and blessed with long legs, Love was tall enough for her feet to comfortably reach the rudders.

The familiar throb of the four 1,350-horsepower Pratt & Whitney engines soon would calm any adrenalin high spawned by her first trip over the rooftop of the world. And though Love flew the airplane, the C-54’s regular captain was present and in command, and she had at her beck and call his full crew. Flying this airplane, she already had discovered, was not so different from flying the B-17, C-47, B-25, or A-20—all multi-engine aircraft she had flown many times in the last two years.

Who was Nancy Harkness Love and how did she happen to be flying an Army C-54 over the mountains and jungles of southern Asia in January 1945?

In the fall of 1942, several months into the United States’ involvement in World War II, Love, a veteran pilot, had been chosen to form and lead a squadron of twenty-eight civilian women pilots who went to work ferrying airplanes for the Ferrying Division of the Army’s Air Transport Command (ATC). The Army was desperate for pilots to fly small single-engine trainer planes from the factory assembly lines to the flight training fields in the South and these twenty-eight women—most of them professional pilots—fit the bill. They were known initially as the WAFS, the Women’s Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron.

As the war progressed, the number of women ferry pilots grew and Love eventually had several squadrons under her leadership. The women were not militarized. They flew under the auspices of the Civil Service. One hundred thirty-four of those women qualified to ferry the Army’s high-performance pursuit airplanes.
Then in 1944, male pilots—released from other duties—wanted to take over the ferrying chores. The Army felt it no longer needed the women pilots. The group was deactivated on December 20, 1944, and the women sent home.

But Love, still a Ferrying Division/ATC employee, was handed one more assignment—a fact-finding trip to India and China under orders from her friend Gen. C.R. Smith, Deputy Director of the ATC. It was on his authority—in his plane—that she flew the Hump that day. Her flight was strictly off the record. She wasn’t supposed to be in the cockpit of an Army aircraft in January 1945. As of December 20, 1944, women were officially banned from Army cockpits. The ban lasted for thirty years.

Nevertheless, Love’s logbook indicates that she flew the four-and-a-half-hour trip from Calcutta to Kunming.

After landing, parking the airplane, cutting the switches, and cleaning up the cockpit, she rose, dropped her headset and oxygen mask on the seat, and followed her passengers and crew out of the airplane into the pale winter sunshine. She wore an Army-issue flight suit. Had it not been for her softly curled, chin-length hair—caught behind her ears in deference to the earphones she had worn and definitely out of place in the crew-cut male world of 1945—she might have passed for a young crewman.

As she walked toward the group of officers clustered on the ground, she did not stride purposefully nor did she walk like many women would have, to call attention to herself. She was, in fact, slightly pigeon-toed and had a hint of a glide to her step. She moved with a poise that bespoke more self-assurance than she actually possessed. When she smiled, her luminous, gold-flecked hazel eyes took in each man, graciously making him feel as if he, personally, was the object of that smile. Her firm pilot’s handshake, offered in greeting, belied the small, slender, feminine hand beneath.

Thirty-year-old Nancy Love was a strikingly beautiful woman with high cheekbones and delicate features. She had begun to go gray at nineteen, beginning with a streak that swept back from the right side of her forehead. By 1945, her light brown hair had turned mostly silver, casting an aura of maturity about her.
Her reserve, carefully honed over those thirty years, masked her drive. Love greeted challenges with cool assessment, never allowing the passion that lurked just beneath the surface to show in her cultured, contralto voice. That she had been asked to take part in this flight, to fly this airplane, was a coup—the high point in a distinguished aviation career that, by 1945, had covered fifteen years.

Dutifully, she recorded the Hump flight in her logbook—bible and sworn gospel to a pilot. All flights are noted. She wrote nothing else of the flight. She didn’t need to. For her, having done it was what mattered. Years later she did allude to the flight in interviews. (The sources are noted in the chapter “Flying the Hump.”)

And she did relate the story to her three daughters Hannah, Marky, and Allie. In turn, the girls have passed on what they heard.
Hannah Lincoln (Nancy) Harkness was born on February 14, 1914, in Houghton, Michigan, the daughter of Dr. Robert Bruce and Alice (Chadbourne) Harkness. Alice wanted to name their daughter for her sister, Hannah Lincoln Chadbourne Denton. Mrs. Denton’s first daughter, also named Hannah, had died in childhood. The name Hannah Lincoln was a family tradition and Alice wanted the tradition to carry forward. Precedent carried some weight with Dr. Harkness; however, he disliked his sister-in-law. Finally, he relented sufficiently for “Hannah Lincoln” to go on his daughter’s birth certificate. But the name he chose to call her—Nancy—is the name that stuck.

Alice Graham Chadbourne’s family originally came to North America from Norfolk, England, in the 1630s, settling first in Hingham, Massachusetts. In the 1870s, Alice’s parents, Thomas L. and Georgina Kay Chadbourne, moved to the town of Houghton in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. Houghton lies in the northern-most part of the state, the scenic Keweenaw Peninsula that juts out into Lake Superior. Their move to this western outpost coincided with the growth of copper mining in that region and the attendant economic boom that began in 1865.¹
Alice was born May 16, 1879. In addition to her sister, Hannah Lincoln, Alice also had a brother, Thomas Lincoln Chadbourne, a well to do man-about-town in New York and Palm Beach, Florida, who became a benefactor to both Alice and Nancy during the hard times of the Depression. Alice died in April 1958 and her ashes are buried in Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts.

Robert Bruce Harkness’s family emigrated from Paisley, Scotland, to Wilkes-Barre, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, in the mid-nineteenth century. He was the youngest of ten children and said to be the only one born in the United States, on October 1, 1875, in Wilkes-Barre. Their granddaughters, to this day, aren’t sure how these two met. However, Alice was from a prominent Boston-based family and did spend time there as a young woman. Possibly young Bruce, with the intention of studying medicine, made his way to the country’s intellectual and educational center sometime after the Spanish-American War in which the Love daughters believe he served.

Bruce and Alice were married August 3, 1905, after which they went to Germany where he continued his medical training. Sometime after 1907, they too settled in Houghton, where Dr. Harkness was named Public Health Officer for Houghton County. A son Robert Bruce Harkness Jr.—known as Bob, but called “Bobbin” by his mother—was born May 5, 1908. The Harkness family was severely rocked when Bob died as the result of a skiing accident at Wildcat Mountain in New Hampshire, on December 18, 1933. He was racing, hit a tree, and died of internal injuries.

Dr. Harkness died in 1955 and is buried in Wilkes-Barre. Nancy’s earliest days coincided with those of World War I, which began in Europe in August 1914, just months after she was born. While Nancy was a young girl growing up in the deep green forests and snow-covered northern Michigan landscape, several women—intent on learning to fly in those fledgling years of aviation—already were paving the way for Nancy and the women flyers of the next couple of generations.

On May 21, 1927, Nancy was present at Le Bourget Field in Paris to witness Charles Lindbergh’s landing in the Spirit of
“You can’t make an interesting story out of that,” she later told a public relations person who hoped to do just that. “It didn’t inspire me with an overwhelming desire to fly, as it probably should have!” Nancy, her aunt Hannah Denton and her cousin Georgina Kay Denton were on a tour of Europe that spring—a trip Nancy’s mother thought would broaden her education.

It did, in ways Mrs. Harkness didn’t intend. The already engaging, rapidly maturing Nancy, though only thirteen, attracted the amorous attentions of an Italian count on the beach at the Riviera—much to her aunt’s dismay. It was with great delight that Nancy, whose dry sense of humor became legendary, told her own daughters the story years later.

On June 17, 1928—when Nancy was fourteen—Amelia Earhart became the first woman to cross the Atlantic in an aircraft.
as a passenger in a plane flown by two male pilots. Four years later, Earhart would fly the Atlantic solo. And on November 2, 1929, when Nancy was fifteen, twenty-six licensed women pilots, including Earhart, met at Curtiss Field in Valley Stream on Long Island to discuss forming a woman pilot’s organization. At the time, the United States had 117 licensed women pilots. Ninety-nine of them responded either by attending the meeting or by letter indicating interest. In recognition of their charter membership, they became the Ninety-Nines, the International Organization of Women Pilots. Earhart was elected the first president.

Erroneous reports have listed Nancy Harkness Love among the founders of that organization. At that time, she had yet to make her first flight. But before the next year, 1930, was out, sixteen-year-old Nancy Harkness would spot a biplane flying near her home in Houghton and her life would be forever changed.

Nancy was out riding her horse Daisy one August day in 1930 when she saw a biplane taking off and landing. She watched, fascinated. The aircraft seemed to dance in the sun, catching and reflecting golden rays on its silver wings.

The barnstormer pilot was looking for passengers, giving five-dollar stunt rides or a less adventurous circle of the airfield for a “penny a pound.” Along came Nancy. She must have been a refreshing change—a lot prettier than the civic leaders and other residents of Houghton he had been flying around that day. She paid her penny a pound and went up. Then she came up with five dollars and up they went again, this time for a stunt ride.3

With a chance to show off for a pretty girl, the pilot’s best option was to fly her out over Lake Portage, head west to Hancock, Houghton’s twin city across the shipping canal, cross the swing bridge back to Houghton, and buzz the sturdy sandstone and brick buildings along Shelden Avenue, including the Houghton National Bank and the Masonic Temple. As a child, Nancy had stood on the sidewalk and looked up at Houghton’s four-story-high downtown buildings. To impress her, the pilot surely
asked her to point out her house and then promptly buzzed the rambling Victorian home at 253 College Avenue.

A couple of rolls—one to the left and one to the right—followed by some over-and-under loops were stock thrills barn-
stormers executed for first-timers. If the pilot thought these would turn her green, he was wrong. When they landed, Nancy had stars in her eyes. She was hooked. Another five dollars took her up for a second spin. When she was out of money, reluctantly she climbed out of the airplane. She wanted more. At dinner that evening, she informed her parents that she wanted to learn to fly. Flying, she said, was a lot more interesting and worthwhile than going to school.

This statement did not sit well with her mother, according to Nancy’s daughters, but her father saved the day. Why should one preclude the other? he wisely asked. Why couldn’t she learn to fly and go to school?

Nancy had an adventuresome streak that led her, on occasion, to defy her mother’s admonition that “nice young ladies don’t do such things.” Nancy and her father struck a bargain. He would allow the flying lessons she so desperately wanted, but she must return to boarding school in September.

What must Dr. Harkness have seen in his daughter’s eyes that made him give in so easily? Had he seen or suspected the mettle, the fire inside this lovely girl child of his? Certainly most fathers of that period didn’t “look” for attributes of willfulness in their children—attitudes that would make them stand out in a crowd, particularly their daughters. Could he possibly have envisioned the alteration in the status of women his daughter would help bring about through her simple idea that became so practical in wartime when the need was so great?

Was he being contrary because Nancy’s mother tried to keep too tight a rein on her?

Most likely, Dr. Harkness simply was being an indulgent father. Beautiful and charming, Nancy was the apple of his eye. “Grandfather indulged Mum’s enthusiasms. Grinny (Nancy’s mother) did not,” says daughter Marky.

What he told her when she left for her first lesson simply was “do it well or not at all.” Throughout the rest of his life, he kept a scrapbook of his precocious daughter’s aviation exploits. Throughout the rest of her life, Nancy followed those seven words of advice from her father.4
Reporters frequently asked Nancy to tell them why and how she learned to fly. “I have no idea what made me catch the flying bug. A ride in a barnstorming Fleet was my undoing and from then on I knew what I wanted. Fortunately, my parents were indulgent,” she wrote about her first flight. “I persuaded my family to let me take lessons in a rather broken down [biplane] that one of the barnstormers imported from parts unknown to teach me in.”

On August 26, 1930, Nancy climbed into the tandem two-seater, single-engine Kinner Fleet biplane to take her first lesson. Her instructor was Jimmy Hansen of Upper Peninsula Airways. He was all of two years older than Nancy.

Surely Dr. Harkness had a long talk with Jimmy about his flying training and experience—and possibly his intentions—and then they agreed on the terms of Nancy’s flight instruction, provided Jimmy found a suitable airplane. The eighteen-year-old instructor, like most men who met Nancy Harkness, was captivated when she climbed into his airplane and most likely fell head-over-heels in love the minute she exhibited a fascination with him and what he could do with an airplane.

“I wanted to fly right off, and I just about did,” Nancy later told a reporter. “I’m no supergenius, you understand, but I concentrated hard and I learned fast. It was a darn nice plane I started with—a Fleet. I soloed after only five hours training. That kind of thing is not legal now.” Nancy actually soloed on August 31 with only four hours and thirty minutes of flying time in her logbook.

“It was a classic example of the blind leading the blind when I soloed. He [Jimmy] had a brand new license and I was his first student ... but we made it. It was wonderful fun and quite routine at the time. I don’t think he knew what made the plane stay in the air. At least he never told me. My instructions were just to ‘keep up the flying speed.’”

On September 4, Nancy and Jimmy flew to Escanaba, another city in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula—an hour and forty-minute flight over and an hour and thirty minutes back. It was her first dual cross-country. By September 10, 1930, she had
earned the hours necessary for her private pilot’s license. James S. Hansen signed her logbook noting “13 hours 25 minutes dual instruction and 9 hours 40 minutes solo time” by his student. He also wrote on the front of her Pilots Log:

To Nancy  
With best wishes for Happy Landings  
Jimmy

“Our paths were to cross again during the war. He was ferrying planes and was later killed because of a malfunction.”

Early in November 1930, accompanied by her mother, Nancy went to Chicago to take her examination for her private pilots license and Milwaukee for her flight test. She received a letter from the Department of Commerce, Aeronautics Branch, Washington, D.C., dated November 7, 1930. It said: “Dear Madam:
You have completed the tests and examinations required by the Air Commerce Regulations for a Private Pilots License.”

Nancy was a boarding student at Milton Academy, a girls’ prep school in Milton, Massachusetts, outside Boston, but by the time she returned mid-September 1930, she mainly had flying on her mind. Her “book learning” that academic year was to be overshadowed by the realities of flight that she learned in two close calls.

She didn’t waste any time getting in the air once she had returned to Milton. “I was still just sixteen when I took off on my first cross-country—from Boston to Poughkeepsie. I had two friends along and all our luggage. We were on our way from Milton to Vassar College to visit friends. In the first place, the ship was far too large and complicated for my fifteen solo hours. Once in the air, I realized I had never used an aircraft compass before. I couldn’t read it! Our luggage was in the right seat beside me. My two passengers were sitting in the back. They had no idea how inadequate and frightened I suddenly felt.

“I noticed ugly clouds coming from the west and they were moving fast. I couldn’t really see that well. I flew lower and lower in an effort to see out. With that, the oil gauge broke and smeared black stuff all over the windscreen. That meant I had no visibility at all to the front. I had to hang my head out the open side window. My inflamed imagination convinced me the motor was about to stop. I picked out a field that looked smooth—it was winter, so not much vegetation—and I landed. Lucky for me and my passengers, we and the ship were still intact.

“It taught me a great deal in a short time, and ended happily, but due to age and inexperience seemed tenser than any later experience.”

Her second close call wasn’t long in coming.

One Sunday afternoon, she was flying with her brother, Bob, and he dared her to buzz the neighboring boys’ prep school. She flew low down the quadrangle and tried to pull up at the far end to avoid hitting the chapel. Nancy still hadn’t learned the laws of physics. She didn’t realize that though you pull up, the plane
doesn’t immediately go up. She nearly hit the bell tower and did
rattle some slates loose so they fell off the roof.

Someone got the tail number of the airplane and called the
airport. Two local boys, the Fuller brothers, were known for
such stunts. The irate headmaster of the boys’ academy rang the
airport manager. “Which one of those Fuller boys just buzzed
the school?” The manager dutifully answered that the pilot of
the single-engine Kinner Kitty Hawk that afternoon was Miss
Nancy Harkness.

Bob drove her back to school. When she walked in the door
at her residence hall, the headmistress, the housemistress, and
two members of the board of trustees were waiting for her. Her
brother took one look and bolted, leaving her to make the ex-
planations by herself.

But the school had no rules about flying. Students couldn’t
drive cars, but nothing said they couldn’t fly. Nancy wasn’t sus-
pended; rather she was severely reprimanded and told to stay
out of airplanes for the remainder of the semester.

“I attended Milton in the late ’60s,” Nancy’s youngest daugh-
ter, Allie, relates. “Nancy Harkness was still a legend at Milton.
And I ended up rooming with Emily Fuller, daughter of one of
the Fuller boys!”

That same spring, Bob Harkness took his sister by East Bos-
ton Airport to meet Crocker Snow, a well-known Boston pilot
who would be one of the men responsible for the B-29’s prowess
in the last year of World War II.

“She was a rosy-cheeked teenager, appropriately attired in rid-
ing breeches and boots,” Snow writes in his autobiography. Her
brother “explained that she was a student at Milton Academy
and had already taken flying lessons in Houghton, Michigan. He
asked if I would give her a check ride and see what I thought.

“The note in my logbook said: ‘Check-out with 300 foot ceil-
ing. Awful job keeping her from climbing into the soup. She
ought to make a good pilot if the conditions under which she
learned have any bearing. All dual and 14 hours solo in 10
days. Warner Fleet with prop held together with tacks.’” Then
he adds: “She became an accomplished, skillful pilot, with a real sense of the air.”

Other than her penchant for flying, Nancy was a typical, if imaginative, teenager while attending Milton. One Sunday afternoon, while a white glove tea was in progress for the seniors, Nancy and a fellow student conspired to play a trick aimed at disrupting the very proper affair. The two of them moved some street signs and managed to reroute campus traffic through the circle in front of the headmistress’s house where the tea was being held.

“Mum is a descendant of Benjamin Lincoln, who took Cornwallis’s sword at Yorktown,” the girls relate. “Her great aunts in Boston were very proud of this heritage, and of belonging to the DAR. Mum tried to burst their bubble. She had studied history at Milton and proceeded to tell them he was a bumbling drunk who couldn’t get anything right. Grinny, Mum’s mother, was mortified!”

Discovering flight that summer of her sixteenth year gave Nancy direction that would last a lifetime and set her feet on a path utterly different from the one her strait-laced mother would have chosen for her. However eldest daughter, Hannah, believes Nancy’s mother vicariously enjoyed and secretly envied her daughter’s adventurous spirit.

One of Nancy’s school notebooks survives from her senior year at Milton. Doodled on the front are pictures of airplanes and the words “Stearman” and “Aviation.” She penciled in the initials of her friends—and likely a boyfriend or two—as well as teenage expressions like Hyper! Super! Ultra! Positively bleak! Fed Up! Be careful with those eyes! The words “Squantum” and “Forced Landing” are explained by an April 16, 1931, entry found in her logbook and in a two-inch newspaper article. Squantum was a local naval base.

When the motor of her plane failed several hundred feet above the Squantum airport, Miss Nancy Hark-
ness was sent to earth in a forced landing. Neither she nor her companion, Joseph H. Choate, 3rd, Harvard freshman, was injured. The pair had taken off from East Boston airport with Miss Harkness as pilot. Young Choate learned to fly last summer.12

During 1930–1931, Nancy’s senior year at Milton, her English teacher wrote the following observations on her report card. After the first marking period: “She is beginning to do her best work.” The comment for the second period was: “Her work is showing increasingly a deeper, more mature interest and grasp. She must work now for more variety in composition subjects.” Flight now dominated everything she wrote.

“Her work is very good. She must avoid sweeping statements, which because they are true only in part convey a false impression.” The teacher’s comments following the third marking period show the budding iconoclast at work. At this point, Nancy was very much her father’s daughter. And finally, the observation: “Her [Nancy’s] incisive thinking, keen appreciation and critical ability have made her work very commendable.”

Comments from her French, history, and zoology teachers are similar. They suggest that Nancy did better in daily work than on exams and, for this reason, indicate mild concern as she approached the dreaded College Boards, required for admission to the northeast’s renowned women’s colleges. She passed and was accepted at Vassar.

Comments by her physical education teacher indicate a lack of interest in team sports. She played neither soccer nor field hockey. Nancy was not competitive. She liked dancing better. Under posture, the teacher noted that she carried her shoulders high—as if braced to meet whatever the world threw at her.13 Nancy was a perfectionist, says Marky. She also suffered from bouts with depression, a tendency that resurfaced periodically throughout her life.

Nancy and a Milton classmate from Chicago were known for their prickly pride in being the lone westerners amid New Englanders. At Christmastime, when they sang “We Three Kings of
Orient Are,” she and the other girl would accentuate the word “west” on the line “WESTward leading, still proceeding,” so that all around knew exactly in which direction their loyalties lay.

In the fall of 1931, Nancy entered Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, as a freshman. She had her eye on a career in education and declared French and French history as her majors. But she also had her eyes on the skies and, with parental permission in spite of the school’s concern over the precedent, continued her flying—on weekends. With the help of Jack Ray, the assistant manager of the Poughkeepsie Airport and the chief instructor for Gyro Flyers Ltd., she worked toward her limited commercial license. She also hopped passengers to earn money to pay for her flying lessons.

Then in April 1932, Nancy had one more encounter with fate in an airplane. A superstitious person would say it was the magic number three. This time she was not the pilot-in-command, but a flight student working toward her commercial license. John Miller, a well-known flyer and a friend of Jack’s, was her instructor that day. They were flying Jack’s Great Lakes two-seater, single-engine trainer airplane.

An article in the April 5, 1932, Poughkeepsie newspaper says that Miller cut his motor, prepared to give it the gun before landing, but the motor failed to respond and they hit a tree about fifteen feet below the tops of the branches. The plane tipped backward and fell about thirty feet, crashing upside down across the stone wall at the edge of the field. The motor was torn loose from the craft and landed in the field east of the Vassar Road.

Miss Nancy Harkness “narrowly escaped death when their plane crashed into a tree.” Miller’s head struck the instrument panel. He was generally bruised and shaken and lost a tooth.14 In truth, Nancy later told her daughters, he was badly cut about the face and lost his left eye.

Nancy, apparently uninjured, got out first. Stunned and just not thinking, she unfastened her seatbelt and, since they were upside down, fell from the airplane hitting her head on the stone wall below. Miller then extricated himself and followed her down
a few seconds later. He was taken to the local hospital. In light of his serious injuries, no one realized Nancy, too, was hurt and she was simply taken back to Vassar. After that, she was plagued with serious headaches, which everyone, including her physician father, thought were brought on by a concussion. Not long after that incident, the gray streak began to creep into her hair.

“John cracked Great Lakes-303Y,” Nancy wrote in her log-book. Jack and his chief mechanic told reporters at the scene that the airplane could be repaired, and it was, because Nancy was back flying it the following fall.

Nancy and Jack Ray remained lifelong friends and correspondents. In a letter dated October 16, 1971, Nancy wrote:

Dear Jack: I’m awfully sorry about your mother’s death—she was a dear person and I know you’ll miss her very much. I was touched that she kept my picture on her dresser all those years. 1931 was a long time ago, wasn’t it?

On March 14, 1974, she wrote:

John Miller’s letter was priceless—I could almost hear him talking. No lack of confidence there, and never was. Remember what he said just before flying me in your dear Great Lakes that grim day? “Come on, let me show you how we fly in the Marine Corps.” It took me a long time to have faith in Marine pilots after that one.15

Nancy emerged from three youthful brushes with disaster a more cautious student of flying. Throughout a flying career that lasted forty years, never again would she overestimate her flying skills. She had done it twice herself and then witnessed what could happen even to an experienced pilot, one who was a qualified instructor. Nancy trained herself to be a careful and deliberate pilot. She established her own methodical approach to flying. She made written checklists for her preflights and paid close attention to the details of flight, traits that would pay off several years later when she was ferrying new aircraft as well as
Learning to Fly

shot-up candidates for the airplane graveyard cross-country for the Army.

Nancy acquired her limited commercial license on April 25, 1932, at New York’s Roosevelt Field, three weeks after the Great Lakes crack up. She was eighteen. She did it in yet another of Jack Ray’s Great Lakes trainers. By then, she had eighty-seven hours to her credit.

The story of her newly won license, accompanied by a winsome photo, went out on the wire services and newspapers around the country, including one in far away Honolulu, carried the story about “the Flying Freshman” of Vassar. Her father collected and carefully pasted all the clippings sent to him into a black-paged scrapbook that Nancy’s daughters still have.

The clips contain a variety of tidbits about Nancy and her flying. Several papers proclaimed that she was one of but fifty-six women in the United States holding a commercial license. When she announced that, next, she was going for her transport license, reporters came up with the fact that as of April 1932, only forty-two American women pilots held a transport rating. One article quotes Jack Ray, her instructor: “Miss Harkness is
one of the few women pilots in the country who is earnestly striving to make accomplishments in the air. She is sincere and hopes to make a professional flier.”

A longer article appeared later in *Sportsman Pilot Magazine*, and bears no byline. “What does Vassar think about flying students?” the reporter asked her.

“They require your parents’ written consent, but once you have it, they are very good about it.” And she laughed about her brother’s recent visit when he tried to land a big six-passenger Travel Air at the Poughkeepsie Airport. He and the five friends flying with him had to make an emergency landing at another airport. Nancy then flew there and escorted the party back to the local field that *Sportsman Pilot* described as “a tiny pocket-handkerchief of a place.” The piece continued:

It’s no secret, however, that demonstrating aircraft is to be her career. She has no illusions about her own ability; she says she knows too many good pilots. But she thinks being a girl will help. By which she doesn’t mean that she will be coquettish about the job. The idea is that a woman demonstrator is the ideal one because people have a feeling if a woman can do things with a plane, most anyone can. That’s far from being the truth. But a woman demonstrator is a selling point nevertheless.

After that, Nancy set her sights on her transport license and began accruing the requisite two hundred hours.

She flew that summer in Houghton, returned to Vassar for fall semester in 1932 and again flew weekends, often with Jack. But her father was now concerned about her frequent headaches. Rather than letting her return to Vassar for the spring 1933 semester, he kept her home to let her recover her equilibrium. He blamed the concussion sustained in the fall from Jack Ray’s Great Lakes trainer the previous spring.

Nancy may have been recuperating, but she didn’t let that slow her down. She used the time to work on her transport license and to get in a lot of flying. And some of that flying was social as well as building time. Nancy’s good friend and fel-
low pilot Alice Hirschman lived in the Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe Park and Nancy visited Alice on several occasions between February and August 1933. She and Alice, in fact, spent Nancy's nineteenth birthday flying two Kinner Birds from Gratiot Airport (later Detroit City Airport) to Selfridge Field in neighboring Macomb County for lunch. They repeated that pattern for several days. On occasion, Alice's future husband, Johnny Hammond, and some of his friends joined them.¹⁸

A photograph taken of Nancy and Alice ran in one of the Detroit papers during Nancy's visit. Alice—the daughter of eminent Grosse Pointe physician, Dr. Louis J. Hirschman—perches on the arm of an easy chair in which Nancy is seated, legs crossed. Both are dressed in stylish dark wool dresses: Alice's with a diamond-patterned scarf at the neck, Nancy's with cowl neckline. The caption reads: “Both have limited commercial licenses. They have been spending every afternoon in their airplanes and today plan to make a trip, each taking a plane, to all the airports on the surrounding countryside.”¹⁹

Not the usual Society Section fodder!

On August 13, 1933, Nancy logged her two hundredth hour and passed the necessary written tests for her transport license. She was not yet twenty. She returned to Vassar for fall semester.

When interviewed about obtaining her transport license, she told the reporter that she was interested in starting a student flying club at the college. Before she took the spring semester off, she had found some kindred spirits and inspired at least three other students to pursue flying. All began taking instruction from Jack Ray.²⁰

Nancy did succeed in starting an aviation club at Vassar. The idea sprouted wings and spread to other eastern women's colleges.

On January 3, 1934, Nancy applied for membership in the Ninety-Nines, the international organization for women pilots founded by Amelia Earhart and several other women who later became Nancy's friends. She indicated 225 hours flown in the following airplanes: Fleet, Stearman, Waco, Great Lakes,
Aeronca, Bird, and Kitty Hawk. Did she own an airplane? “No.” The initiation fee is noted as $1 and the annual dues are $2.50, which included a subscription to the Ninety Nines monthly newsletter.21

Beyond the hallowed halls of Vassar, other things were happening that would have a dramatic impact on Nancy’s life.

The stock market crash the fall of 1929 had brought about the Great Depression. By 1933 it had reached dire proportions with an estimated sixteen million people out of work: one third of the labor force. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, elected president in November 1932, took office March 4, 1933, and immediately set upon his “First Hundred Days,” during which he persuaded Congress to pass legislation creating the “New Deal” to provide for the general welfare of the U.S. populace.

Eventually, Nancy would benefit from some of this social legislation, but, by late 1933, things looked bleak for the Harkness family. Nancy’s father was not as astute at handling money as he was at handling his daughter or his medical career. He had not invested well. Dr. Harkness could not afford to send his daughter back for the 1934 spring semester, so she dropped out of Vassar at the end of the fall semester in January. Nancy once told a friend that she left school because “It occurred to me that the people of the world were making history not studying it, and the airplane was in the very center of it all.” But as was true for so many others at that time, lack of money was the real culprit.