

Jackie Cochran: A Record-Setting Pilot and Entrepreneur

An entrepreneur and exceptional pilot, Jacqueline “Jackie” Cochran set records unparalleled by any pilot, male or female.

Cochran was born Bessie Lee Pittman and grew up poor in the panhandle of Florida. Her experience working in a local beautician’s salon filled her with dreams of creating her own line of cosmetics. In 1929, she moved to New York City, got a job in an upscale salon, and gained a significant and loyal clientele. In 1932, Cochran met millionaire Floyd Bostwick Odlum, who encouraged her to get her pilot’s license in order to more easily travel to build and maintain her cosmetics business.



Cochran took his advice and earned her pilot’s license after three weeks of instruction. She then attended a California flight school to further develop her flying skills. Cochran began participating in aviation competitions but still pursued her entrepreneurial aspirations, launching her cosmetics company in 1935.

In 1937, Cochran began to enjoy great successes in flight and set several records. At the start of World War II, she joined the “Wings for Britain” effort and helped deliver aircraft from the U.S. to Britain. She made history as the first woman to fly a bomber across the Atlantic Ocean. Cochran volunteered her services to Britain’s Royal Air Force and lobbied the U.S. government to allow female pilots to assist in the war effort.

Cochran participated in the U.S.’s programs for female pilots when they were created and led the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), where she supervised the training of thousands of female pilots. Near the end of the war, Cochran worked as a news correspondent. In that capacity, she witnessed General Tomoyuki Yamashita’s surrender and was the first woman to enter Japan after the war. Cochran also received accolades for her entrepreneurial efforts. She was chosen by the Boston Chamber of Commerce in 1951 as one of the 25 outstanding businesswomen in America and selected by the Associated Press as the “Woman of the Year in Business” in both 1953 and 1954.

Cochran continued setting records in the 1960s, receiving more than 200 awards and trophies and setting more speed and altitude records during her lifetime than any other pilot. A heart condition finally slowed Cochran down in the 1970s. She died in 1980.

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Air Force Office of Small & Disadvantaged Business Utilization

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