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Article Summary: A brief biography of Nebraska's famous flyer, one of the most trusted women pilots of the Army Ferry Command

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EVELYN AND HER MASCOT

Evelyn Sharp, Pilot From Ord

Evelyn Sharp! Beautiful and beloved, eager, upward-striving child — Nebraska's famous flyer at sixteen. None who knew her in her home at Ord can ever forget the tireless labor, the one-pointed devotion with which she struggled toward her goal.

She was trained by Jack Jeffords, transport pilot for Pan-American Airlines in Alaska, who called her a natural-born flyer. That was in February 1935. Off and on through the year she took lessons, and on March 4, 1936, soloed for the first time. Born October 1, 1919, she was the youngest woman in the United States to gain a commercial pilot's license, after a grueling Government examination. In her barnstorming days, helping to pay for the plane Ord business men had bought for her, she carried five thousand passengers with never an accident. She was the only woman in the United States to be licensed as an air-mail pilot, flew the first air mail into Ord, and her picture was on the special cachet attached to the first air-mail flight covers.

It was the height of Evelyn's ambition to pilot a transport ship, and she met every requirement for that license except to become a man with eight years of experience behind her. She made a wonderful record of over four thousand flying hours. She had the warm friendship of Tex Rankin, head of an aeronautical academy in California (whose son is also "crazy about the P-38"), and in stunt flying she carried parachute jumpers trained by him. His last letter to her was dated February 26, 1944:

It astounds me to learn that a mere slip of a girl like you is flying the Army's newest and fastest airplanes, and here I am not even knowing how to taxi one of them! In fact, I often go two months at a time without even flying a Primary Trainer. When the war is over you will have to teach a lot of people like me to fly all over again.

Your swell build-up about the fine flying and landing qualities of the A-20 does not change my opinion about it one particle. I still think it takes a mighty good pilot to fly any of this new, fast Army equipment.

Yet she was the first ever to ferry that treacherous A-20

(known as "the man-killer") from coast to coast, and had delivered twelve of them. She had shown amazing skill — say her instructors — in handling various classes of planes and had flown eight distinct types, but the P-38 that carried her to her death was the one she loved most.

When General Arnold asked for fifty of the nation's best women pilots she enlisted, was transferred to Long Beach in February 1943, was kept busy ferrying bombers from factory to demanding points in the United States and Canada, and soon became commanding officer of her squadron. Only the barrier of sex kept her from ranking among the most daring pilots of the AAF. She was one of three women in this country to be checked as proficient in flying many different types of planes and given Army instrument cards. She was one of the most trusted women pilots of the Army Ferry Command.

And it was as such a trusted pilot, flying the crack fighter twin-fuselage plane, that she crashed near the Harrisburg Airport only a few minutes (700 feet) after leaving the field on April 3, 1944. The motor faltered, dropped abruptly, and she was thrown out headlong. Yet she did not let her plane dive but brought it to a pancake standstill by a miracle of clever flying. The little girl from Valley County had only 114 pounds to use in her last battle. It was not enough.

That day, under Civil Service, Evelyn had but three more trips to make before she would have received her Fifth Rating, the highest offered to women. She was to ferry an A-20 to Great Falls and take two B-17s out, when the required number of types, planes and trips would entitle her to higher rank and she would have been in the Army with what is called a master's degree.

And only the fact that she had not been inducted into the Army, and officials were still quibbling over the point of affording Army protection to the brave young women of the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, kept her from giving to her parents through death the personal protection she was giving so eagerly in life. In the bitter years of the Great Depression they had scraped every dollar from the bottom of the barrel to complete her education and maintain her until she was on her own feet. The \$10,000 insurance policy that she was denied would have taken care of them in comfort; as it is, they get but a few hundred and that is the end.

"Mom and I feel that we are all through, for at our age what is left? I am so distracted I can't hold my thoughts together as I should to tell you of her wonderfulness," wrote the father's quavering hand, weak with age and the strain of a serious operation.

But Evelyn was more than a pilot. She was a winsome girl; she became a splendid woman. She did not lean upon liquors, or any brand of cigarettes, for her energy and daring. She did not seek night-clubs for amusement, but the mountains and their valleys where she loved to wander with Scotty at her side; the lakes where she loved to swim and skate, where she taught swimming to scores of boys and girls. She loved to cook and to sew: she designed and made many of her own garments. "She has a charming, low-pitched voice and poised, unruffled manner," wrote James Running for the *Daily Argus-Leader* of Sioux Falls. "The sun has given her a deep tan and freckled her nose. She is an expert swimmer and tennis player, and loves to dance and ride horseback—though she finds little time for any of them with six full days a week of instructing. She also bowls, hikes and hunts: she is a crack shot. In High School she was a better-than-average student, sang in the Glee Club; later played piano and saxophone." She graduated from Ord High in 1937 as the best girl athlete in the school's history.

The man at Gate 4 told me, "Sorry sir. We've had to cancel your passage on the flight. There's a priority on your seat." I looked at him in dismay. "But I've got to get to Washington!" . . . Yet in my disappointment I couldn't help asking who was getting my seat.

"The lady, sir."

She was a girl in a trim gray uniform with silver wings. . . . A bulky fur-lined coat hung over her arm. When she lifted her face I saw she was tired—desperately tired. She looked as if she hadn't slept in days. . . .

Well, I'm back in New York. It's raining. I can hear a plane overhead, but when I look up from the window I can't see it. It's lost in the clouds.

It's quite possible that somewhere up there, alone in the open cockpit of a training plane she is delivering, a girl is shivering in the wet wind, knowing she'll have to be alone and cold for another seven or eight hours. She's flying up there, a mile above the earth, so that some man may be released to fight for his country.

—Oscar Schisgall, in "The Girls Deliver the Goods." (Magazine article in Evelyn's scrapbook.)