

DAKOTA IMAGES

On 30 August 1943, one of the first South Dakota women to die in the line of duty during World War II was killed when her military airplane crashed near Big Springs, Texas. At the time of her death, Helen Anderson Severson was in training to become a pilot in the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program of the Army Air Forces.

Helen Josephine Anderson was born 2 November 1918 near Marvin, South Dakota. She attended grade school in Salem, Unityville, and Howard and graduated as class valedictorian from Summit High School in 1936. The following year, she moved to Brookings, where she worked for the State Planning Board until entering South Dakota State College. During the summer between her junior and senior years, she pursued a long-held ambition and took a Civil Aeronautics Association course in flying at the Brookings airport. Anderson graduated from college with honors in 1940, earning a bachelor's degree in political science. She then attended the University of Illinois, where she earned a master's degree in library science in 1942.

Helen Anderson married Lt. Robert A. Severson at Fort Benning, Georgia, on 4 September 1942. When her husband was sent overseas for military duty, she returned to Illinois and co-managed the Illini Airport at Urbana. While there, she joined the Civil Air Patrol and continued her flight training.

Severson was accepted into the WASP program on 24 March 1943 and reported for duty the next month at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. The four-month WASP curriculum trained female pilots to ferry military aircraft to various points throughout the United States, freeing up men for combat duty. Shortly before her death, Severson and her classmates in the controversial program were featured in the 19 July 1943 issue of *Life* magazine.

The twenty-four-year-old Severson had nearly completed her training at the time the aircraft she was piloting crashed, also killing her instructor and another classmate. The airplane was later determined to have gone down because of structural failure. Jacqueline Cochran, director of the WASP program, awarded Severson's silver WASP wings posthumously to her parents. Severson's husband died in combat in Germany shortly after her death.

—Katherine J. Mehrer



Helen Anderson Severson

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