



# A Flying Start

Elizabeth Moody Wagner '37 helped pioneer women in aviation during

BY WILLIAM A. BOWDEN

Elizabeth Moody Wagner '37 was on a training flight near Danville, Ky., in her small, single-engine airplane on a summer morning in 1943 when her engine suddenly stopped. The plane had no self-starter—you started it by having someone stand in front of the plane and spin the propeller, obviously not an option at 3,000 feet.

Landing without power—a “dead-stick” landing in aviation parlance—had been part of her pilot training, but Wagner didn’t relish the idea of putting that skill to use so soon.

“I first tried flying as fast as I could straight down,” she recalled, a maneuver that sometimes spins the prop fast enough to restart the engine. No luck.

So, she pulled the plane back up and began to scour the landscape for a farmer’s field or a deserted road. Keeping the aircraft in a steady, silent, slowly descending glide, she set it safely down in a farmer’s field and walked away from a potential disaster with no damage to herself, the air cadet she was instructing, or the aircraft.

It takes courage and good nerves to land a powerless airplane, attributes that Wagner has never lacked. They got her into an experimental pilot training program during World War II that made her

one of the relatively few women aviators of her day and served her well as she helped to train male air cadets for service overseas.

## ***A dashing appearance***

Wagner, a member of the Transylvania Board of Trustees since 1981, lives in Lexington with her second husband, Arlyn O. Wagner. At 87, her resemblance to the dashing young woman in a flight suit from so many years ago is remarkably strong, as are her disposition and her memories of those adventurous times.

When the federal government created the Civilian Pilot Training Program in 1942, Wagner was eager to sign on. Her first husband, Nat Hall, had purchased a small airplane that they kept in a barn on Lexington’s Nicholasville Road in open countryside that is now the site of a K-Mart store. His flat feet kept him out of the Army, so he wanted to become a flight instructor.

“As long as we had a plane, I thought I ought to learn to fly,” said Wagner.

Wagner was accepted into the CPT program and took her initial training at Transylvania. Transy, like many colleges and universities across the country, was giving up some of its residence hall and classroom facilities for military training and educa-

tional purposes.

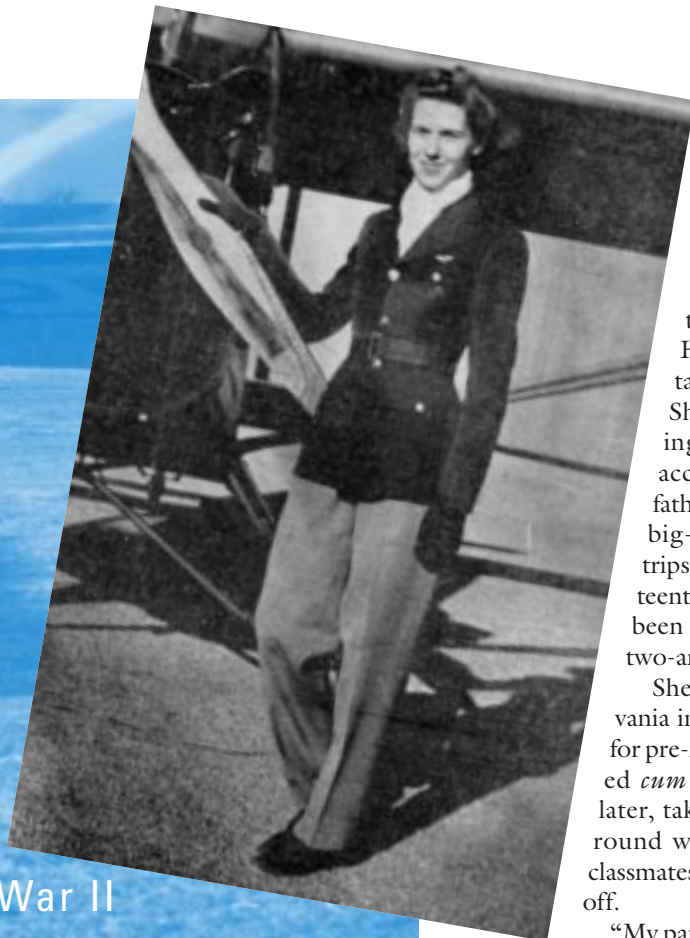
After her Transy schooling in ground courses such as navigation, meteorology, and mechanics, Wagner’s adventure really began. In the fall of 1942 she was accepted into a highly selective experimental training program created by the Tennessee Bureau of Aeronautics to see if 10 hand-picked women could make capable instructors for male Army and Navy air cadets. Six of the trainee slots went to Tennessee women, while Wagner was one of four out-of-staters chosen from 220 applicants.

This was all in the context of a nation suddenly at war after Pearl Harbor, when men were enlisting or being called up through selective service for the war effort, and women were asked to do a variety of jobs previously handled mostly by men. The need in aviation was great—the military wanted to train approximately 200,000 men to be pilots in a very short time.

Wagner proved to be an able pilot with a knack for instructing. She graduated from the 12-week flight instructor training program in Nashville in February 1943, but not before having her scariest adventure in an airplane.

“I had been out too long one afternoon flying around Nashville and got lost—I just could not find that little old

## World War II



■ Elizabeth Moody Wagner and her first husband, Nat Hall, were living in Lexington in 1942 when they posed in front of the airplane they had recently purchased. Inset, Wagner cuts a dashing figure in her flight instructor's uniform while undergoing training in Nashville.

airport on the Gillespie River," Wagner recalled. "The airfield had no lights—we weren't supposed to be flying at night. It was almost dark when I finally found it. They were all glad to see me get back in. That's the most scared I've ever been."

Wagner was given an 18-month assignment to train air cadets stationed at Centre College in Danville, flying out of Junction City Airport.

"I had 10 students and we taught six hours a day, even on weekends a lot of times," she said.

Yet another nerve-racking experience awaited her during this instructor's stint. She was teaching a cadet how to pull out of a spin when he "froze" on the stick. She was seated in front of the cadet, using tandem controls that were mechanically linked.

"I had a terrible time. I had to unbuckle in the middle of a spin and turn around and hit him to get him to let go of the stick. It was the grace of God that got him off of it. It was very scary."

### A life of adventure

Wagner's life already had a fair amount of adventure in it long before her war-time flying experiences. She was born in India to Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) missionary parents and was educated in a

private school in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains close to Nepal. She grew up speaking Hindustani and accompanied her father and brothers on big-game hunting trips. Before her eighteenth birthday she had been around the world two-and-a-half times.

She came to Transylvania in 1934, signed on for pre-med, and graduated *cum laude* three years later, taking courses year-round while many of her classmates took the summer off.

"My parents were in India and I had no place to go," she said. "It was a month by ship from New York to Bombay, so I couldn't possibly go home for the summer."

Nat Hall, a banker she had met through her part-time job at the YWCA cafeteria, proposed to her during her senior year,

and they were married on her Transy graduation day—May 31, 1937.

"In February he asked me to marry him, and I said, 'I wouldn't marry you a day before I graduate.' He went down and had the rings engraved with my graduation date, so we had to get married that afternoon. I graduated at 10 in the morning and got married at 3 in the afternoon."

After her war-time adventures, she taught flying at Lexington's Cool Meadows airport on Newtown Pike, the predecessor to Bluegrass Field. She continued as a flight instructor until 1956, though the birth of her two sons—Nat Berry Hall Jr. in 1949 and Ewing M. Hall in 1951—prompted her to spend more time raising her family.

Hall died in 1956. In 1958 she married Arlyn Wagner, a widower and (now retired) executive with Brock-McVey Electrical Supply Company.

Over the years, Wagner became involved in a plethora of civic activities and organizations, including United Way of the Bluegrass, Girl Scouts, the International Book Program, the Florence Crittenton Home, Planned Parenthood, and the Living Arts and Science Center, among others.

A long-time member of the Junior League of Lexington, Wagner was instrumental in acquiring the Bodley-Bullock House in Gratz Park for the league's headquarters. She is a past president (twice) of the Bluegrass Trust for Historic Preservation, which honored her with its John Wesley Hunt Award in 1991.

Transylvania awarded her the Morrison Medallion, which is given to alums for outstanding service to the University, in 1981. In 1992 she received the Lexington Optimist Cup award.

One of the ways Wagner stays active is by volunteering as a docent at the Hunt-Morgan House, explaining the history of the antebellum home in Gratz Park. She also attends Transy board and committee meetings. "I enjoy that because it lets me keep up on what's going on at Transy."

She has kept in touch over the years with a number of her classmates, who still know her as Moody, her maiden name.

"When somebody calls and asks for Moody, I know it's Transylvania." ■



■ Elizabeth Moody Wagner is pictured today in the garden at Lexington's Hunt-Morgan House, a historic home where she is a volunteer docent.