



# Who was Cornelia Fort?

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A True Distinguished Alumna  
7th grade English classes  
2017-2018

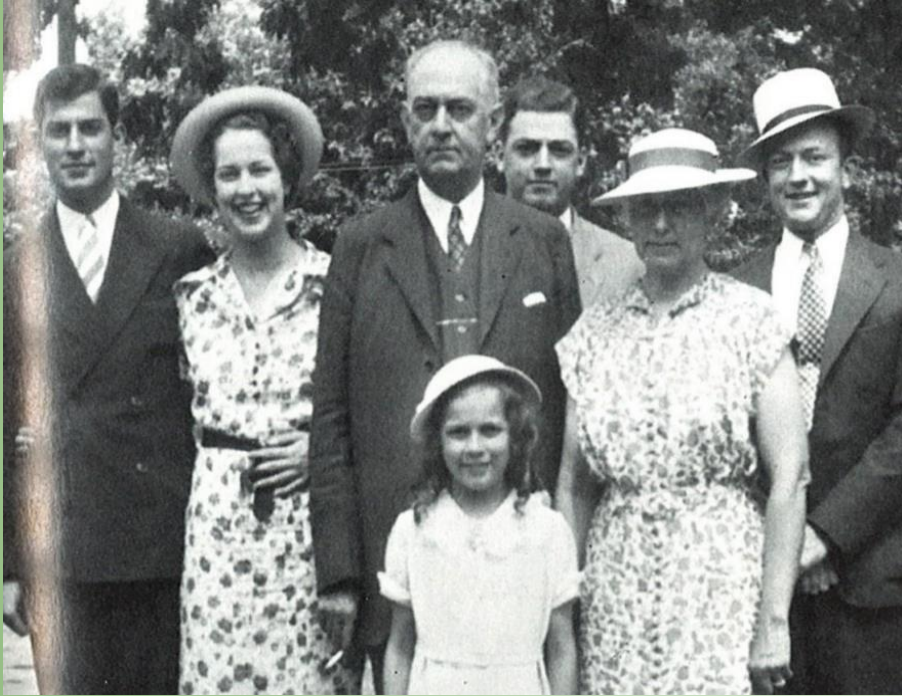


# 1: Growing Up at Fortland



Cornelia Fort was a wild child with a grand space to roam. Cornelia and her older brothers grew up on the 365-acre Fortland estate, a grand two-mile stretch of farmland along the Cumberland River in Nashville, Tennessee. Cornelia was a daring child, standing on the backs of horses, finding adventure wherever she could, and eventually going against her father's wishes not only when she attended ---- but also when she made the decision as an adult to fly. Cornelia's father, Dr. Rufus Elijah Fort, was a very respected doctor as well as an accomplished insurance company owner. Dr. Fort had no tolerance for flying because of the extreme peril that the pilots were put in. Because of this intolerance, he made all his children take an oath never to fly, except for his daughter, mostly because Dr. Fort never dreamed that a woman would.

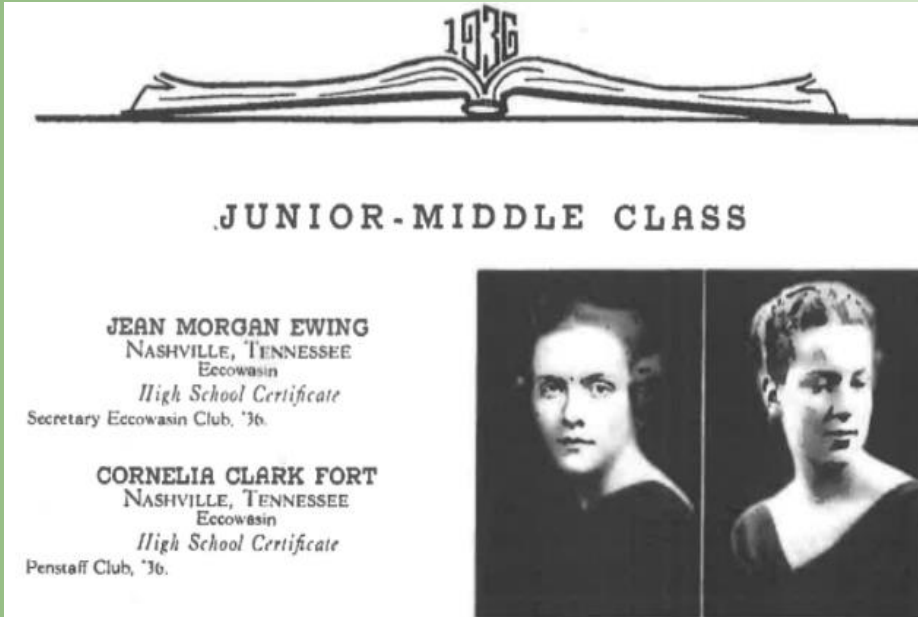
## 2: The two sides of Cornelia Fort



There were two sides to Cornelia Fort, one of which we see here in this posed photograph of Cornelia with her family in Sewanee, Tennessee. Proper and sophisticated, Cornelia is shown dressed in a long, flowered dress with her arm around her brother. Her hair is styled tamely under her hat, and every part of her says sophisticated and traditional.

Olivia Majors, Class of 2023

# 3: Turbulent Teenage Years



While Cornelia graduated from Ward-Belmont as a part of the Class of 1936, her time at the school was not always easy. Academically, Cornelia graduated in the middle of her class, but she had a passion for writing and was a member of the Penstaff club, one of two writing clubs on campus. Cornelia was known for her quiet demeanor and love of a good laugh.

While Cornelia may not have distinguished herself in the classroom, she did in the sky. In 1942, an article was published in the *Ward-Belmont Hyphen*, the official school newspaper, speaking of a graduate who saw the attacks on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 from the air. That girl was Cornelia. While she was an accomplished pilot and now even an instructor giving flying lessons to men, on this morning, three of Cornelia's fellow flight instructors died in crashes. This gave her a rare perspective on America entering WWII.

Caroline Seehorn, Class of 2023

# 4: Cotillons and Cameras



The Fort Family was very wealthy, and they provided their children with nice clothing, good food, and much to Cornelia Fort's dismay, parties. In 1939, Cornelia Fort made her debut as a member of the Cotillion Club. Every girl's dream--nice dresses, flowers, and dancing--that is, every girl except Cornelia Fort. As a young woman Cornelia was less than happy with the idea of large parties in her honor. Details show that her parents had to bribe her even to attend the festivities. In this photo, it is not hard to notice that Cornelia is the only woman who is not smiling at the camera. Often characterized as a person who does not care much about her appearance or formal parties, Cornelia appears very tightly pinned, instead of the freer person she appears to be in other photos of the time. Cornelia Fort understood the wealth and position of her family, but she was not always comfortable with some of the expectations that accompanied them.

Mary Meacham, Class of 2023

# 5: The Beginning of a Lifetime

Form 348  
Rev. 1-1-40

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
CIVIL AERONAUTICS AUTHORITY  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

**GROUND INSTRUCTOR**  
CERIFICATE NO. **79516-41**

This certifies that **CORNELIA CLARK FORT** is properly qualified  
and is physically able to perform the duties of **GROUND INSTRUCTOR**  
Address **Riverside Drive, Nashville, Tennessee**

| DATE OF BIRTH | WEIGHT     | HEIGHT       | HAIR         | EYES        | SEX           |
|---------------|------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|
| <b>2-5-19</b> | <b>150</b> | <b>5'10"</b> | <b>Brown</b> | <b>Grey</b> | <b>Female</b> |

THIS CERTIFICATE is of 60 days' duration and, unless the holder hereof is otherwise notified by the Authority within such period, shall continue in effect indefinitely thereafter, unless suspended or revoked by the Authority, except that it shall immediately expire (1) at the end of each **TWENTY FOUR** months' period after the date of issuance hereof if the holder of this certificate fails to secure an endorsement by an authorized Inspector of the Authority within the last 45 days of each such period, or (2) at any time an authorized Inspector of the Authority shall refuse to endorse this certificate after inspection or examination.

Endorsement Refused: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Issuance **August 5, 1941**  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_ By direction of the Authority: *O. C. LeBoutillier*  
Signature: **O. C. LeBoutillier**  
Inspector, Civil Aeronautics Authority Title: **Aeronautical Inspector**

This certificate is not valid unless there is attached hereto the appropriate Rating Record bearing the above number. Any alteration of this certificate is punishable by a fine of not exceeding \$1,000 or imprisonment not exceeding three years, or both.

(Over) Signature of Holder: *Cornelia Fort*

Cornelia Fort's career as a pilot started here with this license on August 5, 1941. World War 11 had been going on for two years and gender discrimination was alive and well, but this license qualified her to be a ground instructor. This license made it possible for a number of firsts: the first woman instructor at Nashville's first airport, one of the first five WAFS recruits, and sadly later, the first woman to lose her life in service to her country. This seemingly unimportant document is a crucial stepping stone on the path to her career and sacrifice.

Sarah Joffrion, Class of 2023

# 6: A Door Opened for Women



Cornelia Fort made history on March 10th, when she achieved her Instructor's rating and began teaching a fellow local flyer, Garland Pack. In this photo, Cornelia appears as a strong and confident woman and professional. In an edition of the *Nashville Aviation*, Miss Fort explained why she wanted to teach people how to fly, saying, "Women are needed in aviation and can be an important factor in the national defense program. "Women can do in this country what they have been doing in England... Every woman who flies releases a man to fight." Cornelia's view and accomplishments offer a different perspective from that of many people in this time period. With her accomplishments, Cornelia Fort opened a door for women into aviation all over America.

# 7: A Wonderful WAF



On September 12<sup>th</sup> 1942, Cornelia Fort was officially certified as a member of the WAFS, the Women's Auxiliary Flying Squadron. The WAFS was a group of female pilots who flew missions throughout the United State for the military. Some information on Cornelia's WAFS license include her date of birth, eye color, hair color, weight, and height. It also includes her signature and a photograph of her. In her photograph, Cornelia looked happy, proud, and confident, which also describes her as a person. Overall, the purpose of Cornelia Fort's WASF license was to show that she was a part of the WAFS, a very big accomplishment.



# 8: What So Proudly She Hailed...

## *At the twilight's last gleaming*

CORNELIA FORT

*Here is one of the most remarkable articles ever published—a personal story by the first woman pilot to die on war duty in American history. Shortly after she sent it to us, Miss Fort, twenty-four, of Nashville, Tennessee, was killed when the bomber she was piloting crashed in Texas. But her words here will live—as a moving account of why one woman joined the WAFS and as a testament to all American women who are helping keep America free*



The author . . . "all the luck I ever hope to have"

I KNEW I was going to join the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron before the organization was a reality, before it had a name, before it was anything but a radical idea in the minds of a few men who believed that women could fly airplanes. But I never knew it so surely as I did in Honolulu on December 7, 1941.

At dawn that morning I drove from Waikiki to the John Rodgers civilian airport right next to Pearl Harbor, where I was a civilian pilot instructor. Shortly after six-thirty I began landing and take-off practice with my regular student. Coming in just before the last landing, I looked casually around and saw a military plane coming directly toward me. I jerked the controls away from my student and jammed the throttle wide open to pull above the oncoming plane. He passed so close under us that our celluloid windows rattled violently and I looked down to see what kind of plane it was.

The painted red balls on the tops of the wings shone brightly in the sun. I looked again with complete and utter disbelief. Honolulu was familiar with the emblem of the Rising Sun on passenger ships but not on airplanes.

I looked quickly at Pearl Harbor and my spine tingled when I saw billowing black smoke. Still I thought hollowly it might be some kind of coincidence or maneuvers, it might be, it must be. For surely, dear God . . .

Then I looked way up and saw the formations of silver bombers riding in. Something detached itself from an airplane and came glistering down. My eyes followed it down, down and even with knowledge pounding in my mind, my heart turned convulsively when the bomb exploded in the middle of the harbor. I knew the air was not the fire for my little baby airplane and I set about landing as quickly as ever I could. A few seconds later a shadow passed over me and simultaneously bullets splattered all around me. Suddenly that little wedge of sky above Hickam Field and Pearl Harbor was the busiest fullest piece of sky I ever saw.

We counted anxiously as our little civilian planes came flying home to roost. Two never came back. They were washed ashore weeks later on the windward side of the island, bullet-

riddled. Not a pretty way for the brave little yellow Cubs and their pilots to go down to death. The rest of December seventh has been described by too many in too much detail for me to reiterate. I remained on the island until three months later when I returned by convoy to the United States. None of the pilots wanted to leave but there was no civilian flying in the islands after the attack. And each of us had some individual score to settle with the Japs who had brought murder and destruction to our islands.

WHEN I returned, the only way I could fly at all was to instruct Civilian Pilot Training programs. Weeks passed. Then, out of the blue, came a telegram from the War Department announcing the organization of the WAFS (Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron) and the order to report within twenty-four hours if interested. I left at once.

Mrs. Nancy Love was appointed Senior Squadron Leader of the WAFS by the Secretary of War. No better choice could have been made. First and most important she is a good pilot, has tremendous enthusiasm and belief in women pilots and did a wonderful job in helping us to be accepted on an equal status with men.

Because there were and are so many disbelievers in women pilots, especially in their place in the army, officials wanted the best possible qualifications to go with the first experimental group. All of us realized what a spot we were on. We had to deliver the goods or else. Or else there wouldn't ever be another chance for women pilots in any part of the service.

We have no hopes of replacing men pilots. But we can each release a man to combat, to faster ships, to work delivering a trainer to Texas may be as important as delivering a bomber to Africa if you take the long view. We are beginning to prove that women can be trusted to deliver airplanes safely and in the doing serve the country which is our country too.

I have yet to have a feeling which approaches in satisfaction that of having signed, sealed and delivered an airplane for the United States Army. The attitude that most nonfliers have about pilots is distressing and often acutely embarrass-

ing. They chatter about the glamour of flying. Well, any pilot can tell you how glamorous it is. We get up in the cold dark in order to get to the airport by daylight. We wear heavy cumbersome flying clothes and a thirty-pound parachute. You are either cold or hot. If you are female your lipstick wears off and your hair gets straighter and straighter. You look forward all afternoon to the bath you will have and the steak. Well, we get the bath but seldom the steak. Sometimes we are too tired to eat and fall wearily into bed.

None of us can put into words why we fly. It is something different for each of us. I can't say exactly why I fly but I know why as I've never known anything in my life.

I knew it when I saw my plane silhouetted against the clouds framed by a circular rainbow. I knew it when I flew up into the extinct volcano Halaakala on the island of Maui and saw the gray-green pineapple fields slope down to the cloud-dappled blueness of the Pacific. But I know it otherwise than in beauty. I know it in dignity and self-sufficiency and in the pride of skill. I know it in the satisfaction of usefulness.

FOR all the girls in the WAFS, I think the most concrete moment of happiness came at our first review. Suddenly and for the first time we felt a part of something larger. Because of our uniforms which we had earned, we were marching with the men, marching with all the freedom-loving people in the world.

And then while we were standing at attention a bomber took off followed by four fighters. We knew the bomber was headed across the ocean and that the fighters were going to escort it part way. As they circled over us I could hardly see them for the tears in my eyes. It was striking symbolism and I think all of us felt it. As long as our planes fly overhead the skies of America are free and that's what all of us everywhere are fighting for. And that we, in a very small way, are being allowed to help keep that sky free is the most beautiful thing I have ever known.

I, for one, am profoundly grateful that my one talent, my only knowledge, flying, happens to be of use to my country when it is needed. That's all the luck I ever hope to have.

Cornelia Fort was in the skies above Hawaii on December 7, 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The article you see to the left, "At the Twilight's Last Gleaming", was written by Ms. Fort for the *Woman's Home Companion* magazine. In the well written article, Ms. Fort tells of her harrowing experience on that morning above Honolulu, not only letting the women of the public know what happened that morning but also going into detail about her acceptance into the WAFS, the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, and how the hardships faced as a part of the WAFS only made her more proud of herself and her fellow female pilots. Cornelia Fort's love for writing and her experiences and struggles as a female pilot come together in this piece that can give us some insight into why Cornelia decided to become a pilot. She speaks of how sometimes people are misled to think that flying is glamorous, saying, "We wear heavy cumbersome flying clothes and a thirty-pound parachute." Ms. Fort goes on to describe one of her proudest moments as a pilot in the WAFS, recalling that it was in this group that she felt for the first time like "she was apart of something larger." For Cornelia, flying as an instructor and as a part of the WAFS were two of the important roles she was played for her country and how she knew she was contributing to a winning war effort.

Bella Guillamondegui, Class of 2023

# 9: Head in the Clouds

## LADY-BIRD

by Cornelia Fort, '39

If only I had some answer, any answer, to the eternal question: "How did you start flying?"; but I don't. Frankly, I don't even remember; but I began, in weeks and months, a very short time ago.

Looking back a little more than a year ago it seems very much like the famous "two roads that divulged in a yellow wood." I shudder when I think how easily I might have missed that road that led to the airplanes, to the misty summer sunrises and the aching good-byes with the sun beating down—and to all the little remembered bits of happiness that fit into the flying pattern.

But let me refute at the start the too common notion that flying is glamorous. Too many girls have entered aviation with only a desire for shining white coveralls, a helmet and goggles, and the "fine free wind" in their hair. And it is these sorry sisters who have caused the rest of us to fight, and fight hard for every ounce of recognition and respect that we have earned. Flying isn't glamorous or even adventurous in the ordinary sense of the word. It is for the most part heart-breaking, back-breaking work. The adventures which we all have which make such wonderful stories afterwards seem at the time only desperate moments when we were completely helpless, moments for which we would gladly turn in our flying suits to have done without.

You will ask me why we fly, and that's a question very few pilots can answer coherently. "For rooms and board" is the only logical answer; further explanations are always vague, because we can't manage to put into words what it is that really keeps us at it. There's not one of us, no matter how tired we may be of everything connected with airplanes, whose head won't park up at the sound of an engine overhead, whose eyes won't light up as a shining plane roars down the runway. And that's the only answer there is; in brief, the trite phrase: "it gets' under your skin, deep down inside."

Everyone is more or less interested in flying—more interested than in ditch-digging, less interested than most pilots, who will talk flying the clock round to anyone who shows a flicker of enthusiasm for the subject. For a girl to fly is, of course, still unusual enough to provoke plenty of conversation. The fact that I am a pilot precedes me wherever I go, and reactions are fascinating, especially since I started instructing.

The question I am asked most often is whether my students (all boys) resent a female instructor. Strangely enough they don't seem to. I think the explanation is in the psychological set-up. They are so completely helpless at first, and after leading them by the hand for eight hours up to the climax

of soloing I have made them so dependent upon me that they seldom think of me as anything other than the instructor.

I still remember my first lesson vividly—a teacher's turning the plane over to me at a safe altitude of 2000 feet, and telling me to keep it level with the stick. I had a terrible time, and finally turned to him in desperation. He was most amused. "Soon," he chuckled, "you won't even think about the plane's being level. You will feel it as automatically as you drive a car." That seemed impossible then; but now I find myself laughing at my fledglings as they try frantically to keep the plane level. That was my first introduction to the word "feel," that all-important intangible attribute that distinguishes a good pilot from a mediocre one. And it doesn't take long to discover whether a boy has the makings of a good flyer, just about two days. One student who back-handled the stick, and who struggled over everything that should have come quite easily to him, turned to me in distress. "You know, Miss Fort," he said, "I just can't seem to get used to this flying business. I'm so used to handling a tractor." And to the end of time that's the way he will fly—as if that lovely instrument of precision were a caterpillar tractor!

Nothing ever meant so much to me as my private license; it was the first big step up. I took the privileges of that little white piece of paper very seriously: "the holder may fly anywhere within the limits of Continental United States." In the first week I flew well over 2000 miles. I must admit that lunching in St. Louis, breakfasting in Louisville, flying down to a cocktail party in the Mississippi Delta was very exciting. And then came my first experience of the ugly side of flying, running into "weather" without instruments.

We earth-bound creatures are so used to having a constant reference point, the ground, that we can't realize what it means to be without it, as one can't realize what it means to be in a thick blanket, completely destroying one's sense of equilibrium. This situation is so serious that there is a law to cover it: "if the pilot is at any time unable to see the ground for more than 3 minutes at a time he must go on instruments, return to his base or immediately set down." There are times, however, when one can do neither. One has no instruments, the weather has closed in, and there are mountains underneath. Incredible as it sounds, one doesn't know whether the plane is upside down, dragging a wing (which leads to a spin), or spinning. Even if you do realize that something is wrong it is terribly difficult to remedy the situation. A spin is

Cornelia Fort was a woman who strived to succeed in what she wanted to do--flying. She made her dreams into reality and worked hard every day to make sure her reality stayed. An important detail about Cornelia's personality is she did not focus on the hard aspects of situations, but instead focused on what she was fortunate to receive from these situations. In an article she wrote for the *Sarah Lawrence College Alumnae Magazine* called "Lady-Bird," Cornelia reminds the audience that the small things that happen in life are the most important. The main message Cornelia projects in her article was that there no one single reason she wanted to fly. Flying was just an activity she loved dearly, and she knew that her it was her job to fly. In the last paragraph of the article she tells the reader, "Flying is a wanderlust. We either fly because we have it or acquire it because we fly" Although Cornelia did not know what her future in the air held, she flew no matter what, with her head in the clouds.

Priyanka Chiguluri, Class of 2023

# 10 : Welcome!



This picture represents the start of Cornelia Fort's new life as a member of the WAFS, the Women's Auxiliary Flying Squadron, where her role will be to serve her country. Since the year is 1942, the WAFS is the only program for female pilots to fly for the military. In this photograph, Nancy Love (far left) is welcoming Cornelia Fort and three other new WAF recruits. Nancy Love is in full uniform, with her wings pinned to the left side of her chest, indicating that she is both a certified pilot and a Lieutenant Colonel. This photograph was also staged and the luggage they are holding is empty, as the women had arrived a day earlier.

Hannah Mosley, Class of 2023

# 11: Cornelia Fort Takes Flight

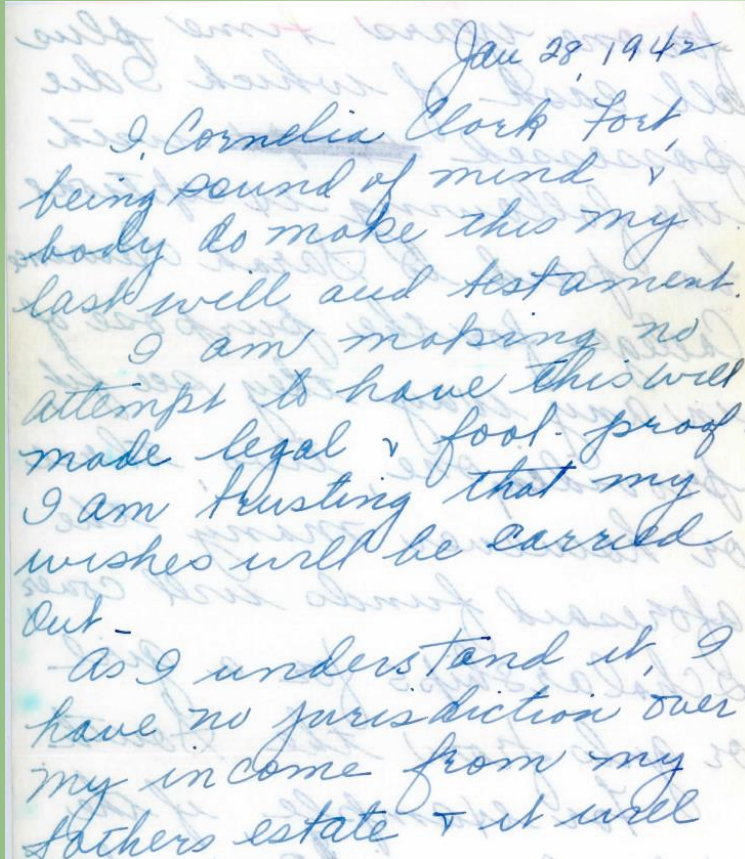


A group of World War II WAFS stroll past press cameras at New Castle Army Air Force Base, Delaware. It is September 1942, eight months since the war came to America. The nine inspiring women in this photo include (from left to right): Teresa James, Cornelia Fort, Betty H. Gillies, Aline Rhonie, Helen Mary Clark, Catherine Slocum, Adela Scarr, and Nancy Love. Led by Nancy Love, the women, wearing their zoot suits, helmets, goggles, (and for Cornelia, her saddle oxfords), they all could not wait to fly.

Gabrielle

Conrad, Class of 2023

# 12: The Worry of Death



Jan 28, 1942  
I, Cornelia Clark Fort,  
being sound of mind &  
body do make this my  
last will and testament.  
I am making no  
attempt to have this will  
made legal & foot. proof.  
I am trusting that my  
wishes will be carried  
out -  
As I understand it, I  
have no jurisdiction over  
my income from my  
father's estate & it will

After experiencing the attack of Pearl Harbor from the skies on December 7, 1941, Cornelia Clark Fort expresses anxiety by writing a will shortly after, on January 28, 1942. This letter was handwritten to her mother from Hawaii, and it stated what she wished of the future if something happened to her while flying. Cornelia included in her letter making a fund in her name, The Cornelia Fort Scholarship, to Sarah Lawrence College, paying any debts and taxes, care for her dog, the selling of her possessions, and more. Not only does Cornelia write this will because she is worried about the Pearl Harbor Bombing, but also because she is on her way to San Francisco and it is rumored that the Japanese will attack. This will is significant because it communicates Cornelia's uncertainty and the reality of what might happen after Pearl Harbor was bombed.

Mary Virginia Sullivan and Zoe Pearson, Class of 2023

# 13: It is my sad duty to inform you....

CLASS OF SERVICE  
This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless a deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol above or preceding the address.

**WESTERN UNION** (39)

A. N. WILLIAMS  
PRESIDENT

NEWCOMB CARLTON  
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

J. C. WILLEVER  
FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT

SYMBOLS  
DL = Day Letter  
NT = Overnight Telegram  
LC = Deferred Cable  
NLT = Cable Night Letter  
Ship Radiogram

The filing time shown in the date line on telegrams and day letters is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination.

AA142 GOVT LG=WUX LONGBEACH CALIF 22 1014A  
MRS CORNELIA CLARK FORT= \*  
JACKSON BLVD NASH=

CONFIRMING THE TELEPHONE CONVERSATION OF MARCH 21 1943 IT IS MY SAD DUTY TO INFORM YOU OF THE DEATH OF YOUR DAUGHTER CORNELIA FORT ON SUNDAY MARCH 21 1943 NEAR MEKEL TEXAS. THE SYMPATHY OF THE ENTIRE PERSONNEL OF THE ARMY AIR FORCES SIXTH FERRYING GROUP IS EXTENDED TO YOU IN THE BEREAVEMENT OF YOUR DAUGHTER. REQUEST YOU NOTIFY THE COMMANDING OFFICER SIXTH FERRYING GROUP LONGBEACH ARMY AIR FLD GOVERNMENT COLLECT AS TO DISPOSITION OF REMAINS. I ASSURE YOU THAT WE SHALL FOLLOW YOUR DESIRES AND AGAIN EXTEND OUR HEARTFELT SYMPATHIES. SGD COL RALPH E SPAKE COMMANDING OFFICER SIXTH FERRYING GROUP= SPAKE.

21 1943 21 1943.  
AIR FLD

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE

While Cornelia Fort was indeed recognized when she died, we understand the importance of her life to a deeper extent today. Although Cornelia graduated from Ward-Belmont in 1936, she died just seven short years later when the plane she was ferrying from her base in Long Beach, California crashed. The telegram sent to Cornelia's mother after her crash may appear cold at first to the reader, but it does address the death of a daughter and expresses heartfelt praise and condolence for the family's loss. Upon her death, Cornelia Fort became the first woman to die in service to her country. Now we can understand how phenomenal her life truly was.

Leala Nakagawa and Sophia Williams, Class of 2023