

Scene Two

(Lights. Civilian flight instructor, ZIGGIE LEWIS, appears on the drill field.)

(Underneath the monologue, WOMEN enter to stand at attention, dressed in their zool suits.)

ZIGGIE. *(addressing the audience)*

Attention! Look on each side of you. One of you will be left here at the end.

No doubt you all can flit about the sky in your Piper Cubs, but to graduate a WASP, you're gonna need to learn to fly *real* planes.

You will march everywhere: to breakfast, to the flight line, to the latrine. You will keep your bays neat. Cameras are contraband. You will abstain from consuming alcohol; you will abstain from gambling. You will abstain from wandering from your cot after curfew. You will politely decline answering any invites you have to movies or dinners or the water tower from any of the locals. Not that any of them would have you.... You will fast learn here that there are men who find a woman in uniform to be.... Well, the important thing is they're wrong.

Today we're going to fly PT-19's, and after two weeks some lucky lady is going to be the first to solo. You'll soon all catch up. When fifty-five hours in PT are done, we move on to advanced training with AT-6's and AT-17's, and when sixty hours there are up – around the end of March probably – we move on to basic instruments with BT-13's and take cross country solos before graduation in May. Then you become someone else's problem. I've got your instructor assignments, and where you need to report every afternoon to meet them. Any questions?

EDDIE. Yes Ma'am, just one.

ZIGGIE. What's your name, pilot?

EDDIE. Eddie. Eddie Harknell.

ZIGGIE. Permission granted, Miss Harknell, to inquire.

EDDIE. Who the hell are you?

ZIGGIE. My name is Ziggye Lewis. I'm an instructor on this base.

ROSALIE. We've got women instructors?

ZIGGIE. There's very few of us. But we're here. Now, a squadron commander and two flight lieutenants need to be nominated. Flight lieutenants will lead your flight's marches, and call you to breakfast in the morning. The Squadron Commander will, besides covering the flight lieutenants' asses, serve as the officers' liaison to the class, and play Stepmother the next seven months. Does anyone have a recommendation for Squadron Commander?

EDDIE. I recommend Norma Jean Harris!

NORMA JEAN. What? Why me?

EDDIE. You're tall.

ZIGGIE. Does anyone second this recommendation?

NORMA JEAN. If any of you dare....

CAROL. I second!

NORMA JEAN. Shrimp!

CAROL. My name is Carol!

ZIGGIE. Do you accept this recommendation, Miss Harris?

NORMA JEAN. It's Mrs. Harris.... And yes, I'll accept.

ZIGGIE. Choose your flight lieutenants please.

(MILDRED catches NORMA JEAN's eye.)

NORMA JEAN. I recommend her.

(to MILDRED)

You are in flight one, aren't you?

MILDRED. I sure am! My name is Mildred Simmons and I –

NORMA JEAN. Fine, Mildred here can be lieutenant of flight one.

ZIGGIE. And your flight lieutenant for flight two?

NORMA JEAN. I recommend...

Scene Eight

(Lights. New Years Eve. EDDIE and VIRGINIA are walking back from the hangar.)

EDDIE. So here I am, sweating bullets while we land, sure that he's gonna tell me to pack up my bags and go home, I washed out of primary, but instead he says to me:

(in a flirty voice)

Did you know that two "ee's" at the end of a word, for instance, "trainee," in most romance languages is oftentimes a feminine word?

VIRGINIA. He did not!

EDDIE. He did! And I say: No, Lieutenant Reinhart, sir, I was not aware of that. You see, I didn't study romance languages. Then he asks me what I did study and I say: Not much of anything, except flying. Then he winks, signs my pass slip and yells at me to get out of the plane!

VIRGINIA. Are you going to see him at the New Years Eve party tonight?

EDDIE. C'mon Virginia, you know the rules.

VIRGINIA. I know you like to break them.

EDDIE. Can you believe it? Tomorrow begins a whole new year.

VIRGINIA. And we are going to be starting it flying AT-

Sweet-Sixes!

NORMA JEAN. *(entering)* She's gone!

EDDIE. Who's gone?

NORMA JEAN. I got a list of all the girls going onto advanced. Dozens of girls washed, dozens. Rosalie's name isn't on the list. She washed. She had Captain Maytag and he washed her.

VIRGINIA. We have to catch her, we have to say goodbye -

NORMA JEAN. She's already moved out of our bay, she could be anywhere.

VIRGINIA. No. We all know exactly where she is.
(Lights. ROSALIE with her suitcase and flate box at the well. She steps into the water. The WOMEN enter.)

What are you doing in the well? That water is freezing!

ROSALIE. It's not frozen.

NORMA JEAN. It's close enough! Get out of there.

ROSALIE. I can't. I came here to be a part of the war - I helped send a boy over there, and now he's probably dead and I'm being sent home? I'd rather die than go back home and darn socks!

EDDIE. Suicide by hypothermia isn't patriotic, Songbird, it's just stupid.

ROSALIE. Oh, why do you have this absurd need to nick-name everybody?

NORMA JEAN. Yes, Edith, keep your mouth shut.

ALICE. Rosalie, didn't you go to school for music?

ROSALIE. I didn't graduate. I came here instead.

ALICE. Now you can go back.

CAROL. Bring music to the masses! Teach little children in the cornfields of Iowa!

ROSALIE. It'll never be enough. It's not flying. Iowa isn't Sweetwater. None of you will be there.

(VIRGINIA joins ROSALIE in the water.)

(to VIRGINIA)

What are you - ?!

VIRGINIA. *(singing, wading toward ROSALIE)*

WHEN THE WAR IS OVER, WE WILL ALL FLY CUBS AGAIN

WHEN THE WAR IS OVER,

VIRGINIA & ROSALIE.

WE WILL ALL FLY CUBS AGAIN

WHEN THE WAR IS OVER, WE WILL ALL FLY CUBS -

(VIRGINIA holds ROSALIE. The weight of ROSALIE'S imminent departure is suddenly on all their shoulders.)

ROSALIE. How am I supposed to say goodbye?

VIRGINIA. Don't say goodbye. Say...

CAROL. Sayonara!

(to everyone)

What? Ben's taught me some Japanese.

(ROSALIE laughs. Everyone laughs. One by one, the WOMEN step into the water, embracing ROSALIE.)

End of Act One

ACT TWO

Scene Nine

(Lights. Just past midnight on New Years Day.)

(NORMA JEAN and VIRGINIA in the bay.)

NORMA JEAN. I told them to be back by 11 o'clock, at the latest. We are twenty-three minutes into 1944 and they are still not back yet.

VIRGINIA. Maybe they are on their way back now.

NORMA JEAN. We are talking about Eddie, Alice, Carol, and God-knows who all else cramming together to play poker in Mildred's latrine. And Eddie brought that garbage whisky along with her.

VIRGINIA. Maybe they feel safe, with all the officers fired out from the New Years Eve party down at the gym -

NORMA JEAN. If they think that those officers will fail to do an after-bed check tonight because they're tired out from a little party, which ended twenty-four minutes ago, they don't know anything about how the Army Air Force works. They're watching Mildred like a hawk, too, ever since her bay mate Wendy washed last week for drinking; Mrs. Deaton threatened to wash the whole bay if they didn't fess up to whose liquor it was they'd spilled all over the floor.

VIRGINIA. Is it true that she slipped and fell on it when she came in for the after-bed check?

NORMA JEAN. She fell twice. And she was livid, and they've been doubly careful with after-bed checks since. I swear, Eddie is as ungrateful as she is careless, she's just

asking to get kicked out herself, and after Rosalie... If they get caught, I swear, I'm gonna....

VIRGINIA. I don't understand. Rosalie was good enough to get here in the first place.

NORMA JEAN. Darling, that doesn't mean she was good enough to stay.

VIRGINIA. She just needed more time.

NORMA JEAN. Some people are just meant for different things.

VIRGINIA. That is easy for us to say. We are still here... Any word about James?

NORMA JEAN. No, nothing yet.

VIRGINIA. How do you stand it? I know exactly where Will is, and his silence is unbearable, and then there is you, who don't even know where he... how do you stand it?

NORMA JEAN. I study radio maps. I look for shapes in the clouds, or messages. I pray. Mostly, I pray.

VIRGINIA. I'm not sure God hears my prayers. My earthly father never listened, anyway.

NORMA JEAN. I like to think of God as being a woman.

VIRGINIA. What?

NORMA JEAN. Like one of the women in my church's choir that can sing the sweetest melodies you've ever heard. With bosoms so soft they're like pillows that you know will hold even your heaviest tears. A God who will love you no matter how many times you fall Her, no matter how many times you fall short.

VIRGINIA. Norma Jean, the Bible says "He."

NORMA JEAN. Who wrote the bible, Virginia?

CAROL. *(entering)* Norma Jean! Norma Jean!

ALICE. *(entering)* SHHHH! CAROL! Are you trying to wake up the whole base?

NORMA JEAN. What in the Lord's good name are you making such a racket for?

ALICE. Mrs. Deaton's doing an after-bed check.

NORMA JEAN. What? Did she see you?

EDDIE. *(entering, spilling things)* They saw me. They, whoopsie, Mildred, I was winning and then -

NORMA JEAN. Get into bed, all of you. Eddie, pick up those chips! Hide that flask!

(to ALICE)

Do they know you were playing cards?

ALICE. I don't think so.

CAROL. I stuffed the deck down my bra!

EDDIE. What are you going to tell them?

NORMA JEAN. Oh, Eddie, did you brush your teeth with whiskey? Get yourself into bed!

EDDIE. What are you going to tell them?

NORMA JEAN. What do you mean, what am I going to tell them?

EDDIE. If you talk, Norma Jean, they'll take one look at me and wash me! They washed Wendy last week for drinking, and her uncle's a Supreme Court justice! I'm nobody, they won't even -

(knocking at the door)

What are you going to tell them?!

NORMA JEAN. Edith Harknell, if you know what is good for you, you'll get your tan, Floridian ass into your godsdamned bed, or, Lord help me I will -

(EDDIE flies into bed as MRS. DEATON and MILDRED enter. NORMA JEAN feigns just waking up.)

NORMA JEAN. I'm sorry, Mrs. Deaton, *(yawn, whispering)* is everything alright?

MRS. DEATON. Squadron Commander Harris, this young woman says three of your bay mates were with her in the latrine betwixt bay 25 and 26, not even five minutes ago.

NORMA JEAN. Well, that's odd, because my baymates and I have been sleeping for the last few hours.

VIRGINIA. Ejecting from a plane is a last resort.

NORMA JEAN. Are you aware, Mrs. Deaton, that we've never gotten more instruction than a cartoon pamphlet on how to bail?

EDDIE. You taught us to count to ten before hitting the silk, otherwise you're chopped liver, and she knew that...

VIRGINIA. But the ground was too close, so she had to improvise.

CAROL. ONE-TEN!

(Lights out on CAROL as she pulls the ripcord.)

VIRGINIA. Thank goodness she only got bruises for her trouble.

ALICE. Will you at least make sure she gets some avocados with her dinner tonight? They're her favorite.

NORMA JEAN & EDDIE. I could kill Shrimp for doing something so stupid -

EDDIE. without me! I'm supposed to be the hot pilot around here.

NORMA JEAN. Maybe you're getting smart in your old age, Eddie.

EDDIE. I've got to stop hanging around you. Responsibility is contagious.

Scene Twelve

(Lights. WOMEN at the well. The sound of a plane overhead.)

VIRGINIA. I love that sound. I can't stand long silences much anymore.

EDDIE. Who are you writing?

VIRGINIA. William.

ALICE. I thought he hadn't written in a month or two.

VIRGINIA. I got one this morning. A short one.

NORMA JEAN. I told you he'd come around.

VIRGINIA. In the letter, he said: "This flying business is a phase that I'm willing to indulge until you come home and be my girl again."

NORMA JEAN. That's not quite coming around.

EDDIE. He said that? He's an ass.

VIRGINIA & NORMA JEAN. Eddie!

EDDIE. What? Correct me if I'm wrong, but this guy didn't want you to come here, he waited until December to say he wanted to see you, and then when you couldn't get there because of a Texan snowstorm, he goes back to giving you the silent treatment until finally he writes to say that? Doesn't he know you at all?

VIRGINIA. Of course he does. We grew up together.

EDDIE. Let me tell you something Virginia: when my mama married my daddy, he let her fly all over the God-damn state, but as soon as she had Ricky and me, he moved us closer to Jacksonville and he made her stop. And four years later, she got sick, and three years after that she was dead. And then Daddy ran off, because he couldn't stand us knowing the truth; that sickness wasn't what killed Mama, he was.

NORMA JEAN. Edith Harknell, you're scaring the girl!

EDDIE. Good. Kid should be living with her eyes wide open. Any one of these days could be our last, Shrimp here fell outta the sky two weeks ago -

CAROL. I'm never gonna hear the end of that, am I?

EDDIE. So you better be careful, is all I'm saying!

NORMA JEAN. Eddie, what's gotten into you?

EDDIE. Nothing, I'm fine.

ALICE. Virginia is nothing like your mother, Eddie.

(to VIRGINIA)

Right?

(*sound of a plane flying overhead*)

VIRGINIA. Law number six: the women we are now is what matters. Not who we were before...even if we might have to go back to being those women when this is all over.

Scene Thirteen

(*Lights. WOMEN remain at well. ZIGGIE at one flight position, and MILDRED at another.*)

(*She sings "I Wanna Be a Miss H.P."*)

MILDRED.

I WANNA BE A MISS H.P.

H'MMMMMMM AND A LIL BIT MORE!

I WANNA BE A WASP TRAINER,

H'MMMMMMM AND A LIL BIT MORE!

I WANNA BE A GRADUATE, AND THEN I'LL ASK NO MORE!

FOR ALL I'LL HAVE ALL THAT'S COMING TO ME,

HMM, AND A LIL BIT

HMM, AND A LIL BIT

HMM, AND A LIL BIT MORE!

ZIGGIE. Decision Height: the altitude at which a pilot must decide to descend for her landing or continue on and deem it a "missed approach."

(*Lights. Sound of crash. A trumpet plays "Amazing*

Grace." MRS. DEATON enters with microphone.)

MRS. DEATON. At fifteen-hundred hours today Mary Stine, class 44-W-6, along with her instructor Ziggye Lewis, and Mildred Simmons, class 44-W-4 died in a mid-air collision. A memorial service will be held in the gym tomorrow morning. The Avenger Choir, started by Mildred, will sing a selection of hymns. A collection is being taken to help send Mildred and Mary home to their families. Ziggye, who had no family, will be laid to rest here at Avenger Field, where she was happiest.

Scene Sixteen

(Lights. The runway, early on Easter morning. VIRGINIA, CAROL, and MRS. DEATON stand singing the hymn "The Strife is O'er, the Battle Done." NORMA JEAN stands separate.)

NORMA JEAN. *(counting on her fingers)* Basic Training started.

Cross country flights long and hard, no, no... flights tiring. Today Easter morning: airfield sunrise service. Sang "Victory."

WOMEN.

THE STRIFE IS O'ER, THE BATTLE DONE,
NOW IS THE VICTOR'S TRIUMPH WON
NOW BE THE SONG OF PRAISE BEGUN

ALLELUIA!

NORMA JEAN. *(counting on fingers)* You never guess who came.

(EDDIE enters, and takes NORMA JEAN's hand.)

WOMEN.

ALLELUIA, ALLELUIA, ALLELUIA!

(Lights. MRS. DEATON exits one way, EDDIE and

NORMA JEAN another. CAROL and VIRGINIA address the audience.)

VIRGINIA. William, there is nothing basic about Basic Training.

CAROL. Dear Monsters: You can't see the ground in a BT-13, you just got instruments and your wits to keep you on course. I am great at it! I'm already used to flying blind.

VIRGINIA. The Army Air Force keeps the good planes for the men, so most of ours are in poor shape: the BT-13's are the worst. I swear, these buckets of bolts only got duct tape, chewing gum, and prayers keeping them together.

CAROL. It's a thrill to fly high above the highways, and not be able to see a damn thing but the sky.

I'll send another postcard soon — we fly next to California!

VIRGINIA. I have been to Alabama, Georgia, and Missouri so far. To think, six months ago I had never left Connecticut.

EDDIE. *(entering, to CAROL)* You know Shrimp, I think Ricky would go berserk if he saw me flying cross country. I take my top off and sunbath.

(They share a laugh.)

VIRGINIA. We'll soon be assigned to different bases, to ferry planes, so it's important for us to practice cross country flights. They are nerve-wracking. It's impossible to keep each other in sight, so you are mostly alone. And if you're lucky, and have no problems and make it to your destination base on time... then you have to wait for everyone else.

(Lights. The three wait silently on the runway, eyes glued to the horizon. NORMA JEAN finally enters.)

CAROL. Norma Jean!

VIRGINIA. Thank goodness.

EDDIE. What took you so long!

NORMA JEAN. What, I'm a little late, and you all stand here like a couple of nervous mothers? Isn't that my job?

EDDIE. Shut up Ace.

(EDDIE scoops NORMA JEAN up in a bear hug. Has

EDDIE's casing finally cracked?)

VIRGINIA. Graduation is looming like a Texas dust storm, William, and I am terrified. The thought of leaving my friends and this place should make me feel excited. I'll finally get to do what I came here to do — be a part of the war effort! But instead, I feel such grief. We all feel it, but we try not to talk about it. It is the B-29 in the room, you might say. Instead, we watch each other fly from the runway. We relish the taste of butter on our morning toast. We continue the delusion that Sweetwater is forever; we know in our hearts it is too good to last. I'm beginning to fear that maybe you and I are too. Tell me I'm wrong? Signed, Virginia.

Scene Seventeen

(Lights. Early morning, the day of their last cross country trip. WOMEN cross the stage towards the well. They hear something, and hide.)

EDDIE. Shh!

CAROL. They're going to catch us. They're going to catch us, and we're going to get kicked out before we can graduate next week!

NORMA JEAN. They sure will if you don't shut your mouth!

(EDDIE strips to her underwear and steps in.)

EDDIE. It's like bath water.

(She sits in the well. The others follow her lead.)

CAROL. This feels better than sleeping.

EDDIE. This feels better than smoking.

NORMA JEAN. This feels better than church!

VIRGINIA. Today's our last cross country till graduation, can you believe that?... Where do you think we'll go?

EDDIE. After graduation?

CAROL. I wanna get assigned to Casper Air Field, in Wyoming. Or some other base with mountains.

NORMA JEAN. I'd like to be assigned to Camp Davis. That's only a few hours from my folks.

EDDIE. I don't care where they send me, I just wanna volunteer for a top-secret project. They have those, you know.

CAROL. When the war's over, I'm gonna live in the mountains.

NORMA JEAN. When James gets home, we're going to have a baby.

EDDIE. Maybe I'll barnstorm around the country again, just one more time.

CAROL. When I've got enough money, I'll buy a ranch of my own, with horses and dogs.

NORMA JEAN. We will name her Jackie, and we'll teach her how to fly.

EDDIE. I hear they're training women to be officers. I could be the New Ziggie Lewis!

CAROL. Oregon has mountains, right?

NORMA JEAN. Yes, Carol. *(short beat)* What about you, Virginia?

EDDIE. Yeah, when are you and Will getting hitched?

CAROL. Whose gonna be your maid of honor? Can I do it?

EDDIE. No Shrimp, she's going to ask Rosalie. Or me.

NORMA JEAN. Virginia? What's going on in that pretty little head of yours?

VIRGINIA. I was just thinking, about how many people the war has taken, how many more it will take before it's over. I'm prepared to do whatever it takes until then. But when it is over, I'm going to see the Pacific Ocean.... No, I don't want to just see it, I want to swim in it. And fish in it, and sail over it, and watch the sun sink into it.

NORMA JEAN. Time to go.

(They step out of the well, hearing a sound, they run off, bursting.)