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Media Life: Pioneer World War II pilot Betty Wood forgotten in Auburn

Gus Thomson/Media Life



Betty Wood



From time to time, this reporter would bump into a sun-splashed photo of **Betty Wood** and her story – or at least the partial one that was available at the time.

It's in a bound copy of Journals from 1943.

The page on which her photo reposes is burnished orange at its edges now. But the story of her death remains compelling. It was published on the front of the Sept. 30, 1943 edition of the Auburn Journal.

Under the headline "Air Crash Fatal to Local Girl," the story detailed how Betty Louise Taylor Wood – a Ferry Command pilot – had died the week before in a plane crash at a North Carolina air base.

"Details of the accident are not known here other than the fact that she was killed as she came in to land her plane and something went wrong," the report stated.

It went on to say Wood was an Auburn girl who graduated from Placer High School and Sierra Junior College. In the parlance of the day, it added that she was a "popular member of the student body at both schools."

Wood first learned to fly as a member of the Civilian Pilot Training program at the junior college – whose buildings now make up part of Placer High. She was described by another trainee who went on to earn a Silver Star in the air war against Japan – Capt. Don Graham – as the most natural pilot enrolled in the class.

Rest of story

Looking through subsequent editions of the Journal, there appears to have been no follow-up on the reasons behind the crash. But the continued interest in women's history over the ensuing 68 years had shed new and disturbing light on the circumstances that led to Wood's death.

Perhaps Media Life can fill in the broad holes in a story left half-finished so long ago – and maybe give a brave woman her belated due in what was her home town.

"Free a man to fight" was the reason behind establishing the Women Airforce Service Pilots in 1942. They would be better-known as the WASPs.

Wood was one of 25,000 women who applied for a chance to train and was one of 1,830 accepted. A total of 1,074 woman pilots received their wings. Wood became one of the 38 American women who sacrificed their lives in the air in support of World War II.

As others who served as WASPs have since recounted, women pilots ran into heavy opposition – particularly at Camp Davis, N.C. That's where Wood found herself in September 1943, flying targets in a beat-up A-24 that had been deemed no longer fit for combat. She had earned her wings in early August and married WASP instructor "Shorty" Wood the day of her graduation

Dangerous work

Up in the sky, anti-aircraft trainees shooting at the targets were using live ammunition at Camp Davis. The word when Wood reached camp was that the planes were expendable and so were the pilots.

On the ground, resistance was strong from male pilots. WASP Marion Hanrahan described in a 1990s interview how the Camp Davis commander advised female pilots to "go home and knit socks for the troops."

Male pilots resented the intrusion because if women replaced them, they would be transferred to combat duty. But they would go as ground troops because they weren't qualified for aerial combat, Hanrahan recalled.

Wood, 22, died while trying to land and the circumstances surrounding what was officially ruled an accident attributed to pilot error remain couched in mystery.

Sugar in tank?

But some clues have come out in the accident report now in Texas Woman's University files that preserve the WASP war effort

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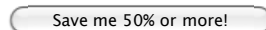
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papers. According to one researcher, the report includes the statement that sugar was found in the fuel tank. But it was also discovered that not much was left of the report after it was heavily blacked out and censored.

Another possible explanation revolves around the airworthiness of the A-24. Wood went in for a landing with a male chaplain aboard but aborted and gave the plane full throttle to make another pass. The plane rolled and went to the ground. Wood and the chaplain were crushed between the canopy and the plane.

Some surmise the throttle stuck and that caused the plane to roll when Wood pulled up on the stick to gain altitude.

Adding to the danger, replacement parts were hard to come by for A-24s and the gas being used was lower in octane than required.

Questions remain

A careless mechanic? Wornout parts? Pilot error? Or the unthinkable – a practical joke gone awry or even sabotage by another pilot or crewmember?

Nearly 70 years later, Betty Wood's death remains clouded but hopefully now a little clearer in the town she grew up in.

Oddly enough, while she made the supreme sacrifice, Wood's name doesn't appear on the memorial honoring local war dead at the Auburn Cemetery. There are 42 dead from World War II enshrined on the wall to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice. But no women. And, in particular, no Betty Wood.

Keywords

betty wood, wasp, death, mystery, 1943, camp davis, placer high, placer junior college, north carolina, air crash, world war II, gus thomson, media life, media life etc.


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Comments

On 2/4/11 at 12:12 PM, **bimaub** wrote:
 I agree, this is a great story . I thought too, that there was/is a group of women pilots in the Auburn area. Along with any other WWII pilots still around in the Area. I think it would also be great if any of the groups could corroborate about this and perhaps adding BETTY WOOD's name to the war memorial in Auburn Cemetary.
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On 2/5/11 at 05:41 PM, **Andy96** wrote:
 Hi Gus,
 First of all, thanks for posting this WASP story.
 I've maintained a WASP web site, <http://wwii-women-pilots.org/>, since 1995 and I have copies of all the official Army accident reports for the WASP.
 To the day and one month earlier Mabel Rawlinson, from class 43-3. Betty Wood was from class 43-4. was killed in the same type of

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