

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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Vineyard Resident Recognized With Congressional Gold Medal

By PETER BRANNEN

When the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) were unceremoniously disbanded in 1944, Ann Lesnikowski of Vineyard Haven was told to go home, with no explanation or money for transportation. In the decades that followed, the memory of the first female military pilots was either forgotten or deliberately obscured. But on March 10 at a ceremony at the United States Capitol Ms. Lesnikowski and her remaining fellow WASPs finally received their due: a congressional gold medal, the highest civilian award in the country. “It was a long 60 years coming,” she said.

A few weeks ago Washington D.C. was buzzing. Hundreds of WASPs and their beaming relatives crowded the Capitol for an awards ceremony that featured Nancy Pelosi, John Boehner and Harry Reid, as well as the sponsors of last year’s bill to award the gold medal, Senators Kay Bailey Hutchinson of Texas and Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, as well as Representatives Susan Davis of California and Ilena Ros-Lehtinen of Florida.

“There were two girls from my class there,” said Ms. Lesnikowski in an interview. “There were 200 girls there overall but there’s not many more than 200 left.” Of the more than 1,100 women who served as WASPs it is estimated that only 300 are still alive.

The Women Airforce Service Pilots were established at the height of World War II when the number of male pilots available for overseas combat duty was strained by the more routine task of ferrying planes from factories to military bases for embarkation.

Vineyard resident and glamorous aviatrix Nancy Harkness Love approached the Army in 1940 to propose using women to relieve male servicemen of the duty. Although the Army was skeptical about the capabilities of women pilots, Ms. Harkness and fellow pilot Jacqueline Cochran eventually went on to head the newly established air corps.

Ms. Lesnikowski, who had earned a private pilot’s license in her time at college in Kentucky, was inspired by the images of the venturesome and patrician Ms. Love that festooned the pages of national magazines, and she took off for Texas to train with the WASPs in 1942.

After six months of training she was assigned to Long Beach, Calif., then Palm Springs, and finally La Junta, Colo., before being decommissioned after two years of service.

Much of her time was spent flying solo across the country, delivering planes from the West

Coast to the eastern seaboard with hours of quiet reflection in between. Although working under the auspices of the military, Ms. Lesnikowski says that she and her fellow pilots were often made to feel second-class.

“We got nothing when we were in service, absolutely nothing,” she said. “Thirty-eight of us were killed in service but we couldn’t even put a gold star in the window and we couldn’t even put a flag on our coffins. We had to pay our way home to wherever home was to be buried.”

In the years after the war the WASPs remained invisible. “Nobody had ever heard of us or knew who we were or what we did,” she said. Records of their service were classified until 1977 when Jimmy Carter finally afforded the women full veteran status.

Although their impact on the country wasn’t immediate, it was lasting.

“Our service broke the glass ceiling for women in aviation absolutely,” she said.

Among her fondest memories of her service with the WASPs Ms. Lesnikowski cherishes the time spent with her female colleagues and the attendant comradeship that is often forged between bands of lonely pioneers.

“The best part of it all was the companionship,” she said.

Besides her colleagues Ms. Lesnikowski will always hold dear the memories of the great American landscape stretching endlessly before her and the solitude of guiding her PT-19 through the ether.

“My favorite was flying those long distances solo over the desert. There was not that much scenery but it was still beautiful.”

Some of the souvenirs Ms. Lesnikowski collected during her time with the WASPs can be seen at Martha’s Vineyard Museum’s exhibit Those Who Served — Martha’s Vineyard and World War II, including her wings, which she had affixed to a silver bracelet, as well as her yearbook.

For now she is still absorbing the thrill of being recognized by her country, an honor she thought might never come. The greatest thrill, however, has been the opportunity to share the honor and the memory of her service with her family over the past few weeks. “One of the nicest things about the whole ceremony was that so many members of my family were able to join me and I got to spend most of my time with them,” she said.

Still, she has no special plans for her medal. “I’m just going to enjoy looking at it for a while.”