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Former WASP honored by Dodd for service to her country

By Susan Tuz
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DANBURY -- Ann Gleszer wanted to fly since childhood.

While working as a teacher in Simsbury, she took flying lessons -- a rarity for a woman in the 1940s.

When America went to war, Gleszer learned the Air Force was hiring women as test pilots, to ferry planes from coast to coast and teach men how to fly.

So Gleszer, then in her early 20s, took advantage of the unique opportunity to join the Women's Airforce Service Pilots or WASPs.

"These ladies were all of a certain caliber," said Ken Gleszer, Ann's husband. "They had lots of get-up and go. They believed they could do anything a man could do and they proved they could."

On Saturday, Ann Gleszer was one of the more than 1,000 WASPs honored nationwide for their service during World War II. Sen. Chris Dodd awarded the Congressional Gold Medal to Gleszer in a ceremony at the Veterans Administration hospital in West Haven.

"I couldn't have been more pleased when we were able to approve the legislation awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to the Women Airforce Service Pilots," Dodd said. "More than 1,000 women served in the WASP corps during World War II. Six of them are still living here in Connecticut. They are great American heroes and national treasures. And they are recipients of the highest honor Congress can bestow."

Gleszer was a test pilot in the WASPs -- flying planes and helicopters that had either just been repaired or built before Air Force pilots flew them to

assure they met specifications.

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"There were all sorts of maneuvers I had to do to make sure the planes were safe to fly," she said from her Danbury home Saturday. "I realized we were making a breakthrough for women and was happy doing it."

From 1942 to 1944, more than 1,000 women were trained to fly military aircraft.

The Air Force had thousands of new aircraft coming off assembly lines and had to be delivered to military bases around the country. But most of the pilots were overseas fighting the war. To deal with the backlog, the government launched an experimental program, training women to meet the need.

Gleszer and some 900 other WASPs were stationed at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. They slept eight to a barracks, wore

uniforms sized for men and had no official military status.

They often faced disbelief and resentment from male officers, but they persevered and proved women could be capable pilots. They paved the way for women today to be pilots in the U.S. military.



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"The men were often jealous of us," Gleszer recalled. "It's hard to break ground but it was worth it. I had always wanted to fly. I started flying at Simsbury Airport. It was just a little hayfield. I had some flying time officially logged when I heard about the Air Force program for women pilots. I flew with the WASPs until the program was abandoned."

Gleszer continued teaching after the war. She was a French teacher at Newtown High School for 15 years. She retired from teaching in 1983.

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The Congressional Gold Medal is the highest civilian award in the United States. It is awarded to individuals who perform outstanding deeds or acts of service to the security, prosperity and national interest of the country. It is separate from the Medal of Honor, which is a military award for extreme bravery in action. Both houses of Congress recently approved unanimously awarding the medal to the women who served as WASPs during World War II.

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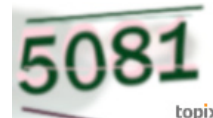
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