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## Ex-WASP pilot gets nod as parade marshal

Joy Juedes, Staff Writer  
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Sixty-five years after piloting airplanes in World War II, Alma Fornal will be the guest of honor in the Redlands Fourth of July Parade.

Fornal, a Women's Airforce Service Pilot (WASP) who flew training aircraft in Florida and Alabama, will serve as this year's parade grand marshal.

In March, she was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal at the U.S. Capitol.

"I feel honored people want to hear about what we did back in those days, so I'll be (at the Redlands event)," she said.

City clerk Sam Irwin will drive Fornal in a BMW convertible, parade organizers said.

Fornal has spoken at functions for American Legion Post 106 in Redlands, where she is a member, her church, and other veterans' events.



"She's a special person," said Paul Kelly, a parade organizer and American Legion member, who suggested Fornal as grand marshal.

"She can tell you what she had for breakfast 10 years ago - I can't even remember the socks I wore yesterday," he said.

"It's fun to find these people and seek them out and have them involved in the community," said parade organizer Tim Murone.

Fornal came to the area in 1960 when her husband, Joe Fornal, an aircraft mechanic, was transferred to Norton Air Force Base. They met at a base in Florida and were married in 1945.

"He was a New Yorker and I was born in Texas, and there's no way we would have gotten together if (the war) hadn't happened," she said.

Someone took her flying while she was a student at the University of Arkansas and she fell in love.

"I said, 'I have to do this,'" Fornal remembered.

Fornal, whose maiden name is Newsom, started taking flying lessons. One day, she saw an ad in the newspaper saying the country was in "dire need of pilots because the men are overseas, and women can do that - Mrs. Roosevelt said that," she said.

Fornal applied, promised her parents she would finish school, and was "off and running."

Out of the more than 25,000 women who applied to the WASP, 1,900 were accepted.

Fornal was one of the 1,078 who made it through training and earned their wings.

It was 1942 and the war was not going well, she said. After training, she went to Alabama, where she tested AT-6s, aircraft built to train fighter pilots, for three months. After that, she was sent to Florida, where she towed gunnery targets in a B26 Marauder over the Gulf of Mexico.

When the war ended, the WASPs were told they could go home, but she stayed and married Joe Fornal. She taught flying lessons before they moved to Long Island, where they lived for a few years.

Joe Fornal received a permanent commission, and they decided to "have some fun," she said. They lived all over the world, including the Panama Canal, Germany, Arlington, Va., when her husband was stationed at the Pentagon, and then California.

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"We had a wonderful career together - we went all over the world traveling in the Air Force," Alma Fornal said.

Fornal's husband retired from Norton in 1964 and then worked for TRW and Northrop Grumman.

"He retired (from the Air Force) one Friday and went to work (for TRW) on Monday," she said.

They raised a son and daughter, and Alma taught lower grades at Riley Elementary School in San Bernardino.

They lived in their San Bernardino home for 42 years, she said. Joe Fornal died in 2000.

In March, her daughter, son-in-law and grandsons accompanied her to Washington, D.C., where she received the Congressional Gold Medal with more than 200 other WASPs. The medal is the highest award Congress can give a civilian or group of civilians. Past honorees include the Navajo Code Talkers in 2000 and Tuskegee Airmen in 2006.

"It was wonderful - we were wined and dined and were taken to places around town - museums, Arlington (National) Cemetery, the World War II museum, so we were treated very well," Fornal said.

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