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Ann Darr, 87; Aviator During WWII, Poet

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Ann Darr, 87, a well-known Washington poet who wrote about the "aerial dishwasher" she and other female pilots performed during World War II, died Dec. 2 at the Warren Barr Pavilion in Chicago. She had Alzheimer's disease.

Mrs. Darr, who wrote, read and taught poetry in Washington and Bethesda for many years, was one of the 1,074 female aviators who were Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASPs, between 1942 and 1944. They were Civil Service employees who were promised military commissions that never came through. It wasn't until 1977 that they were acknowledged as military veterans.

She flew every kind of aircraft in simulated strafing and bombing missions, searchlight tracking and mountain mapping. She flew a plane with wind-damaged wings from California to Texas for repair. She flew B-26s, towing targets at the gunnery school near Las Vegas, while gunners in B-17s fired live ammunition at the sleeve she towed. It was "aerial dishwasher," as the WASPs called it, the mundane but necessary tasks to keep the Air Force flying.

The enemy was not just overseas. Someone cut the rudder cable of one female pilot's plane in Texas and caused her to crash. Many of the planes were in no condition to fly, and one in South Carolina was sabotaged, with sugar found in its gas tank. Legend has it that when male pilots balked at flying the bumpy B-29, WASP pilots were ordered into the cockpit to prove it was a plane that "even women could fly."

Thirty-eight WASPs died during the two years of the program, and Mrs. Darr never forgot one crash near Las Vegas, which killed everyone aboard. The body of the male Army Air Forces pilot was sent home with honors. Both the Army and the Civil Service disavowed responsibility for the female co-pilot; Mrs. Darr and the other WASPs took up a collection to ship her body home.

The weather could also pose a danger. One windy morning, the pilots were called to the flight line. "We saw what we had to do," she wrote. "We lined up on both sides of the runway so that as each plane came in, we grabbed the wings and kept it steady as we ran alongside it. I think we saved all the trainers who landed that day."

But despite the promise that WASPs would become members of the military, Congress did not agree to it. Ordered to keep silent during the debate and not to write their congressmen, the pilots watched as their program was disbanded in December 1944, before the war ended.

Lois Ann Russell was born in Bagley, Iowa, and graduated from the University of Iowa in 1941. The

Advertisement

The advertisement is a vertical rectangular box. At the top is the Ford logo. Below it is a large, stylized image of a Ford car's front end, showing the headlight and grille. In the center, the slogan "THE WORRIERS. THE WARRIORS. THE SAFE HAVENS." is written in orange, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below the slogan is a blue button with the text "LEARN MORE" in white and a small orange circle to the right. At the bottom, three Ford vehicles are shown in profile: a dark blue sedan, an orange SUV, and a blue hatchback.

previous year, she had skipped a college class to sign up for Civilian Pilot Training courses, in which she learned to fly. "I was a prairie child," she wrote. "We didn't have the mountains, the sea; what we had was *sky*."

After college, she worked for NBC Radio in New York, writing and broadcasting "The Women of Tomorrow" daily program, with the responsibility of filling the 30 minutes with fashion, food and tips for keeping husbands happy. She started using news bulletins about the war in Europe and urged women listening to save sugar, tinfoil and gasoline.

Her husband was going into the Navy when his medical training ended, and Mrs. Darr was one of the 25,000 women who applied for the WASP program. Only 1,830 were chosen, and 1,074 earned their wings. Mrs. Darr, dark-haired, 5-foot-8-inches tall and wearing a size 8 flight suit, trained at Sweetwater, Tex., under Jacqueline Cochran, the first female aviator to break the sound barrier.

After the war ended, she and her husband settled in Alexandria and then Bethesda. For the next decade, she was a full-time homemaker and mother.

Her marriage to Dr. George Darr ended in divorce. Three daughters survive her, Dr. Elizabeth Darr of Worcester, Mass., Deborah Darr of Chicago and Shannon Darr of Eliot, Maine, as do four grandchildren.

In the mid-1950s, she began focusing on her poetry.

"The poems I write and read help me to handle the feelings that would otherwise shred me," she once told an interviewer. "Poetry may not have saved my life, but I can't imagine a life without it."

She taught at American University and for the Writer's Center in Bethesda. A 1976 Washington Post review of her book "Cleared for Landing" called her a "poet who is unafraid to take risks. . . . When she succeeds, she succeeds brilliantly, as she does in many of the poems in her third collection. She has a keen perception of the darker side of things."

Among her nine books are "St. Ann's Gut," "The Myth of a Woman's Fist," "Riding With the Fireworks" and "Confessions of a Skewed Romantic." Contained in "Flying the Zuni Mountains" is a play she wrote, a series of monologues based on the stories of women who were in her flight group.

In her 70s, she had a romance with her old flight instructor when he called from Tucson. She also toured Western Europe on a river barge with other artists, writers and musicians in a troupe called "Point-Counter Point." Mrs. Darr wrote to a friend that after that adventure, she wanted her tombstone to read: "Late in life, she ran away from home and joined the circus."

When the Women in Military Service for America Memorial was dedicated in 1997, she attended and heard a woman who served in the Navy during World War I speak. "When Frieda Mae Hardin spoke, reminding us she couldn't vote when she signed up, saying to the young people, 'Go for it!', we were almost ready to serve again," Mrs. Darr wrote.

She moved to Chicago last year, when Alzheimer's had impeded her ability to live alone. She flirted with the men in the nursing home, and when her daughter Deborah offered to read her to sleep, Mrs. Darr pulled from her bedside table a copy of Eve Ensler's "The Vagina Monologues."

Her last wish seemed to come true. As her family took her remains to Woodlawn Cemetery in Forest Park, Ill., they noticed five statues of elephants. As it turns out, those statues mark the boundaries of Showmen's Rest, a plot of 750 graves of circus performers.

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