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# Pasadena female WWII pilots honored for wartime service

By Brian Day Staff Writer Posted: 04/05/2010 03:48:16 PM PDT

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Like the nearly 1,100 women who graduated flight training to become Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II, Alyce S. Rohrer of Pasadena was never recognized as being part of the military during the war.

The WASPs received none of the benefits or honors bestowed on their male counterparts. In fact, once their service was completed, many of the WASP pilots had to pay their own bus fare back home, she said.

"The ones that were killed, the government didn't even buy a pine box to send them home in," said Rohrer. "We had to do everything ourselves."

When they signed up, the female pilots were promised that the WASPs would be militarized as a new woman's air force, but legislation to make that happen died as the war came to an end, she said.

"They just broke their promise and sent us home," said Rohrer.

Sixty-five years later, Rohrer and three other Pasadena WASP members - Margaret M. Weiss, Eileen W. Ferguson and Geraldine F. Olinger - finally received the recognition long overdue them when were presented with the Congressional Gold Medal.

The medals, the highest honor granted by Congress to civilians, were presented at a March 10 ceremony in Washington, D.C.



Alyce Rohrer, 87, of Pasadena was one of the nearly 1,100 members of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots was honored last month with the Congressional Gold Medal -- the highest honor given to civilians by congress. The all-female group of pilots flew non-combat mission during WWII, but they were not officially recognized as military pilots. In this picture, Rohrer stands in front of a 1944 photograph of herself and two fellow pilots on display at the Women in Military Service To...

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display at the women in military service to America Memorial in Washington, D.C. on March 9, 2010.

About 200 former WASPs attended the ceremony. Each received a small version of the medal as a keepsake, while the original medal will be donated for display at the Smithsonian Institution's "Women in Aviation" display in Chantilly, Va.

Speakers at the award ceremony included House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, Secretary of the Air Force Michael Donley and other dignitaries.

Rohrer, 87, worked as a test pilot during the war. "It's a very wonderful gesture and we're very honored - all of us," she said of the belated award.

WASPs flew noncombat flight missions while male pilots were fighting in Europe and the Pacific. At the time, Rohrer said, female pilots were almost unheard of. In her case, Rohrer said, she test-piloted repaired aircraft, a risky job that involved making sure the planes were suitable for combat duty.

Since before her wartime service, Rohrer said she was enamored with aviation.

"I was born wanting to fly," she said. "I used to watch the birds and butterflies and envy them for being up there."

She said she took flying lessons as a youth, earning her pilot's license even before she got her driver's license. She joined the WASPs at age 18.

Today, many modern-day female pilots credit the WASPs as pioneers. "It's wonderful to have their respect and their kindness," Rohrer said.

After her stint with the WASPs, Rohrer spent 20 years teaching at Arroyo High School in El Monte. Many of her students were interested in her experiences as a test pilot.

Rohrer said she always had a message to the girls in her classes:

"Don't be a stewardess, be a pilot. Don't be a nurse, be a doctor," Rohrer said. "Don't let somebody tell you what you can and can't do because you're a woman."

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