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Army brass initially fought to keep them from flying for their country. And when they were through, they had to wait more than three decades to be considered military "veterans."

The role of women pilots during World War II was highly underplayed and clearly underappreciated.

Now, with President Barack Obama having signed a bill into law last month, members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots finally will get some recognition. Sometime later this year or early next, many of the nearly 300 surviving WASPs — Adeline Ellison of Modesto and Doris Wanty of Oakdale among them — will go to Washington, D.C., to receive the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor.



Modesto Bee - Photos taken in 1944 at Sweetwater, Texas of Doris Wanty, then 22 by one of the planes she trained on a AT-6. Wanty, 86, from Oakdale was a WASP, Women Airforce Service Pilots during WWII

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He can be reached at

It took a long and concerted campaign of calling members of Congress to get them to support the bill, said Ellison, who will turn 90 Sept. 26. Wanty is 86.

"They finally decided to do it," Ellison said. "There were only 300 of us left when the president signed it. We've lost three or four since. We're all getting up there (in age)."

The recognition is long overdue for the 1,074 women pilots who, working as civilians, flew military planes at home to free male pilots for combat duty. They flew everything from training planes to C-47 transports to B-17, B-24 and B-25 bombers. They flew them from the manufacturers to points of departure to the war zones. They flew them from base to base, all over the country.

All of them were civilian pilots before training to become WASPs, and "we learned to fly the Army way," Ellison said.

As a young woman in Illinois, she began flying at the urging of her father — "a just-for-fun

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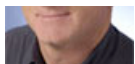
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Jeff Jardine's column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays in Local News section of The Modesto Bee and at modbee.com/columnists/jardine

pilot" — she said.

"He talked me into going out and getting some flying lessons," Ellison said.

Under the guidance of Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold, commander of the Army Air Forces, the military began using the civilian women pilots to fly its planes in 1942. Ellison, 21 at the time, jumped at the chance.

"We saw an ad in the paper from Jackie Cochran (who organized the WASP effort) wanting women pilots," Ellison said."

More than 25,000 applied, and about 1,900 were selected for the program. Of those, 1,074 earned their wings, according to author Amy Nathan in her 2001 book "Yankee Doodle Gals."

"I ferried aircraft from California to all over the U.S.," said Ellison, who was stationed at Long Beach.

Wanty spent most of her 11 months as a WASP in Texas, flying PT-17 Stearman and Vultee BT-13 Valiant training planes.

The last time she flew solo?

"In December 1944," Wanty said, referring to when the program ended.

Because they were considered civilians, they enjoyed none of the respect nor the honors those in the military received for their efforts. If a WASP died in the line of duty — and 38 of them did — her family had to pay to bring her body home for burial, and they were not allowed to drape an American flag over the casket, Ellison said.

"A lot of the girls would donate money to help pay," said Ellison's daughter, Andrea Holmquist.

Ellison experienced additional disappointment. When the program disbanded, she joined the newly formed Air Force reserves. By 1952, she had risen to the rank of first lieutenant. She also got married and had two children, all of which was on her military record. But while taking an Air Force class in personnel management — the only woman in a class of 35 students — her colonel overheard her talking about her children during a break.

"He said, 'You have children?'" Ellison said. "I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Unless you have someone adopt your children, you can't be in the Air Force reserves.'"

He allowed her to finish the class, then had her honorably discharged.

"It broke my heart," she said. She lost her retirement pay, too, she said.

A Congressional Gold Medal won't right that wrong. But it is one more step toward formally recognizing the overall lack of respect given to women — civilians as well as those in the military — for their roles during wartime.

When the WASPs head to Washington to pick up their medals, Wanty and Ellison plan to be there.

"We're hoping to be able to go," said Mike Wanty, Doris' husband. They have attended numerous WASP meetings over the years. But he warns, the government shouldn't wait too long to schedule the ceremony — not with so many of the surviving WASPs and their spouses approaching 90.

"None of us are spring chickens anymore," he said.

Jeff Jardine's column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays in Local News. He can be reached at 578-2383 or jjardine@modbee.com.

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