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Hayward woman among pilots honored for World War II service

By Eric Kurhi Oakland Tribune

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BAYTOWN, Texas — There were moments of monotony high up there in the clouds, but 93-year-old Barbara "Bobbie" Heinrich fondly recalls the "great fun" she had ferrying World War II fighter aircraft across the country.

Based out of Love Field in Dallas, Heinrich would pilot Warhawks, Airacobras and Mustangs to bases on both coasts, from where they'd be sent to face off with Messerschmitts over Europe or Zeros in the Pacific. She was one of the Women Airforce Service Pilots — or WASPs — honored last week with a Congressional Gold Medal at a ceremony in Washington, D.C.

Heinrich, who spends eight months a year living with her youngest daughter in Hayward, said it was quite an honor.

"We just had a marvelous time," she said. "I was amazed by the amount of people who were there."

Out of 1,100 WASPs, fewer than 300 are still alive. About 200 of them were on hand at the March 10 ceremony, along with family, friends and politicians from throughout the country.

The aviators were the first female pilots to fly military aircraft under the direction of the Army Air Forces. The men formerly in those jobs then were able to fly combat missions overseas.

"Oh, it could be great fun," Heinrich said. "Of course, during deliveries it was kind of boring, sitting up there and watching the clouds go by."

But if she was ahead of schedule, she would never miss an opportunity to take the agile fighters through some acrobatic

maneuvers, "just playing around up in the clouds," or down into canyons for kicks.

A favorite trick was to use a P-51 to buzz her mother's New Jersey home, which was en route to a drop-off

spot.

"I would rake the neighborhood," she said. "Then loop up and come by again. Then 20 minutes later, I would call my mom to let her know I had landed."

The job wasn't without its risks.

Those planes were fresh out of the factory — the WASPs were often the first ones to take a newly minted plane up for any significant amount of time. Thirty-eight of the WASPs died in crashes while making their deliveries.

But Heinrich said her missions weren't scary.

"We trusted the mechanics," she said. "I never had anything go wrong. I was lucky."

She said after the war, there was little opportunity to continue flying, so she eventually settled down in Texas to raise a family with her husband. Commercial airlines simply would not hire female pilots, although Heinrich and her two closest friends from the WASPs tried to get hired.

"They just laughed at us," she said. "They didn't have any women flying at that time. They figured all the passengers would have a fit."

Eric Kurhi covers Hayward. Contact him at 510-293-2473. Read our blog at www.ibabuzz.com/hayword.



Barbara Heinrich receives a medal for her service with the WASPs in World War II. (Courtesy of...)

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