

LOCAL APRIL 5, 2016 4:29 PM

Captola Johnson: Pioneering female aviator dies in Sacramento at 95

HIGHLIGHTS

The Fair Oaks resident flew bombers in World War II

She was one of about 1,100 pilots in Women Airforce Service Pilots program

In 2010, Johnson, other WASP pilots received Congressional Gold Medal



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Captola "Cappy" Johnson Courtesy of Johnson family

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Captola "Cappy" Johnson, a coal miner's daughter who went on to fly during World War II as a pioneering aviator, died March 18 at a Folsom hospital after a short illness. She was about a month shy of her 96th birthday.

The longtime Fair Oaks resident was one of the approximate 1,100 women in the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program. In 2010, when she and other WASP pilots received the Congressional Gold Medal in Washington, D.C., an estimated 300 were still living.

Nearly 30,000 women applied for the wartime program. WASPs tested planes, ferried aircraft from factories to military bases, and performed other duties so men could fly combat missions overseas.

They flew many types of military aircraft, including bombers. In addition to ferrying aircraft, they performed the dangerous stateside duty of towing targets behind their aircraft to give soldiers a chance to fire anti-aircraft guns.

A total of 38 WASPs died during the short history of the program, which grew from two efforts that started in 1942. Cappy Johnson graduated as a WASP at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, in 1943.

Her son said that she spoke often about flying for the government. "She really enjoyed it," said David Johnson, a Fair Oaks resident. "Mom said she flew the planes to where they were needed."

Captola Whittaker was born in Raleigh County, W.Va., to Peery and Theodosia Whittaker. Her father, a coal miner, named her Captola, a name derived from the Cherokee language, although the family had no American Indian heritage.

"Grandpa just liked that name," said David Johnson.

The 5-foot-2-inch Captola Whittaker barely made it into the WASP program because of her height.

"I think she may have been on tippy-toes to get in," said David Johnson.

When women were dismissed from the service in 1944, their records were classified and sealed.

The man who gave the go-ahead to create the WASPs, Gen. Hap Arnold, chief of the Army Air Forces, noted upon the disbanding of the group that he initially doubted that women could command big bombers.

"Frankly, I didn't know in 1941 whether a slip of a young girl could fight the controls of a B-17 in the heavy weather," he said in a War Department release of his speech to the last graduating WASPs.

In the end, WASPs proved they could "fly wingtip to wingtip with your brothers," Arnold said.

The Air Force trumpeted in 1976 that the women who were graduating from the first co-ed class of the Air Force Academy would be the first American women to fly military aircraft. That angered the aging WASPs.

They knew of their service flying all manner of military planes even if the nation had largely forgotten. The WASPs spoke up.

A movement to recognize the blue-uniformed WASPs began, an effort that climaxed with Congressional Gold Medals for Johnson and her fellow pilots in 2010.

Johnson did some flying after the war, sometimes with her fellow pilot and husband, Lyall E. Johnson. The couple met while both were stationed at Edwards Air Force Base in California.

They had twin boys, David and Dennis. The family moved around the country as an Air Force family before settling in the Sacramento area around 1960. The family built a home in Fair Oaks.

She raised her boys and enjoyed golf, bridge, photography, reading and bird watching. She also sold real estate for Bill Withrow Realty for 10 years.

In addition to her sons, she is survived by her brother Wayne Whittaker; two granddaughters and three great-grandchildren.

Johnson will be interred at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, along with her late husband. Lyall Johnson died in 2009.

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