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Dorothy Eppstein, who served in the Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II, dies at 92

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 Fritz Klug | Kalamazoo Gazette
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Dorothy Eppstein, 92, of Kalamazoo, was a member of the Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASP) during World War II.

KALAMAZOO — Throughout her life, Dorothy Eppstein fostered an independence and sense of adventure that led her to work in research labs of The Upjohn Co., build a Frank Lloyd Wright house and fly U.S. military aircraft in World War II as a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP.

Eppstein, 92, died Monday from complications after falling Friday in the parking structure of her Kalamazoo apartment building, said Maggie Eppstein, a daughter.

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Dorothy Eppstein was one of the three women who were still living in the Kalamazoo area who were **awarded the Congressional Gold Medal** by President Barack Obama in March for their service during the war.

She was joined by Doris Nathan and Suzanne D. Parish, one of the founders of the Kalamazoo Air Zoo. Parish died May 14.

After receiving the medal, the highest civilian award accorded by Congress, Maggie Eppstein said her mother wore her WASP uniform

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around town for a week — to the beauty parlor, the theater and the bridge club.

“She was so excited,” Maggie Eppstein said. “It meant a whole lot.”

In WASP, Eppstein served as a ferry and a test pilot and was one of 1,078 female pilots to complete the training. More than 25,000 volunteers applied. About 300 pilots are still alive.

Eppstein was born on March 1, 1918 in Lansing, and survived the Spanish flu pandemic when she was six months old. After earning a chemistry degree from Michigan State University, she became a research secretary at The Upjohn Co. in Kalamazoo, before volunteering for WASP in 1943.

Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs): Dorothy Dodd Eppstein

But Maggie Eppstein said her mother would say her time with WASP was less important than the 20 years she worked as a substance-abuse counselor at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Battle Creek.

After retiring from the VA, she wrote a book on her counseling philosophy called “Is Living Killing You?”

Daughter Betsy Eppstein said she spent most of Tuesday looking through some 20 photo albums her mother compiled over the years.

“She reinvented herself so many times in so many disconnected things,” Betsy Eppstein said.

Dorothy Eppstein was a teacher, did community theater work, wrote plays, earned degrees in counseling, psychology, and social work, and, late in her life, played in Texas Hold ‘em poker tournaments.

“She was always curious about things,” Betsy Eppstein said. “She believed she could do anything she wanted to do.”

In the 1950s, Dorothy and her husband, Sam, built a Frank Lloyd Wright house near Galesburg, and told the famous architect that the kitchen needed to be bigger.

The couple built the house themselves, from pouring the blocks of concrete to finishing the woodwork.

Eppstein was politically active during the anti-war and civil rights movements in the 1960s, and wrote many letters to the editor on her views. She attended many political rallies and saw Martin Luther King Jr. deliver his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

“She lived a full life and stayed independent,” Maggie Eppstein said. “She had an independent spirit that would never be kept down, long before it was customary in women.”

In addition to her daughters Betsy and Maggie, Dorothy Eppstein is survived by daughters Elizabeth Downs, Debby Eppstein and Laurel Eppstein, son Jonathan Eppstein, 10 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held at 7 p.m. Friday at the Peoples’ Church, Unitarian Universalist, 1758 N. 10th St., where Eppstein was a member.

Contact Fritz Klug at fklug@kalamazoo gazette.com or 269-388-8553.

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