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Congressional Gold Medal helps WASP get over sting from military snub

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Lauren Long / The Post-Standard

Dawn Seymour, in her office at home in South Bristol, is seen in front of a wall with pictures of early models of the B-17, the plane she flew during World War II as a member of Women Airforce Service Pilots. In March, she received a Congressional Gold Medal for her service flying military transport aircraft in 1943 and 1944.

After graduating from Cornell University in 1939, Dawn Seymour became one of the first Women Airforce Service Pilots — the famous WASPs — who flew military aircraft during World War II. They took the helm of transport aircraft, thus freeing male pilots to handle combat missions. The women's contributions to the war effort, largely overlooked for many years, were acknowledged in March, **when they received Congressional Gold Medals.** Seymour, who lives in the town of South Bristol near Canandaigua Lake, spoke with Post-Standard staff writer Hart Seely.

So what do you do with a Congressional Gold Medal? Can you wear it around town?

It's in a box on my desk. It's quite heavy. They have little ones now, that the U.S. Mint has also cast, which are available to the WASPs and their families. This one is in a presentation box, so it's quite elaborate. It's designed and engraved on both sides.

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So do you just happen to leave it out on the coffee table when entertaining guests?

Well, I suppose you could.

You often speak at schools and talk to kids. What do they make of it?

The little ones are fascinated with photographs and stories, and the fact that women can fly. Of course, we were unknowns to so many people in the country. We thought we had done a pretty good job. But in history, there

was that big vacuum hole.

Receiving the medal must have been nice, being finally acknowledged for the contributions?

The reason it closed the circle so much was that we had been sent home in December of '44, just as the Battle of the Bulge began. So we never had a complete circle. We were civilian pilots. We were never militarized. And the feeling of being sent home while the war was still going — well, we felt then that we were needed. And we were needed. It left a sting, you see.

You once told an interviewer that you never felt like an outsider. But didn't you feel like a woman in a man's world?

We recognized that, at once. But we trained with women. That gave us a great sense of confidence and security, and when we passed, we were pilots. ... Once you have that as a strength, that's buoyant.

Some girls I know just walked in and went to the CO (commanding officer) and said, "I'm here to report, sir." One girl has a story where he said, "I didn't ask for any women pilots!" She said, "Well, I didn't ask to come." But we knew we were trained. We were there to fly. We were there to help the war effort.

You once mentioned in an interview being affected by "The Feminine Mystique," written by Betty Friedan.

That was very interesting. Because we had slid back into this pre-war feeling about women, and then Betty Friedan opened that door of how women were being treated differently than men — as children, growing up.

Did you feel like a vanguard of the feminist movement?



J. Scott Applewhite / The Associated Press

At a ceremony March 12 on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASPs, receive Congressional Gold Medals. Among those attending were (from left) House Minority Leader John Boehner, of Ohio; House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, of California; Deanie Parrish, a WASP pilot from Waco, Texas; and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, of Kentucky.

No. I didn't. I think we were comfortable in our roles, and we just slid into them after the war. We were still — well — we were called "ladies" in that sense. The boys still opened the doors for us, that kind of thing. Civility and the politeness still reigned.

Do you think women can fight and hold their own in the U.S. military?

I know they can.

Do you ever get asked by groups to give your support on political issues?

Not really. I stand up for women ... but I do believe women have to stand up for themselves. I encourage them to be strong, to make their own choices. If they are free to make their own choices, they're happier.

But they gave you no choice when they

sent you home in '44?

No, and that's — that's a good point. But we were determined to make our own choices in life, rather than have them made for us. I think that's probably as good as it gets. ... I have loved my independence in life. I think if you make your choices and act willingly, the workload is so much easier.

So, to what do you attribute your interesting life and success?

Well, I keep thinking about that, now that I am getting to this ripe, wonderful age. You know, it is a wonderful

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age, because you get to look back. Looking forward — that's a little hazy, of course, but I suppose it's always been that way. The future always has dark clouds as well as plenty of sunshine.

My mother said I had a sunny disposition and was a happy child, that I was very curious and I loved nature. I think that's what propelled me.

That's it? Be happy? Be curious?

And think. My dad taught me that: Think things through. Turn it over. See what is on the other side of the coin. Then make your choices.

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Hart Seely: You can do better than this. Your questions, particularly the first two, are light-weight and a bit sarcastic. This could have been a fascinating interview if you had gotten into the nuts and bolts of what Dawn Seymour had actually done during the war and what some of her more outstanding memories were. Instead, you ask her if she wears her medal around town? Come on, man, you are a better reporter than that.

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As a former member of the US Air Force, I must say that this is long overdue. These Ladies worked very hard and did not get recognized for what they did.

I truly have to tip my hat to these Women and all the Women who worked so very hard and got little or no recognition for what they did in service of their Country.