



# Dallas-area women among World War II pilots to receive nation's top medal today

By SHERRY JACOBSON / The Dallas Morning News  
sjacobson@dallasnews.com

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Long before their faces became wrinkled and their hair turned gray, they were the young, daring women of [World War II](#).

Daring because they defied tradition, overcoming discrimination to become the first female pilots to fly military planes in the U.S.

Betty Jo Reed was perhaps one of the boldest. After high school, she worked as a sales clerk, devoting half her paycheck to flying lessons.

Today, the 86-year-old North Richland Hills resident will be among the 295 surviving members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots to accept the Congressional Gold Medal.

The medal, the highest civilian honor bestowed by [Congress](#), will be presented to the group during a ceremony in Washington, D.C. The medal then will be donated to the [Smithsonian Institution](#).

Each of the women or their surviving family members will receive a bronze replica.

"It is wonderful to finally be honored for our service to this country," said Reed, who is attending the ceremony with her daughter, Melissa Reed of Aurora, Colo.

"None of these women expected this honor, but what they did was incredible," said another daughter, Sally Reed Zobrist of [Southlake](#).

Thirty-one Texans, including six women from the Dallas-Fort Worth area, are among the recipients. The local women include Eloise Bailey of [Carrollton](#), Rita Wischmeyer of Dallas, Dora McKeown and Martha Roundtree, both of [Fort Worth](#), Frankie Bretherick of [Plano](#) and Reed.

A bill sponsored last year by Sens. [Kay Bailey Hutchison](#), a Texas [Republican](#), and [Barbara Mikulski](#), a [Maryland Democrat](#), called for the women to be honored. It also lauded the women for ferrying military aircraft around the U.S. between 1942 and 1944.

Some of the pilots, including Reed, flew planes that had undergone repairs and needed to be tested before going back into service.

But the hardest part for the women was not always the flying.

"They faced overwhelming cultural and gender bias against women in nontraditional roles and overcame multiple injustices and inequities in order to serve their country," the bill noted.

When the bill was passed last summer, it authorized medals for the 1,102 WASP members or their survivors, along with those for the 11 women killed during pilot training.

Another recipient was Jacqueline Cochran, the seasoned U.S. pilot who suggested using women to solve a pilot shortage during the war.

"Their service was intrepid, unprecedented and, for many years, largely unnoticed," Hutchison said after introducing the bill.

"Their success in the line of duty paved the way for the armed forces to lift the ban on women attending military flight training in the 1970s, and their efforts eventually led to women being fully integrated as military pilots."

The recognition of the female pilots was a bit unexpected - and somewhat late - considering that most of the women have died and those still living are in their 80s and 90s. About half were expected to attend today's ceremony.

"It's a shame they were almost forgotten and their program was deactivated before the end of the war," said Dawn Letson, coordinator of special collections at Texas Woman's University in Denton.

Since 1992, the university has been home to the personal archives of WASP members, including about 300 oral histories by the pilots. The collection is maintained by a \$600,000 endowment fund.

Reed, who was born in Sherman, shared her personal story of falling in love with flying when she was "a tiny girl."

When she heard the Army Air Force was recruiting female pilots, she jumped at the opportunity. She was only 20 but had taken flying lessons as a teen.

"It was an experiment," Reed recalled. "They weren't sure women could fly the big bombers. There were 74 types of military aircraft, and we flew every one of them."

Most of the women's military training took place in Texas, at airfields in Houston and Sweetwater.

"They went in as civilian pilots, because the military needed them so badly," Letson said. "But the plan was always to get militarization for them later."

WASP, however, was deactivated Dec. 20, 1944, when the war was winding down, and male pilots came home expecting to take over the flying jobs.

"We offered to fly the planes for free, but they wouldn't let us," Reed said. "They didn't want women flying their planes anymore."

Other than becoming a stewardess, it was nearly impossible for a woman to find a job in aviation back then. Most went home and started families.

Then in 1974, the Navy announced that it would allow women to fly military planes for the first time in U.S. history.

WASP members knew this was inaccurate, and they protested not only to the Navy, but also to Congress to finally recognize them as members of the military.

In 1977, President Jimmy Carter signed the measure into law.

"By then, the women had missed out on GI Bill benefits," Letson said. "But it gave them access to the VA hospital, which is no small thing.

"And they get an American flag on their casket when they die."