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Orient WWII flyer honored

Eleanor Faust was a Women Airforce Service Pilot
BY JULIE LANE | STAFF WRITER

It took 65 years, but Orient's Eleanor Faust, 87, and other former Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) finally got their long-deserved recognition last week, receiving Congressional gold medals for their service during World War II.

"It was just thrilling to get all that attention we got in Washington," Ms. Faust said. When she joined the WASPs in the early 1940s, the existence of the elite group of women was barely acknowledged. Members had to pay their own expenses to Sweetwater, Texas, for training, and if they washed out, they had to pay their own way home. If they made it into the program, they earned \$150 a month.

Out of 25,000 women who applied, 1,830 were accepted for training and only 1,074 graduated.

The women were outfitted in men's baggy overalls and given parachutes and cushions to sit on so their feet could reach the rudder pedals. Their job was to ferry fighter and bomber planes and to tow targets for combat pilots to use in gunnery practice. They also tested aircraft and performed other flight duties to free the men for overseas combat. (A story about Ms. Faust's entrance into the program was carried in The Suffolk Times on Nov. 9, 2006.)

Congresswomen Susan Davis of California and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida and Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas and Barbara Mikulski of Maryland led the congressional effort to honor the women flyers. President Obama signed the bill last July authorizing the honors.

The honorees and their families listened in the Capitol's Emancipation Hall as luminaries, including former NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw and Lt. Col. Nicole Malachowski, the first woman to fly with the famed Air Force Thunderbirds aerobatic team, talked about the WASPs' fearlessness and bravery.



The Congressional Gold Medal sits on Eleanor Faust's mantel in Orient.



A photo ID shows Eleanor Faust at 21, during her training to join the Women Airforce Service Pilots.

'It was sort of a humbling experience to get all this attention.'
Eleanor Faust

program was being deactivated. She pursued a career in New York in television and went on to marry and raise a family.

Ms. Faust never flew for the WASPs after graduating in December 1944 because the



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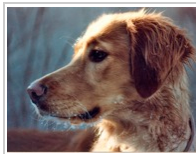


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to marry and raise a family.

It took so long to recognize the women's service, in part, because their files had been classified for many years. It took a group of WASPs to finally have the files released, Ms. Faust said.

In 1977, thanks to legislation sponsored by the late Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona, members were finally recognized as war veterans, but they were granted only some of the benefits. They could be buried at veterans' cemeteries and be treated at Veterans Administration hospitals but they weren't granted other GI benefits such as paid education, she said.

Ms. Faust was accompanied in Washington by daughters Virginia Faust of Middlebury, Vt., and Elizabeth Wheeler of Lyndonville, Vt.; her son George Faust and his wife, Kathy, from New York City; and her granddaughter Amanda Faust and husband Eric Bakko from Brooklyn.

"They loved it," she said about the ceremony. Afterward, WASPS from New York were invited to meet with Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, who gave each a flag that had been flown over the Capitol and a certificate honoring their service.

The group visited the World War II Memorial on the mall before the ceremony. During their ride to the Capitol, police were posted at every corner, stopping traffic so the caravan of 12 buses could proceed.

"It was sort of a humbling experience to get all this attention," Ms. Faust said.

On her return home, she found a fan letter from Nathan Parker of Greenville, N.Y., asking for her autograph. He's a teacher and she's hoping he will tell his classes about the struggle women have had for recognition through the years.

"It's still a fight for women," she said. "It takes hard work at times, but it can be done."

What's ahead for the former flyer?

"I guess, retirement," she said. But then she went on to list activities in which she is still involved, including the American Airpower Museum at Republic Airport in Farmingdale, work with the Oysterponds Historical Society, an acrylics painting course being offered by Southold Town, t'ai chi, lots of reading and, with warm weather on the horizon, golf.

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It took 65 years for Eleanor Faust of Orient and other members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots to be honored, but last week they received Congressional gold medals for their service during World War II.

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