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Aspen women receive congressional medals

by **Troy Hooper**, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer
Saturday, July 11, 2009

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It may have been 60 years overdue, but last week President Barack Obama bestowed the nation's highest civilian honor on the courageous and long overlooked Women Airforce Service Pilots.

Unfortunately, most of the women who flew U.S. military aircraft for the first time during World War II aren't around anymore.

"The WASPs are dropping like flies. There were only about 1,000 of us to begin with and I think there are only 300 of us left," said Elizabeth "Betty" Pfister in an interview at her Aspen home this week.

Pfister, 88, and another Aspen resident, Ruth Brown, 88, are both receiving the congressional gold medal for their admirable service. Now that Obama has signed the measure into law, a medal ceremony will soon be scheduled in the nation's capital to honor the WASPs.

But for decades, the women were left out of the history books. The Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASPs, formed in 1942 to answer the call of the military's aviation need in the United States, freeing up male war pilots to do battle overseas. After 16 months, the program was shut down at the end of 1944 with zero recognition from the government. After the war ended, the women went back to their daily lives without receiving any of the support given to men in the military.

The WASP records were sealed for more than 30 years until, in 1977, Congress elected to make WASPs eligible for veterans benefits. The women did not perform in combat but they were assigned to military bases where they flew drones, transported cargo, served as instructors, conducted night exercises, tested repaired aircraft, and other dangerous duties. Thirty-eight women were killed carrying out their work.



Dustin Franz/Aspen Daily News
Betty Pfister, 88, at her home in Aspen.

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training program at Avenger Field in Texas.

Pfister joined the ferrying division, transporting planes from one place to another, and testing repaired planes damaged in combat.

"We would test fly them and it was just a miracle if anything worked. We were expendable and the men were not," said Pfister, whose division had a lower accident rate than their male counterparts.

Despite the tough assignments, Pfister said she had a lot of fun.

"We were able to check out all kinds of planes. One day it would be a little one, the next day it would be a big one," she said. "I was able to fly a B-17 and that was really exciting for a 21-year-old."

Brown learned how to fly in Denver so she could apply to become a WASP. Once enlisted, she flew planes for cadets to practice their bombardier training using a new instrument at the time, the Norden bomb sight, which allowed pilots to better zero in on targets.

Pfister, who has been named one of the 100 most influential women in the history of aviation, said she hopes to attend the medal ceremony in Washington, D.C., once its time and location are announced.

"I'm still vertical. I'm still able to travel at this point," she said.

It appears less likely Brown will attend. But asked how it feels to receive the congressional gold medal, she answered: "Better late than never!"

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Comments

Fallen Hero - Fly Girl from Kalamazoo

Submitted by EverydayCitizen on Thu, 07/16/2009 - 6:52pm.

Mabel Rawlinson was one of the 38 WASP that made the ultimate sacrifice and she definitely deserves the congressional medal.

It was at Camp Davis on the night of August 23, 1943, that Mabel lost her life when her airplane crashed and was consumed by flames. She became one of the very special women, numbering only thirty-eight, who served and died as pilots for the Air Force in World War II.

Since WASP were technically considered volunteer civilian pilots and not Air Force pilots, no monetary compensation was available to the Rawlinson family for her funeral expenses.

The other female pilots at Camp Davis pooled their extra money and assisted in the expense of transporting Mabel's casket back to Kalamazoo for burial.

Read the whole story about this fallen hero here:

http://www.everydaycitizen.com/2008/05/still_my_fallen_hero_fly_girl.htm...

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Aspen WASPS

Submitted by maycoors on Sat, 07/11/2009 - 8:20pm.

Aunt Ruthie, CONGRATULATIONS!!! I never knew about this! I am so impressed. You are such an awesome woman in SO many ways.

»

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Great...!

Submitted by 1978LivesOn on Sat, 07/11/2009 - 8:56am.

What a great tribute to a "Class Act". Wonderful~!

»

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