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Web Posted: 03/08/2010 11:49 CST

### Female WWII pilots get overdue honor

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By Scott Huddleston - Express-News RSS | EMAIL | PRINT | SAVE

Whether it was landing in dense fog on low fuel or using hand signals to teach Mexican pilots to fly, the experiences of being a female pilot during World War II gave Holly Grasso stories to tell for a lifetime.

She is one of two San Antonians who will be honored Wednesday by Congress for their service as Women Airforce Service Pilots: civilian "WASPs" who tested or ferried aircraft and trained other pilots in the U.S. from 1942 to 1944.

Grasso was footloose and adventurous in her early 20s when she trained Mexican and Cuban pilots at Foster Field in Victoria. Interpreters helped with the preflight briefings, but because she couldn't speak Spanish, she had to use her hands to guide the trainees when they were in the air with her.

"Now I realize that was very dangerous," said Grasso, 88.

Of about 25,000 women who applied for the WASP program, 1,830 were accepted, and fewer than 1,100 got their wings. During the war, 38 of them were killed in service.

The other San Antonian to be honored is Dorothy Lucas, 87. Her daughter, Helen Lucas Hall, who was flying Monday to Washington, said Lucas joined the WASP program in the hope of helping the war effort.

"She said she would've gone overseas and fought if she could because it was wartime," Hall said during a layover. Her mother was on a separate flight.

Event organizers said they expect at least 150 former WASPs, among an estimated 300 still living, to attend. The WASPs as a group will be presented with the Congressional Gold Medal, which will be donated to the Smithsonian Institution. Each member will receive a bronze replica of the medal, which is Congress' highest award for distinguished achievements and contributions.

As a WASP, Grasso also used to tow targets for pilot trainees who fired live rounds. Though her plane never was hit, she did have problems when thick fog rolled in one day. She said she used a highway and water tower to guide herself to the airstrip, and she landed just as her engine ran out of fuel and died.

She said that although she'd had some flying experience, her training in AT-6s at Avenger Field in Sweetwater was grueling.

"I studied all night long with a flashlight under the covers," Grasso said.

Joining the WASPs was a leap of faith for Grasso, who was from Oklahoma and was the only member she knew of whose mother accompanied her on the train to Sweetwater. Today, she has black-and-white photos from that era hanging in her hallway and a photo of AT-6s in formation in her garage. Flying gave her a thrill, with an edge of tension that made it all the more exciting.

By the time she was refining her landing technique, Grasso couldn't stand the thought of washing out and not getting her wings.

"You're up for a checklist tomorrow," her instructor told her after her plane had almost done a "ground loop," or rotation, during a landing.

"I called home and told my mother, 'I've got to pass!'" Grasso said. "She and Dad got down on their knees and prayed. I thanked them the next day, because it worked."

Though she kept flying recreationally, Grasso and other WASPs couldn't find work as military or professional aviators after the war. She said she tried to apply to be a pilot with Braniff Airways in the 1950s, "and they thought I'd lost my mind."

In 1977, WASPs were given military veteran status.

Lucas, one of the youngest pilots in the program, was training in Sweetwater when her brother, an Army Air Corps navigator, was killed overseas. Despite her mother's pleas to return home, she stayed and got her wings.

Lucas towed targets at Moore Field in Mission, where she met a young instructor pilot. They were married in 1945, and she never flew again. Her husband died in 2001.



MICHAEL MILLER/mmiller@express-news.net

Holly Grasso, 88, holds a portrait of herself as a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots.

[National WASP World War II Museum](#)

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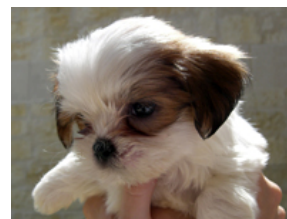
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Daughter Hall, who lives in Austin, said her mother is thrilled by the honor but sad that many former WASPs can't be there.

"It's really wonderful, and long overdue," Hall said. "I'm really proud of her. She was a part of history, and a wartime program that somehow stayed under the radar."

Another former WASP, Mary Josephine Farley Tilton, 88, of Harlingen, cannot attend because of health problems, said her nephew, Bruce Baker.

Grasso plans to attend Wednesday's ceremony wearing her retailored WASP uniform, with her son nearby. She said she and Lucas are friends and that they've reflected on their day in the Capitol and what it will mean to them.

"We're all sisters in the sight of each other," Grasso said. "We went through something together that will never be repeated."



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7 comment(s) on "Female WWII pilots get overdue honor"

Doris 5:51 PM

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During the same period in WW 2, the Russians had a unit of female pilots, the "Witches of Midnight", who flew small requisitioned sports-planes over the German positions at night to deprive the Germans of sleep.

Doris 12:44 PM

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"She was very pretty! I was very impressed!" states a former flight pupil of the "Escuadron 201" of Mexico's Fuerza Aerea, see the youtube video: "The Forgotten Eagles. The 201 Squadron". There are many youtube videos, such as "Mexican Squadron sent to Second World War", "Fuerza Aerea Mexicana en Filipinas" leading on to many more. The 300 Mexican pilots flew combat missions in the Phillipines and Taiwan-China. Some lost their lives in combat. (Brazil sent 20,000 soldiers to fight in Europe, including pilots. See youtube "FEB ofensiva primavera".)

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