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A pilot's service

Ellen Campbell, one of three surviving Women's Airforce Service Pilots in Alaska, talks about flying, helping others

By Kim Andree | JUNEAU EMPIRE

"Service is the rent we pay for being. It is the very purpose of life, and not something you do in your spare time."

- Marian Wright Edelman, American activist for children's rights

When asked about serving in the Women's Airforce Service Pilots during World War II, Juneau resident Ellen Campbell quoted Marian Wright Edelman.

"Far bigger than women pilots and for anybody to have recognition, is that 'service is the rent we pay' for the privilege we have in life," Campbell said. "It's not a one-way street; we receive so much more than we give."

But whether she wants it or not, this 87-year-old has received recognition - one of the nation's highest civilian awards, the Congressional Gold Medal.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski announced May 21 the Senate passed legislation honoring the total 1,074 women who earned their WASP wings. Campbell is one of only three surviving Alaskans, the other two are from Fairbanks, and some 300 WASPs nationally.

"These brave women faced cultural and gender bias, received unequal pay and didn't have full military status during the war," said Murkowski, an original co-sponsor of the legislation. "...It's only appropriate for Congress to recognize and honor their service and award them the highest and most distinguished honor a civilian may receive."

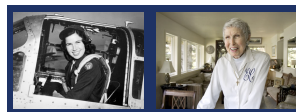
"It's just wonderful, marvelous," Campbell said of receiving the



Michael Penn / Juneau Empire

Ellen Campbell in the cockpit in 1943. Campbell is to be awarded a Congressional Gold Medal for her time flying planes for the Women's Airforce Service Pilots in the early 1940s.

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Web link To read more about WASPs, visit www.aopa.org/aircraft/articles/2009/090506wasp.html

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honor. "I'm very grateful for it."

Campbell was an engineering test pilot for the WASPs from its inception in 1942 to its disbandment on Dec. 20, 1944. This was more than three decades before women were allowed to attend military pilot training with full status in the United States.

"We felt we were meeting a need," Campbell said, "because everybody had their hearts on the situation in the war."

Stationed at a base in Jackson, Miss., Campbell helped fly and test every sort of aircraft, new and newly repaired, so male pilots could be released for combat duty overseas.

Although the only plane on her record is a UC-78, Campbell said she's flown many more than that. Her favorite was the B-25 bomber.

"It was big," Campbell said of the plane. "It had a lot of horsepower, and when you put down the flaps, even moved the flaps, it was heavy. It was just a big cut above."

In all, Campbell describes her experience with WASP as a privilege and an opportunity.

"The most rewarding part was something I think God built into everybody - and that is service, feeling that you're helping," she said. "It was the joy of feeling you were being helpful and the excitement and the delight of flying."

Take off

Although she loves it now, Campbell didn't always know she wanted to be a pilot.

"When I was little, I wanted to be a stewardess, and that was the height of the aspiration for a girl to fly," she said.

But when Campbell graduated from college and began work as a recreational director at an orphanage, the war began. She got a job as a link trainer operator at the naval base in Atlanta and was soon promoted to lecturer.

"It seemed absurd to be lecturing about flying and not have a private pilot's license, so I asked my father for my birthday present if he would give me flying lessons," Campbell said.

Soon after getting her license, Campbell applied with WASP, was accepted and was sent to Sweetwater, Texas, for nine months of flight training.

Of the whole experience, Campbell said trying not to get washed out was the most difficult. Pilots had to complete three primary tests.

"You had to pass a check flight to be promoted from one to the other, and if you didn't pass it, you were washed out, you were no more a WASP," she recalled.

In all, more than 25,000 women applied for training. Of that number, more than 30 women died during training.

Campbell said she was less sure of herself than the other women.

"I was not the hot-pilot type who did everything," she said. "I was just a regular person. I didn't fly P-51s or do experimental aircraft or tow a target."

Campbell's flight instructor - who would rather have been overseas than instructing women - didn't help, she said.

"My flight instructor would kind of say, 'There it is there on the board,' and he'd throw chalk at girls across the room," Campbell said. "He just wasn't excited about us."

The first time Campbell ever flew with her instructor she took off and made a right turn in the regular traffic pattern.

"And all of a sudden, I felt the stick, he grabbed it, and it went 'whap, whap, whap' like that against my knees," she said. "And he said, 'Turn the damn thing! Turn it!' and he yanked it up on its wings, and I thought we were going in."

After that, Campbell was shaky, thinking she was going to wash out. She sat in the plane's cockpit to think things over.

"I just realized, he's already washed out two of us. I'm going to be the next one," Campbell said. "Now am I going to wash myself out, or am I going to be washed out? I looked at the other girls walking up and down the flight line, and I thought, 'If they can do it, I can do it.'"

So Campbell went back to her flight instructor and requested a different one.

"I requested a change of instructors, and I took the Army check flight, and he said 'You're gonna be all right,'" Campbell said. "I didn't wash out, thanks be to God."

Starfish thrower

Today, Campbell still serves but as a religious volunteer in the local prison. She was introduced to it through her husband's work as the former director of corrections for Alaska and his desire to rehabilitate inmates.

"I discovered that I had given my heart to those people in prison too," Campbell said.

With the help of her church, Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, Campbell has her heart set on establishing a local



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halfway house for women. She believes it costs less to help people and keep them out of prison than to keep them in.

"There is a cradle-to-jail syndrome of people who haven't had the same opportunities to catch hold," she said. "Some do and have glorious outcomes. Those are where they catch the vision of 'I can do it.' But sometimes, when people have a thumb on them so much, when they have been abused or neglected, they have been damaged, they don't have the same opportunity to live a life other than bouncing back and forth."

In advocating for a new halfway house, Campbell tells the story "The Starfish Thrower," in which a man questions another man why he is throwing starfish out to sea.

"This man said, 'Why do you do that? It's so hopeless,'" Campbell explained. "And the other man reached down and picked one up and threw it out to sea and said, 'That saves that one.'

"And so that's what we have on our hearts, a sort of starfish thrower - a place where a few can be given some additional strength and support before being faced with expectations that are totally unrealistic," Campbell said.

In the near future, Campbell and her colleagues hope to seek funding for this endeavor but have not taken the initial steps.

"It's only logical that we have to have help, and we have to help each other," she said.

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