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Tulsan Betty Smith, WASP flier during WWII, dies at 90



By TIM STANLEY World Staff Writer
If Betty Smith ever thought at the time about having her head examined, she never let on.

The Tulsan, who was majoring in psychology at the University of Tulsa, had dreamed of flying planes since she was a child. And she wasn't going to miss the opportunity, no matter how crazy it sounded to some people.

One of only two women in a class of 20, Smith joined a government-sponsored program that trained civilian pilots.

Within months, she was the proud holder of a pilot's license.

When the United States entered World War II about a year later, Smith, who by then had graduated from TU, took her license and volunteered for the Army Air Forces' new Women Airforce Service Pilots program.

As pilots flying military missions within U.S. borders, Smith and her fellow WASPs, as they were called, freed male pilots to go fight overseas.

"First thing for all of us, we loved flying," Smith once told the Tulsa World. "We just loved flying. It was just a bonus that we could do that at a time to help with the war effort."

Betty Smith of Tulsa, a veteran of the World War II-era Women Airforce Service Pilots program, displays the Congressional Gold Medal presented to her and other surviving former members last year in Washington, D.C. Tulsa World file

Part of a groundbreaking group of young women who became the first in history to fly for the U.S. military, Elizabeth Whitlow "Betty" Smith died June 16. She was 90.

A memorial service is scheduled for 2 p.m. Tuesday at the Country Club of Woodland Hills under the direction of Ninde Brookside Funeral Home.

Smith's children only began to learn about her part in the war in later years.

"Before, she was Mother," her daughter Ann Sartain said. "But she slowly began revealing these things, and it took a while for it to sink in, the gravity of it and all that she had done."

More than 1,000 women served in the WASP program from 1942 to 1944. Their records are now preserved at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas.

For Smith, who as a girl had covered her walls with aviation-related photos and who idolized flier Amelia Earhart, it had been the chance of a lifetime.

One of 51 members of the second WASP class, she completed seven months of training in Texas.

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For the next two years, Smith piloted a variety of airplanes, ferrying them from one base to another across the United States.

She flew every single-engine fighter the Army had, including experimental planes that were relatively untested.

With the need for pilots declining, the WASP program was deactivated in late 1944.

Smith returned to Tulsa, settled down and raised a family.

And although she never piloted a craft again, she had many chances to be a passenger. At air shows, she occasionally got to go up in some of the planes she had flown during the war.

A recent movie about Amelia Earhart's life also brought back memories. After the film ended, Smith, who was in tears, stopped her son when he started to apologize for taking her to see the film.

"She said, 'It's OK. I'm not crying for Amelia - I'm crying because I'm remembering the intense freedom of flying,' " her son Ben Rummerfield said.

She saw the movie two more times, he said.

In March 2010, Smith joined other surviving WASPs in Washington, D.C., for some overdue recognition, as they were each presented with the Congressional Gold Medal.

In keeping with her wishes, Smith was cremated, and her ashes will be released from a plane over the ocean.

She is survived by her husband, Dan S. Smith; four children, Ann Sartain, Mike Rummerfield, Ben Rummerfield Jr. and Susan Rummerfield; two stepsons, Doug Smith and Kevin Smith; one brother, Joe Whitlow; three grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

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