

WASPs' military service gets a new look

Healdsburg author's historical novel, 'She Flew Bombers,' revisits contributions of women in WWII



JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

Florence Wheeler trained to be a WASP pilot in World War II, but the program to train women was cancelled before she could fly fighters and bombers in the U.S.

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It was a love of flying that spurred Florence Wheeler of Healdsburg and hundreds of others to join the Women Airforce Service Pilots during World War II, flying warplanes in the United States to free up men to fly combat missions overseas.

“It was a chance to fly planes that we would never be able to get our hands on if I didn’t join,” said Wheeler, 87.

Wheeler was one of 1,074 women to become military-trained pilots, ferrying fighters and bombers between bases and flying training missions across the United States.

“That was my adventure. Then I got married and had children,” said Nancye Crout, 89, of Merced, a WASP for almost two years. “I was so glad I took advantage of that. It was certainly something I am so happy I did.”

Wheeler and Crout will be among the women pilots who will be talking about their experiences Saturday at a program organized by Healdsburg author Jeane Slone, who wrote “She Flew Bombers,” and sponsored by the Sonoma County Arts Council.

Slone's historical novel, which took 3½ years to complete, follows the career of one WASP and weaves in the stories of many others.

"Everything in the book is based on fact. The stories are about the women who were flying," Slone said. "One woman got shot in the toe. She had the bullet removed and made into a necklace."

Slone said she started with the idea of writing about her mother, a member of the Women's Army Corps, when she discovered the WASPs.

"What interested me was that 38 died and never left the United States. They got no burial services paid for and they were not allowed to have a flag draped over their coffin. The girls all chipped in for the cost," said Slone.

They were not well-treated, but that didn't dampen their enthusiasm. There were 25,000 women who applied for the program, 1,900 were accepted and just 1,074 earned their wings.

"They did it because they had the flying bug," Slone said.

Wheeler, a Healdsburg High School teacher for 30 years, said she learned to fly at San Jose State, where she was a student, and then became a flight instructor in Alturas.

"You can be up 6,000 feet all by yourself and you can see to the Sierra, the Farallones, you can see Mt. Shasta, beautiful, just beautiful," Wheeler said, describing her love of flying. "And you are in charge of this machine. It's kind of great."

Wheeler said she already had 1,500 hours of flight time when she joined the WASPs, who underwent training by the Army Air Corps but remained civilian employees.

The 300 remaining WASPs are being honored now and receiving the Congressional Gold Medal.

The WASPs were formed as a para-military organization with its predecessors, the Women's Flying Training Detachment and the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron in 1943. Before it was disbanded, 38 of the women were killed in flight accidents.

"WASPs never went overseas, they were always in the continental United States. They towed targets, there were gunners shooting live ammo at us. They flew planes from manufacturers, they flew planes that were serviced to see if they were flyable," Wheeler said.

Wheeler only had 10 days of service after she earned her wings at Sweetwater, Texas, before the group was disbanded in December 1944.

"I loved it, good lord," said Wheeler of the experience and camaraderie. "I had never seen such enthusiasm and excitement and joy as they showed as they were marching off to the flight lines or the classroom. It was just a buzz. You could tell by the enthusiasm they showed they were in heaven."

Crout, who also learned to fly while in college in Texas, was one of the first women trained, serving from February 1943 to December 1944. She flew dive bombers in nighttime missions to train soldiers to find aircraft with search lights and piloted bombers that would trail targets behind them for gunnery practice.

She was young, 23, excited and unafraid, she said.

"I just saw an opportunity to fly bigger and better planes than we had when we were going through the initial training. It appealed to me very much," Crout said. "I had two brothers who were Navy pilots during the war. It was a family thing."

The program is Saturday from 1 to 4 p.m. at the Veterans Memorial Building in Santa Rosa.

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