

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

WWII pilot may soon be honored

By Mark Hofmann
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In her back yard in Connellsville nearly 70 years ago, a little girl looked up to the sky and dreamed of flying.

She spent her spare time assembling model airplanes, one after another, imagining what it would be like in the pilot's seat.

"I think you're born with certain dreams," said Florence Shutsy-Reynolds. "I didn't know it would involve military aircraft."

Born in 1923, Reynolds graduated from high school and a scholarship led her to enter the government's Civilian Pilot Training Program at Connellsville Airport, where she flew for the first time in 1941 at the age of 18.

The United States was on the cusp of war, and during the next few years, 25,000 women applied for training for the newly formed Women Airforce Service Pilots, called WASP. Of those, only 1,830 were accepted and 1,074 graduated. One of them was Reynolds.

Now 86, the retired pilot has one more goal to reach.

A bill to award the Congressional Gold Medal to the WASPs has passed the Senate. Its sponsors, including Rep. John Murtha, still need the support of 38 House members before the surviving WASP veterans -- nearly 300 -- receive their medals.

"I've waited 65 years to be recognized. I don't have another 65 years to wait," Reynolds said.

Reynolds can still recite the opening lines of John Gillespie Magee Jr.'s poem "High Flight" that she memorized decades ago:

"Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth, and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings. ..."

"Those two lines are what flying is like for me," Reynolds said.

At the time she started to pilot a plane in 1941, the demand for male combat pilots and warplanes left a lack of state-side pilots to ferry planes from the factory to distribution points.

A proposal to the government from pilots Jacqueline Cochran and Nancy Harkness had brought two women pilot programs in the Army Air Force in 1942. The programs were combined to form the Women Airforce Service Pilots a year later.

The government had closed the Civilian Pilot Training Program to women in 1941 to train more men for flight. But Reynolds still wanted to fly. When she learned about the WASP program in a newspaper, she wrote to Cochran, asking to be admitted to the program.

Though she was only 19 and candidates needed to be 21 to join WASP, she continued to mail letters until she was sure Cochran had a stack of them. When the age limit was lowered, Reynolds was admitted to the program and graduated in June 1944.

Reynolds' assignments included flight testing repaired training aircraft, slow-time flights to check engine maintenance, ferrying damaged aircraft to and from repair depots and transporting personnel and material, often making more than one flight every day.

WASP members were not in combat, though their flights could be dangerous. Thirty-eight of the pilots died while flying for the Army Air Force, and they're represented by 38 stars on the WASP flag that Reynolds designed in 1986.

"It was great," said Reynolds, who was known as "Shutsy." "But it was hard work. You never knew if you were going to return alive."

During one take-off, Reynolds' plane lost power at a point that could have caused her to crash. She managed to get the plane under control, completed her assignment and reported the problem to her superiors. The next day, another WASP pilot took up the same plane. The hydraulic line broke and the plane crashed, killing the pilot.

The incident left her wondering about the danger, but it never stopped her from flying, even when the military disbanded the WASP program in December 1944 and then seemingly forgot about the pilots.

In the early 1970s, the Air Force announced it would allow women to fly their aircraft for the first time. The news angered WASPs across the country who felt their World War II service had not been recognized.

It wasn't until 1977 that the veteran pilots were recognized as an important part of the Army Air Force. After that, they received veteran's status as well as the American Campaign Medal and the Victory Medal.

Reynolds remained in the military until she retired 40 years ago at the rank of captain.

Though her sight has dimmed, she still has a clear vision of what needs to be done to receive the recognition she feels is deserves.

The former WASP has kept true to the program's motto: "We live in the wind and sand and our eyes are on the stars."

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