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Fearless flier: World War II female pilot receives Congressional Gold Medal posthumously in Exeter

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EXETER — Frederica McAfee Richardson never thought of her participation as a Women Airforce Service Pilot as extraordinary, despite the fact she was among the very few women willing to fly planes with targets in tow so that ground-based gunners could practice their shooting skills.

The woman known to her friends as "Freddy" routinely came back from noncombat flights with bullet holes in her plane and flew everything from bombers to fighters during a World War II era that saw a select group of women taking to the skies so that more male pilots were available for combat missions.

"I don't think she ever thought of herself as exceptional ... she just loved to fly," said her son, Stanley Richardson.

The late Exeter resident received a high honor posthumously on Wednesday when Sen. Jeanne Shaheen traveled to Richardson's former home at Langdon Place for a ceremony that saw a Congressional Gold Medal being presented to her husband and family.

Members of the Air National Guard and Exeter Fire Department gathered with residents at the assisted living facility for a ceremony that took place on the six-year anniversary of Frederica McAfee Richardson's death.



Cunningham/Democrat photo Father and son, Artemas and Stanley Richardson, accept a Congressional Gold Medal posthumously awarded to Women Airforce Service Pilot Frederica McAfee Richardson, formerly of Exeter.

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Richardson was among the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or "WASP," members who were relied upon

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during World War II when the military was looking to keep its male combat pilots flying missions overseas.

Approximately 1,000 women served in a WASPs unit that would pilot planes used to tow targets on cables that would be fired at by military personnel training as anti-aircraft gunners. Some WASP pilots died while performing their duties.

Stanley Richardson, a captain in the U.S. Navy, said his mother had her commercial pilot's license when she joined the WASPs and started taking on duties that would require her to fly everything from fighters to bombers.

His mother would fly planes towing targets on cables so that they could be shot at by 22 mm and 90 mm anti-aircraft gunners on the ground — a job he assured wasn't for the faint of heart.

"They would regularly return with holes in their aircraft," Richardson noted.

Richardson joined the WASPs in 1943 and was piloting planes on the domestic front while her soon-to-be husband, Artemas Richardson, was serving in the Navy.

Her husband, a resident at Langdon Place, spoke at the ceremony on Wednesday and recalled not knowing about her brave actions until after she had accomplished them, before he met her, which he said was probably a good thing.

"I think I would have bitten my fingernails down to the bones if I had," Robinson said.

Shaheen expressed pride on Wednesday in being an original co-sponsor of legislation that has all WASPs being awarded Congressional Gold Medals.

The senator said the recognition is long-overdue for a group that represented the very essence of a World War II generation commonly referred to as the "Greatest Generation."

"It took nearly 65 years for the WASPs to get the recognition they deserve," Shaheen said.

Richardson was born in Portland, Ore., on Nov. 11, 1917, and attended Pyongyang Foreign School in Korea before receiving an associates degree from Pasadena Junior College and a Bachelor of Science degree in merchandising and personnel management from the University of Southern California in 1940.

She later earned a master's degree in home economics from Framingham State College in Massachusetts.

Richardson was a systems servicewoman with IBM in California and New York until 1943 when she received her commercial pilot's license and joined the third class of the WASPs.

Richardson taught home economics, psychology and comparative political systems at Westwood High School, was a Paul Harris Fellow of the Rotary Foundation and traveled extensively throughout the world.

Shaheen equated reading Richardson's biographical information to reading a novel or watching a movie and described the medal winner as nothing short of a "heroine."

The senator said the nickname "Freddy" is appropriate for a woman tough enough to be a member of the WASPs.

Stanley Richardson said his mother was like many Americans during World War II who did anything necessary to contribute to the war effort, whether it be rationing fuel or collecting scrap metal.

"The military didn't just fight that war ... the people of the United States fought the war," Richardson said.

He said his mother was a skilled pilot who remained in the WASPs until she was grounded by a medical problem.

And while "Freddy" couldn't receive her award on Wednesday, her husband told the crowd: "I'm sure she is with us here today."

The Congressional Gold Medal, presented to several members of Richardson's family on Wednesday, is two-sided and shows cast images of planes and a female pilot.

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Cunningham/Democrat photo World War II Women Service Pilot Frederica McAfee Richardson. Richardson, formerly of Exeter, flew military aircraft in noncombat capacities during the war and was posthumously awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.



Cunningham/Democrat photo A photo shows the Congressional Gold Medal recently presented to the family of former Women Airforce Service Pilot Frederica McAfee Richardson of Exeter.

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