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# Connellsville woman received Congressional Gold Medal for WWII service

By **Judy Kroeger**  
DAILY COURIER  
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"Girls love to fly."

With those four words, Connellsville's Florence Shutsy Reynolds summed up a simple truth behind World War II's Women's Airforce Service Pilots -- the first American women allowed to pilot military aircraft.

All women pilots in any branch of the service can trace their jobs to those 1,102 women who took over American deliveries of war materiel and supplies and the testing of newly repaired planes, freeing male pilots for combat missions abroad.

Reynolds is the only WASP from this area.

Now, these aviation pioneers have received formal federal recognition: a Congressional Gold Medal.

Shortly after her 87th birthday last month, Reynolds, several friends and relatives took the train to Washington for the presentation ceremony.

Two-hundred and eighty-six WASP remain alive. About 172 attended the March 10 ceremony. The day before the Gold Medal presentation, a service honoring the 38 WASP who died during training and service took place at the Air Force Memorial.

The WASP trained in Texas. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchinson of Texas introduced the legislation to honor the WASP with a Congressional Gold Medal.

All women in the Senate and the House voted for the legislation, signed into law by President Obama in July.

After 3,000 crowded into the Capitol Dome for the ceremony, no more were allowed. Reynolds said officials told her this was the largest crowd for a Gold Medal ceremony.

"It was very moving," Reynolds said. "It was a great day, a great feeling."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi praised the women for their pioneering work.

"The Women's Airforce Service Pilots, we are all your daughters. You taught us how to fly," she said.

The original Congressional Gold Medal will be displayed in the Smithsonian Institution. The WASP and families of those who have passed received bronze replicas.

The medal visually captures the skybreaking accomplishment of the WASP.

The obverse portrays WASP in uniform. One is walking through the border around the coin.

The obverse reads, "Women Airforce Service Pilots 1942-1944."

The reverse shows three planes, wings extended beyond the border around the

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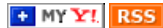


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coin, for the broken barrier. It also shows 38 stars for the 38 women who gave their lives during their service.

The reverse reads, "The first women in history to fly American military aircraft. Act of Congress 2009."

It's been a long road to national recognition.

It started with a pilot's license, which all WASP had to have before joining the Army.

Reynolds was the first woman to receive a pilot's license at the Connellsville Airport.

"I won a scholarship," she said.

More young men would qualify for the scholarship than young women. "My first lesson was my first flight," she continued. "I can remember that J3 Cub. It was noisy. I soloed at eight hours. My family came out to watch. It was a Sunday."

Other barriers greeted the WASP. In addition to having to have a pilot's license, they had to pay their way to Texas for training on military aircraft.

"We were the only ones recruited who had to pay our way to war," Reynolds said. "I had to pay to get to Texas."

WASP trained the same as the cadets, but the males' training ended with them learning combat while the WASP earned cross country navigation and dead reckoning.

Reynolds was assigned to training command in Merced, Calif. Her unit transported aircraft and materiel, did test flights and made sure controls were correct after planes had been serviced.

But Reynolds did not get enough flying time. After finishing her day's assignments, she would check out an aircraft and fly for sheer joy.

Once the war ended, "the guys coming back said we were taking their jobs. We were let go, often without a thank you. It was the attitude of the times. The majority of us would have stayed in if they would have let us."

She served a year and a half before the WASP disbanded.

Reynolds worked as a civilian administrative assistant with the Air Force. "I was the only girl with 500 GIs in Panama. During every break, I went into the shops and learned everything they did. I was there for 16 years."

The WASP could have been forgotten.

Records of their service were sealed, classified and buried for 30 years after the war.

"In the 1970s, they said it was the first time women were allowed to fly military aircraft," Reynolds said. "We were under a gag order, but when we weren't under a gag order, we testified. The good old boys still said flying was a man's job. Not true. We did it. The girls of today are doing a great job," Reynolds said.

"Once you learn to fly, you'll never be the same," Reynolds said. The WASP "was an opportunity of a lifetime. I was in the right place at the right time."

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