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# The Kalona News

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## WWII female pilot to have grave marked at Sharon Center

07/16/2009

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Wayne and Emily Roberts at the grave of his sister, Gleanna Roberts, a member of the Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASP). She died in 1944 while on a training flight in Texas. Her grave will soon be marked with a special plaque.

from when Gleanna Roberts flew for the U.S. Army during World War II. Women pilots today fly the latest fighter jets and bombers as regular Air Service personnel, but in the early 1940s women were segregated to the Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASP). Although WASP was under military authority, they were designated Civil Service employees and paid less than standard pilots pay.

"Many of the 38 gravesites have no military symbols or markings," reads the website womanpilot.com on the women who died flying for the U.S. Army. "On most, the American Flag never flew, no memorial services were ever held. Ignored by both the public and veteran organizations, these brave young women have been forgotten, except by their sister WASP."

One of those 38 gravesites belongs to Roberts.

A letter archived at Texas Woman's University Libraries mentions Gleanna's death. It was written by another trainee, Marjorie Osborne Nicol.

"We had a tragic thing happen yesterday. One of the girls [Gleanna Roberts] in our flight spun in out in the practice area. I knew her very well, was talking to her just before her fatal flight," Nicol wrote. "She was an awfully nice girl, from Iowa City. She had the same number of hours in the Stearman as I did yesterday. No one saw her, she was killed instantly."

"One of her bay mates is escorting her remains home tonight and she'll stay for the funeral. We aren't allowed to have memorial services for her; they tried it once before and it was very demoralizing."

Roberts graduated from the Sharon High School and went on to receive her degree in

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journalism from the University of Iowa. While working as a reporter in Moline, Ill., she acquired her pilot's license and joined the WASPs to serve her country during World War II. She died June 20, 1944, and her body was returned to Iowa to be buried in the Welsh Cemetery just north of Sharon Center.

Sixty-five years later she and the other 36 WASP pilots who were killed while on duty are being recognized for their service with bronze cemetery plaques. The effort - Operation "Celestial Flight" - is being headed up by Captain J. Clemens, an Army chaplain based in Afghanistan. He is being aided by five former WASPS.

Andrea Niapas of Ligonier, Penn., is helping one of those WASPS, Florence Reynolds, in locating the burial sites of the women pilots and contacting relatives. The job is difficult, Niapas said, because the list of next-of-kin is more than 60 years old.

For Roberts, the job was simpler. Two of the three brothers listed are still living - John and Wayne Roberts.

Wayne Roberts and wife Emily live not far from the small cemetery next to the wood-framed Welsh Congregational Church.

Wayne was serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps in Italy as an airplane mechanic when his kid sister became a WASP. He had taken private flight lessons before joining the Air Corps and wonders if his interest sparked a similar desire to fly in Gleanna. Emily said she believes her sister-in-law worked at the Iowa City airport while attending college. Though Emily married into the family after the war, their families knew each other and Emily was in 4-H with Gleanna.

To become a WASP, the women already had to have their pilot's license. They were then sent to Army Air Corps bases to learn the "army's way of flying."

Roberts had not been in training for more than a month at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, when she was killed on a routine training flight when her PT-17 went down near Lorraine, Texas. The Boeing PT-Stearman was an open cockpit, bi-winged, two-seater plane and was the primary trainer for nearly every military pilot who flew.

Ironically, Gleanna would have graduated from WASP training just as the group was about to be disbanded.

WASP was created in 1942 as war production spewed out thousands of new military airplanes. Most pilots were fighting overseas and there were not enough men to fly the planes from the assembly lines to military bases. In response, the government created an experimental program to train women pilots to fly military aircraft.

According to the website [radiodiaries.org/wasps](http://radiodiaries.org/wasps), "From 1942 to 1944, more than 1,000 women were trained to ferry aircraft, test planes, instruct male pilots, and tow targets for anti-aircraft artillery practice. The women came from all socioeconomic backgrounds: teachers, nurses, secretaries, factory workers, waitresses, students, housewives, debutantes, actresses, even a Ziegfeld chorus girl.

"The 1,830 women who were accepted received pilot training at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, where it was hot, dusty and dry, and the threat of finding a rattlesnake in your cockpit was real. It was the first' and only' all-female Air Force base in history, and the women nicknamed it "Cochran's Convent." They slept six to a barrack. At night, they stuffed socks in the urinals and used them to wash their underwear. On the hottest days, they took showers with all their clothes on to cool off. Their olive drab uniforms, called "zoot suits," were sized for men, so they rolled up the cuffs and tied belts around their waists.

"Women pilots were also used to ease fears over airplanes with bad reputations. The B-29, for example, was thought to be a dangerous plane after word got around about engine fires in testing. Colonel Paul Tibbets, who piloted the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, picked Dora Dougherty Strother and Dorothea Johnson Moorman to market the plane from base to base. They showed the men that the four-engine bomber was safe -- safe enough for a woman -- to fly.

"The WASPs prided themselves on having better flying records than their male counterparts. Through their ability, courage and hard work, they proved to the skeptics that women were capable pilots. Yet they had no official military status. WASP Louise Bowden Brown remembers having to ride with her roommate's casket in a train from Texas to New

York. Once there, she had to tell the young woman's parents that she was killed. They received no military honors, no flag, nothing to commemorate their contribution to the country. In fact, the women took up collections for trips like Bowden's. The military didn't even give Bowden money to get her roommate's body home for burial.

"In 1944, the European war drew to a close and male pilots began returning from combat. The WASPs were no longer needed. Cochran (Jacqueline Cochran, who helped found WASP) was given the option to fold the WASP program into the Women's Army Corps (WACS), but she refused to compromise, believing that her pilots would be stuck on the ground. On December 20, 1944, the women pilots packed up their bags and went home. It would be more than 30 years before women would fly again for the US military."

And now 65 years later, Robert's grave will be finally marked with a plaque honoring her military service to her country.

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### Reader Comments

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Added: Thursday July 16, 2009 at 07:46 PM EST

#### **Fallen Hero: Fly Girl WASP**

Mabel Rawlinson was one of the 38 WASP that made the ultimate sacrifice and she definitely deserves the congressional medal.

It was at Camp Davis on the night of August 23, 1943, that Mabel lost her life when her airplane crashed and was consumed by flames. She became one of the very special women, numbering only thirty-eight, who served and died as pilots for the Air Force in World War II.

Since WASP were technically considered volunteer civilian pilots and not Air Force pilots, no monetary compensation was available to the Rawlinson family for her funeral expenses.

The other female pilots at Camp Davis pooled their extra money and assisted in the expense of transporting Mabel's casket back to Kalamazoo for burial.

Read the whole story about this fallen hero here:

[http://www.everydaycitizen.com/2008/05/still\\_my\\_fallen\\_hero\\_fly\\_girl.html](http://www.everydaycitizen.com/2008/05/still_my_fallen_hero_fly_girl.html)

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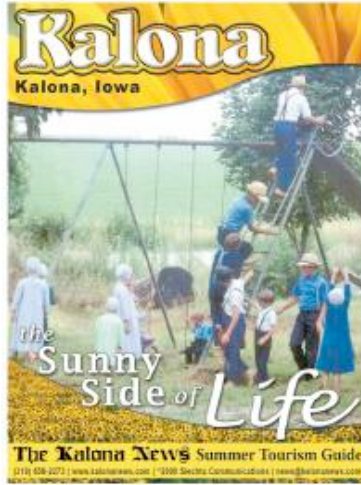
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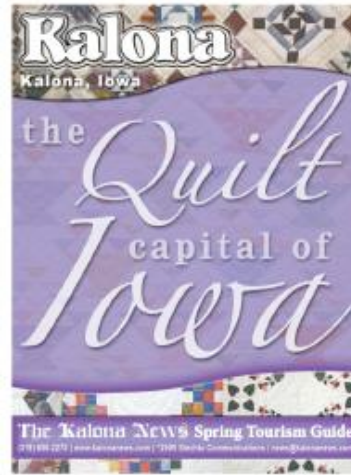


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