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WASPS finally get recognition for helping fight the war

Wendy Leung, Staff Writer
Posted: 08/08/2009 09:08:25 PM PDT
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In 1942, here in the Inland Empire, if you saw a military plane whiz by, chances were good that it was flown by a young, feisty woman.

It was a year that started an astonishing chapter of American history, one in which women played a crucial, although now largely forgotten, role in World War II.

More than two decades before the women's liberation movement, 1,102 female civilians went through the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP, program in WWII and learned to fly military planes.

They weren't trying to break gender barriers. They just answering the call of duty. They were America's fly girls on a mission.

"We had a job to do," said Iris Critchell, 88, of Claremont. "We were capable to fly the airplanes so we just flew shoulder-to-shoulder with the men and did it."



Catherine Bridge, 88, holds a photo of herself standing next to a P-38 Lightning aircraft during World War II. Bridge flew 20 different models of military aircraft during her service in the Women Airforce Service Pilots. (Rick Sforza/Staff Photographer)

Critchell, along with Claremont resident Catherine Bridge, 88, and Rancho Cucamonga resident Pearl Judd, 87, are among the approximately 300 surviving members of WASP.

From 1942 to 1944, these women put their lives on hold at the height of the war to ferry a growing number of military aircraft that needed to be moved from factories to airbases across the nation.

With women taking the helm on these non-combat missions, men were released for combat deployment in an escalating global conflict.

Last month, President Barack Obama said every American should be grateful for these women's service.

He awarded WASP members the Congressional Gold Medal. The president signed the bill in the presence of prominent female pilots, including three WASP members.

It was the public recognition for which many had yearned.

Congress ended the program in 1944 as public opinion of the WASP program turned sour. Not only were these women not regarded as heroines at the time, they weren't even granted military status. And when more and more men faced the draft, these posts held by women were viewed as jobs that could keep men from combat.

Bridge said she didn't talk about her experience for years.

"When they stopped the program, it broke our hearts," Bridge said.

It was a frustrating end to a experience that was equal parts rigorous and fun.

"At first we moved small, light planes from one field to another. Then the larger, more expensive planes," Bridge said. "It was like learning to walk. First you crawl, then when you have success in that, you stand."

Bridge first learned to fly at UC Berkeley where she went to college. Later, she learned how to fly 20 different models of aircraft through WASP.

Her favorite was the long-range P-51 fighter.

Without the war, the thought of taking charge in a military aircraft would have never occurred to women like Bridge.

"I never thought that would be a possibility," she said. "Women just weren't doing that sort of thing."

But it didn't stop women like Judd, who fell in love with airplanes at the young age of 6.

Judd remembers seeing an airplane for the first time at a promotional event.

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"It was the most beautiful thing I saw in my life," Judd remembered.

But when it came time to tour the inside of the plane, only boys were allowed. That's when Judd set her sights to the sky.

Judd, like many of the WASPs, got her pilot's license before entering the military program.

Prior to being selected, Judd remembers being in a room of 300 men for a four-hour test. Once accepted, Judd was sent to Long Beach for a physical. The male doctor gave her a quick embarrassed look and waved her through. There just wasn't any protocol for him to follow to give a female a physical exam.

For the next seven months, Judd and her class were trained in Sweetwater, Texas.

Wearing girdles underneath their uniforms, the pilots were quickly toughened up for the job. Once the missions started, they were kept extremely busy, shuttling planes from Long Beach to New Jersey.

When the program ended, WASP collectively logged 60 million miles in 77 different types of aircraft.

The planes were equipped with top secret equipment that required pilots to carry a pistol. Most had little room in the aircraft for anything more than a toothbrush and an extra blouse. Some found empty compartments in the wings designed for ammunition and put a high-heeled shoe in each wing. Bridge remembered bringing a small iron.

Their male counterparts were shocked to see them pilot the planes. But most accepted the ladies.

"Once you flew, you were part of the brotherhood," Judd said. "It was the outsiders who couldn't see it."

It wasn't until 1977 that WASP members received veteran's status. When 38 WASP died during the program, family members and fellow pilots paid to fly the bodies home.

Judd, who was enamored with airplanes, hasn't flown one since the 1940s. When she later tried to fly, at the Santa Monica Airport, officials there thought she faked her log book.

After WASP, Bridge used her experience to teach grounds school in Montana. She ended up teaching the instructor who first taught her how to fly prior to her WASP experience.

Critchell went on to a 70-year career in aviation that included teaching at Harvey Mudd College. She still flies to this day.

"We were always proud of doing the same job as men," Bridge said. "It shows what women can do when asked."

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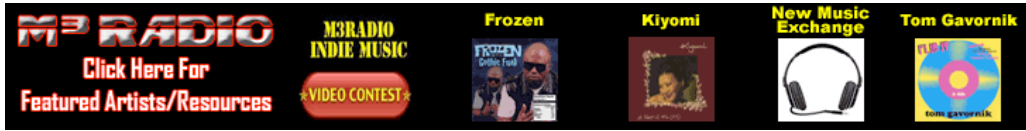
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