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Jesse S. Jones | April 9, 2010 | 0 Comments

Sixty-six years after World War II, this Ponte Vedra resident was among those honored for their service to the country as a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots.

How did you become involved in aviation?

My father was a pilot. We were the "Flying Hutchinsons, America's Flying Family," we flew to all 48 states in 1931 as an effort to encourage air travel. We also attempted to become the first family to fly across the Atlantic but we were forced to make an emergency landing due to rough weather. We were in a Sikorsky Amphibian and we were washed ashore on a rocky deserted island near Greenland. We were rescued by a passing trawler and the photo of my mother, sister and me was Life magazine's photo of the year in 1932.

How old were you when you became a WASP?


I was 18 years old. I was one of the youngest to become a WASP. I read about the program in the newspaper and I immediately wanted to join. My father knew Jacqueline Cochran [Cochran is credited with the creation of the WASPs] so we drove to Washington, D.C. and I was interviewed by Jacqueline Cochran. After the interview I went home, then shortly after I went to Sweetwater, Texas to begin training. The training lasted seven months, after the training I was assigned to Gunter Field in Montgomery, Ala.

What were your duties as a WASP and what was it like to be a WASP?

I was a test pilot, a ferry pilot and trainer. It was an adventure. I did get picked on for being young. Once the other WASPs tied me to a chair and gave me a crew cut. It was also a time that I had my first experience with death. My best friend during training, Elizabeth Erickson, was killed in training in a mid-air collision with another pilot.

What was it like to finally receive recognition from our government and to be awarded the Congressional Gold Medal?

It was one of the happiest days of my life. There were around 1100 WASPs; we flew more than 60 million miles during our service. There are only about 300 of us left. I was among the 174 that were able to travel to the ceremony.





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When you were a WASP did you think of yourself as a pioneer or role model?

I never thought of myself as a pioneer or role model. I just loved what I was doing. Several years ago I was on a commercial flight going to a reunion of the WASPs and one of the stewardesses heard me talking about it. As we were getting off the plane the pilot, who was a woman, stopped me and said "Thank you for paving the way for me." I will always remember that.

With all of your flying experience, what is your most memorable flight?

After the war was over I was flying for the Reconstruction Finance Corporation [an independent agency of the US government] and we would fly these big shot businessmen all over the country from meeting to meeting. One flight we flew into some bad weather and the pilot I was flying with had me go back to check on the passengers and some of them were crying and clutching their seats in fear.

What did you do after you left the WASPs?

I opened a nursery school and we ran that for 39 years. At the same time I was also teaching at a flight school. When we built the nursery school up to 20 students my father came on and we then expanded and eventually had more than 100 students. Later I trained racehorses; I had a stable of 10 horses. My favorite was named Brasher Falls. He was not high strung like most racehorses.

How did you end up here in Ponte Vedra?

I came down to visit my sister for Christmas. She has lived here for quite a while and I really loved the area. So I had a house built next door to hers and moved here in 1991.

Rate Janet Simpson

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