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Toni Adcock sorts through photos and keepsakes of her mother, who served as a pilot during WWII in the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). | Robert Hudson



By [Robert Hudson](#)

## Resident recalls tales of mother's time flying in WWII

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Given the enormous scope of World War II, it is quite easy for stories related to the conflict to fall through the cracks. But one of those stories is very near and dear to the heart of one Alexander City resident.

Toni Adcock's mother, Lillian Darlene Calkins, was one of a select few women that flew planes as a member of the WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots) during the World War II era.

Calkins, who went by the name Darlene, was born in 1921 into a family of farmers, but she knew all her life she wanted to take to the skies.

"The only thing she ever wanted to do was fly," Adcock said. "When she graduated from high school ... she took a couple of courses to get her certificate to teach school, and traveled three miles to teach at a schoolhouse. She used her salary to travel 20 miles to take flying lessons."

Adcock said her mother got a private pilot's license. In the early 1940s as the U.S. got into World War II, the nation had a shortage of male pilots at home because they had them in Europe or the Pacific Theater flying aircraft.

For that very reason, the WASP were formed in 1942.

More than 25,000 women applied for the WASP, who were civilian female pilots tasked with flying military aircraft under the direction of the United States Army Air Forces.

Of the 25,000, little more than 1,000 passed training and joined the organization, and Darlene was among that elite number in 1943.

Darlene then went to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas to do extensive training and was ultimately assigned to fly out of Eglin Air Force Base near Valparaiso, Fla.

"The chief operations officer, who assigned people their duties every day, was my dad, so that's how my folks met. He was also a pilot," Adcock said. "The WASPs had huge responsibilities. First of all, they had to be trained to fly every aircraft that the military had."

And after that training, the WASP would take up numerous tasks.

"She would ferry aircraft from one base to another. She would travel to aircraft manufacturers and take new aircraft to their destination around the country," Adcock said. "She and others towed targets for gunnery practice. If aircraft were damaged and then repaired, she would test fly them to make sure they were air worthy again."

But as the war started to wind down, the women of the WASP were sent home.

"At the end of 1944, she and the other women were given a paper that said 'we don't need your help anymore; the men are returning,'" Adcock said. "They were not officially a part of the military, so they got paid \$250 a month. They had to supply their own uniform and transportation to and from home."

When Darlene left Eglin, she traveled to Washington D.C. where she became an air traffic controller at Washington National, now Reagan International Airport.

Darlene married in D.C. and took the last name Eno.

It was not until 1977 when President Jimmy Carter signed legislation giving the former WASP veterans benefits that the women saw bigger material reward for their service.

But the greatest honor only came in 2009.

“In 2009, President Obama signed something into law that said these women should be awarded the Congressional Gold Medal,” Adcock said. “That was awarded in March 2010. What it meant was finally these people were being recognized.”

Though Darlene passed away in 1991, Adcock was honored to accept the medal on her mother’s behalf with her family, as U.S. Senators Mitch McConnell and Harry Reid and U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi and others where there to make the presentation.

About 150 still living WASP attended.

“The Tuskegee Airmen, George Washington and Charles Lindbergh all received this medal,” Adcock said. “For what they did, I just thought it was incredible to get total recognition.”

The tremendous service of the WASP was recently brought to the forefront of the nation’s conscious again, as one organization got together and financed the building of a float in this year’s Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena, Calif. honoring the women.

Adcock said her mother would have been proud, but ultimately she was just glad she could play her part.

“These women wanted to fly,” Adcock said. “What they did was a big contribution to this country.”

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