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From: "Lynn Yonally" <foretekyonally@rcn.com>**To:** "Dottie and Alan Gregory" <dottieandal@attglobal.net>, "Kate Foretek" <kaf305@lehigh.edu>, "larry yonally" <yonally@sbcglobal.net>**Cc:** WASPkids@yahoo.com, "Amy Nathan" <amynbooks@gmail.com>, nancy@wingsacrossamerica.org

Woman recalls years in WWII as pilot

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Lillian Yonally in her "zoot suit" in May 1943. Lillian Yonally shows some of her photographs from her experience during World War II as a WASP. (Photo by Tom Killips)

COLONIE — Sitting in her apartment, Lillian Yonally often watches planes coming into the local airport and remembers an earlier time in her life when one of the best things to do was to fly a B-25 bomber.

Yonally, 87, was one of the first women in history trained to fly military aircraft as one of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, commonly known as WASPs, a unique group of women who were selected during World War II to relieve men from training exercises so that they could fly in combat.

The WASPs, which were disbanded at the end of the war on Dec. 20, 1944, were particularly necessary because there had been a shortage of combat pilots during the war.

Taken on a recent tour of the Sweetwater Army Air Field in Texas where she was trained on various aircraft more

than 60 years ago, Yonally, who is known as “the pilot” among her friends today, said she had only one request at the time.

“I made it very clear that what I wanted was a B-25,” said Yonally. “They only had one so they took us in it and I got to fly in my nice noisy, rattling, bumpy airplane. It was just like I remembered.”

When asked if she was offered a chance to take control of the plane once more, Yonally said that she hadn’t bothered to ask.

“Sometimes you know when to quit,” she said.

Yonally served in the seventh class of the Women’s Flying Training Detachment, WFTD, which allowed women pilots to lead various training exercises for the men, including aircraft tracking both during the night and at high altitude, along with essentially acting as target practice for combat training scenarios.

According to her recollection, the women flew planes together over the Mojave Desert while towing large, colored nylon sleeves roughly 30 feet behind them that were designed to catch the bullets being fired by trainees. Ideally, a piece of the colored sleeve would be left attached to the bullets so that the pilots could tell who had hit which target.

“Tell me why I wouldn’t be commissioned for something like that,” said Yonally, who noted that the WASPs had served as civil service employees and were not formally recognized as veterans until 1977.

Target towing, along with other advanced technical maneuvers, made a woman’s job in the cockpit very dangerous during the experimental program, with a total of 38 women lost in various incidents by the time it was disbanded.

Specifically, Yonally recalled a morning when she and three other WASPs were asked to do a strafing routine so that the men could get the feel of an airplane coming at them.

“We dove on them and, surprisingly, they all laid down,” said Yonally, who added that her plane’s mechanic later found grass stains on its wings, propeller blades, and underbelly because she had flown too close to the ground during the run. “I hadn’t planned that, and strangely enough they didn’t ask us to do that again.”

While she joined the WASPs at the age of 21, Yonally received her first private pilot’s license on the day she turned 16 and proceeded to fly with her father to New York to see him get married.

After college, she eventually went to work as a secretary for the Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation on Long Island, a leading producer of military and civilian aircraft at the time, before being asked if she’d like to work in the company’s control tower because of the fact that she had a pilot’s license and roughly 35 hours of personal flight experience.

Yonally said that a large number of male pilots at the time were not fond of the WASPs because they didn’t want to see women stealing all of their glory. However, she never let things like that bother her.

“What we were doing, and were glad to do it even on civil service, was to relieve men for flying combat because there was a shortage of pilots — and it was known that they didn’t want us for quite a bit,” said Yonally. “If you want to fly badly enough you can negotiate a lot of other things.”

Yonally was proud to have been a pioneer for women in the 1940s, showing that they could fly just as well as men, if not better.

“I think they were still figuring out what girls could do,” said Yonally, who noted that the WASP program was kept relatively secret at the time of her class because the government had not wanted to be publicly known for the group if it turned out to be a failure.

“The girls flew directly to where they were supposed to fly — guys went off on the side and did things, but the girls came in on time and in good form,” she continued. “We broke the glass ceiling. We were the pioneers. We were what opened it for women to fly.”

Besides flying various training exercises, Yonally also met her husband, Jim, while stationed in the Mojave at what was then known as Camp Irwin.

While the two often spent time together when they could, she noted that their dating was not very traditional

because of their duties.

“You don’t go out to dinner in the middle of the desert in the middle of a war,” said Yonally.

But when the group was disbanded in 1944, Yonally, along with most of the WASPs, felt they were a bit short changed.

“To be told ‘thank you,’ period, and nothing more ... we thought we were going to be militarized,” said Yonally.

Still, she looks back on her time with the program as a wonderful experience where she had a lot of fun doing what she loved — and she has the pictures to prove it.

“It was illegal to take pictures, so I did, and I think I have the best group of colored slides and photos because of it,” said Yonally, who noted that she had received color film in the mail from her father and would send it back to him to be developed.

To this day, her love of flying has not wavered and is clearly visible through her volunteer work with Patriot Flight, an organization which flies WWII veterans to see the memorial in Washington, D.C., or the simple fact that she still watches planes as they fly into the Albany International Airport to make sure that all three wheels of their landing gear is down.

“It’s part of you — most anything you love is like that,” said Yonally, who missed the experiences she had as one of the nation’s first WASPs. “It was just a job, but it was great one.”



Lillian Yonally, 87, looks at her favorite plane, the B-25, which she flew during WWII as a WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilot). (Photo by Tom Killips)

Tom Caprood can be reached at 270-1278 or by e-mail at tcaprood@troyrecord.com.