



Back Home Share: ShareThis Print Comment

Her story is WWII history

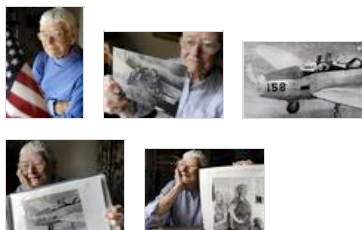
Former Bradley teacher who flew B-26 bombers during war will receive Congressional Gold Medal of Honor



Purchase this photo

RON JOHNSON/JOURNAL STAR
Peorian Duke Caldwell, 91, will receive the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor for her service years with the WASP program during WWII.

More related photos



By **SCOTT HILYARD (shilyard@pjstar.com)**
OF THE JOURNAL STAR

Posted Aug 01, 2009 @ 09:51 PM
Last update Aug 03, 2009 @ 03:35 PM

PEORIA — Mildred "Duke" Caldwell hasn't piloted an airplane since the early 1940s when she flew a Martin B-26 Marauder twin-engine bomber every day for work, but the idea of flying a plane thrills her to this day.

"It was delightful. I loved flying," Caldwell said. "Loved it!"

Caldwell, who is 91, is one of about 300 surviving Women's Airforce Service Pilots, an exclusive club known better by its acronym, WASP. And while the World War II-era group of women never totaled much more than 1,100 members and lasted only 28 months, it left a lasting imprint on American history as the first group of women to fly the country's military aircraft.

The WASP program was in the news recently when President Barack Obama on July 1 signed legislation that awarded the survivors with the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor. It's the highest civilian honor that can be bestowed on an individual, and it puts Duke Caldwell in the company of the medal's first recipient, George Washington.

"Not bad for an old gym teacher," said Caldwell, who retired from Bradley University 26 years ago after a long career in the physical education department and is a professor emeritus.

Caldwell was born and raised in Connecticut. As a girl she spent \$2.50 of her newspaper route money to buy a short airplane ride when a small air show flew into her town.

"I caught the flying bug long before I ever got in a plane," she said. "I always wanted to get my pilot's license."

She graduated from a college in Troy, N.Y., in 1939 and took a teaching job in the area. But she had her eye on another job in another state.

"I knew that the Piper (airplane) company (in Lock Haven, Pa.) had three or four flight instructors on their payroll and gave flying lessons to employees," Caldwell said. "So I got a job there working second shift in the first aid room and then going department to department taking inventory. And

ADVERTISEMENT
Visit cefcu.com for details.
CEFCU Your Credit Union

that's where I learned how to fly."

Her timing was perfect. The WASP program, designed to have women fly planes in the United States in varying

Jim Maloof #1
Homes of the Week
Presented by Jim Maloof/Realtor

- NEW! Mystique
- Take the Mystique survey for a chance to win \$100 Gift Card!
- Does your home have Curb Appeal? Win a \$250 gift card!
- Sign up for Email Headlines
- Better Earth Garden Contest
- Ask the Pro!
- 3B Freebie
- Take a survey and let us know what you think about living in the Peoria area

- All Blogs
- The Buzz
- Andy Kravetz: inFormation
- Gary Panetta: Bach and Lemon Shakeups
- Steve Stein: Stein Time
- Kevin Capie: Check Swings
- Dave Eminian: Cleve's World
- Jeff Lampe: Scattershooting
- Dave Reynolds: Reynolds Rap
- Greg Stewart: From the Rough
- Kirk Wessler: Captain's Blog
- Preps Plus

Yellow Pages

Find whatever you're looking for with **Totally Local Yellow Pages**

Find...
Peoria, IL
Search

Search provided by Premier Guide

Popular Searches Featured Business

- Police kill two pit bulls after dogs attack girl
- Peoria police officer pleads guilty to DUI
- Check paper for windfall
- Semis can drive a little faster now
- Mom and Pop used-car dealers left without clunkers
- Fulton County officials investigating motorcycle

capacities so that men pilots would be free to fly combat missions in the war, started up in September 1942. Caldwell, a freshly licensed airplane pilot, couldn't sign up fast enough. On April 25, 1943, Caldwell reported for training along with 121 other women in Sweetwater, Texas, for primary, basic and then advanced training. By graduation day, Oct. 9, 1943, 37 women in her group had dropped out of training. Soon after, she was specially selected and soon learning to fly the B-26 in the skies above a military base in Dodge City, Kan. Once trained on the bomber, she was sent to Laredo, Texas, with a specific mission in her near future.

Caldwell shrugs when asked if her WASP duty was dangerous. It sure sounds dangerous. The B-26s she flew had the bomber racks removed and a tow reel that dragged something that resembled a wind sock behind the plane on a long cable. She flew the plane with a crew chief and a co-pilot as other planes - with bomber racks very much attached and loaded with live ammunition - maneuvered in the vicinity of her plane firing away at the target she trailed.

"We were the target for the soldiers getting their combat training," she said.

The end came suddenly and without warning. On Dec. 7, 1944, the last WASP class graduated from training. Less than two weeks later, WASP was finished. Here's how a timeline on the WASP Web site,

www.wingsacrossamerica.us, describes the end:

"December 20, 1944. One minute after midnight of preceding day, WASP cease to exist as a quasi-military unit. Hung up their parachutes and paid their own way back home. No benefits, no honors, no veteran status. Official WASP military records sealed, stamped 'classified' and sent for storage to the government archives. History of WASP not recorded by historians in official historical accounts of World War II. Reason: records not available."

Caldwell doesn't have specific memories of the shutdown of WASP almost 65 years ago. She paid some attention when in 1977 the Air Force poked the WASP nest when it issued a news release claiming that, for the first time in history, it was graduating 10 women pilots from flight training, making them the first women in history to fly American military aircraft. An aggressive campaign brought the WASP story into the light, and on Nov. 3, 1977, Congress passed a law giving WASP veteran status.

"I understood why people fought hard for that," Caldwell said. "But I didn't care that much, I'd been a civilian so long."

A WASP World War II Museum opened at Avenger Field in Sweetwater in 2005, and now the entire operation has been rewarded with the Congressional Gold Medal. Details are still being worked out how the medals will be conferred on the WASP recipients, most likely at a special event in Washington, D.C. Caldwell doesn't plan to be there.

"Why the hell would I go all the way out there," said Caldwell, adding she doesn't travel much anymore. "My nephew will go for me. He'll pick up my medal and get it to me."

Caldwell keeps a scrapbook with yellowed press clippings and memorabilia from her WASP days in a permanent spot on a table in her front room. The cover of the scrapbook remains wrapped in its original plastic packaging. She flipped through the book recently and stopped on a page in the middle.

On it was a photo scissored from a Life magazine story about the WASP program published in 1943. The photo showed a young woman in an open-cockpit Fairchild PT-19 airplane, presumably taken from an airplane flying alongside. The co-pilot's open cockpit behind her is empty. The woman, who is staring intently straight forward, is shown from about the shoulders up. Her hair streams behind her in the wind.

Caldwell tapped the photo with an index finger.

"Moi," she said.

Scott Hilyard can be reached at 686-3244 or at shilyard@pjstar.com.

Comments (8)

twomorecents

2 weeks ago

[Report Abuse](#)

Good work Ms. Caldwell. Thank you for your love of flying. Your work for our country is appreciated. :)

bluesatindress

2 weeks ago

[Report Abuse](#)

What a privilege to read such a great story, about an even greater lady. Hats off to you Ms. Caldwell. My grandmother was a WAC and we are all very proud of her. How I wish the Journal-Star would publish more stories like this and get rid of that B.S. that Luciano (and evidently his editors) call 'journalism'. Thanks Ms. Caldwell for your service time, and ultimately making my life better.

lencaldwell

2 weeks ago

[Report Abuse](#)

Thank you for the article about my Aunt, Duke Caldwell. Scott Hilyard captured her spirit and energy perfectly. She and her fellow WASP were true heroes, unrecognized for far too long.

peoria78

2 weeks ago

[Report Abuse](#)

What a great story to put in the paper...wish they had more stories like this with true meaning. Congratulations on your congressional medal of honor and thanks. It's nice to see that even after all those years she still has a passion for flying.

Charlie Parkinson

2 weeks ago

[Report Abuse](#)

fatality

- Bibo: State of the fairgrounds isn't fair
- Is there still a need for wills
- 'We've come out here to take the streets back'
- Glasford man's vehicle hits pole, downing power lines



YAHOO! hotjobs

- 97-year-old takes after Eureka's early pioneers (08/15/09)

- Illinois schools considering flu vaccination plans (08/16/09)

- Thunderstorms moving into the area (08/16/09)

- Fulton County officials investigating motorcycle fatality (08/16/09)

- Is there still a need for wills? (08/15/09)

- The link to putting a stamp on fresh foods (08/15/09)

- Officials: Don't panic about poker (08/15/09)

- Bibo: State of the fairgrounds isn't fair (08/15/09)

- Lampe: Bowfishing spotlight (08/15/09)

- Thome climbs all-time home run list (08/15/09)

I too, commend Scott Hilyards fine story, PJS should go back to this type of writing more often. I am glad others also feel this way!

bikertrash
2 weeks ago
[Report Abuse](#)

This is why they are called the 'Greatest Generation'.

EverydayCitizen
2 weeks ago
[Report Abuse](#)

Mabel Rawlinson will also receive a gold medal for her service, but posthumously. Mabel was one of the 38 WASP that made the ultimate sacrifice - only one of 38 WASP that died while serving in the war.

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 Mabels 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

bornhere
2 weeks ago
[Report Abuse](#)

Now there's an American hero.....thanks Capt Caldwell for your service. God Bless you!

Login or register to post a comment:

Login

Username:

Password:

[Forgot password](#)

Register

Email:

First Name:

Last Name:

I agree to the [terms of use](#)

I am over 13 years of age

NOTE: Your inbox must accept emails from "no-reply@gatehousemedia.com"

[Site Map](#) | [Home](#) | [News](#) | [Sports](#) | [Preps](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Business](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Features](#) | [Obituaries](#) | [Photos](#) | [Blogs](#) | [Multimedia](#) |

[pjstar.com](#) | Peoria, IL

[Contact Us](#) | [Subscriber Services](#) | [Peoria Yellow Pages](#)

Copyright © 2009 GateHouse Media, Inc. Some Rights Reserved.

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

Original content available for non-commercial use

under a [Creative Commons](#) license,

except where noted.



SEO by eLocalListing | Advertiser profiles | Yellow Pages by Premier Guide | Peoria City Content

WEB BROWSING REDEFINED