

Long-due recognition

WWII women pilots may get Gold Medal

By Mike Baird
 Thursday, March 19, 2009



Photo by Rachel Denny Clow

Maxine Flournoy, 87, is one of 300 women still living of the 1,102 Women Airforce Service Pilots who may soon receive the Congressional Gold Medal for service during World War II.



Maxine Flournoy in 1944 while a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots. Contributed photo



Maxine Flournoy gives the 'thumbs-up' signal to a group of onlookers on May 21, 2004, as she taxis to the runway at Naval Air Station Kingsville in a C.A.F. PT-19 flown by Dan Duewall as she relived her experiences of flying during World War II.

CORPUS CHRISTI — Looking out the windows of her 14th floor apartment at Trinity Towers reminds Maxine Flournoy of her cockpit view from World War II military aircraft.

"I loved flying," Flournoy, 87, said Wednesday, while fingering a diamond airplane brooch on her collar, "even that twin engine trainer we called the 'bamboo bomber' because it was fabric covered."

Flournoy is one of 300 surviving Women Airforce Service Pilots who soon may be recognized for their efforts in World War II. In all, 1,102 women pilots served.

"Their service paved the way for all women who serve valiantly in the military today," said U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, who on Tuesday introduced a bill, co-sponsored by all the female members of the Senate, to award the women the Congressional Gold Medal, which is awarded for exceptional acts of service to the United States. The U.S. Mint designs and creates each medal to uniquely represent the individuals being honored.

"Each of these women are fascinating," said Deanie Bishop Parrish, one of the women pilots and associate director of Wings Across America, an archiving group that has compiled interviews with about 100 of the women. "They're all different, but each has the 'can-do, just get out of my way a let me do it' spirit."

Unlike their male WWII pilot counterparts, the women were civilians and had to have completed pilot training before being considered for the program.

Flournoy completed a pilot training program in early 1941 at a junior college in Joplin, Mo. Later, while working as a grinder at a defense plant making dies for bullet shell casings she learned about the call for women pilots.

Flournoy quit her job and took a bus to Kansas City to volunteer. "I was over 21 and didn't need my mother's signature," she said. "She probably wouldn't have done it anyway."

Once accepted into the program she was taken by train to Hondo, where she lived in a barracks with other female pilots while working the next year and a half flying a variety of aircraft. Sometimes she did training flights for male navigation cadets. Other times, she flew slowly in short spurts to break in new engines, she said.

Women Airforce Service Pilots logged 60 million miles in missions across the U.S. But they lacked many of the benefits offered to others who served their country.

After the war, the women paid their own way home. Families of 38 of the women who died in the line of duty bore the costs of transporting their bodies home and the funerals.

It was 1977 before the women were granted status as veterans.

After her service Flournoy said she "wrote to every address I could find to continue flying." And that's how she came to Alice, where she lived nearly 60 years. She landed a part-time commercial pilot job there in early 1945.

"They didn't pay me as much as a they would a man," Flournoy said. "But I was happy."

Among the reasons: the chance to take pilot instructor training at the Alice airport, where she met her future husband.

Lucien Flournoy was a petroleum engineer in 1945 for an Arkansas company that her boss' drilling company was working with.

"My boss asked if Lucien wanted to meet his pilot," she said. "He was surprised I was a gal, and he didn't waste much time asking me for a date."

They married a year later, and over the next 20 years raised three daughters, before she flew again.

In the mid-1960s, Lucien, who died in 2003, bought an airplane for a charter service he launched.

"While it was for the business, he told me it was mine," she said. "So I called it mine whether it was or not."

She flew herself to annual Women Airforce Service Pilots reunions, until about 1985 when an oil field recession required selling the airplane, she said. She hasn't piloted since.

"I was sorry to let it go," she said. "I had to take an airline flight to my next reunion, and it wasn't the same."

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ArticleComments

Posted on March 19, 2009 at 7:05 a.m.

Excellent!

Posted on March 19, 2009 at 8:48 a.m.

Fabulous article !

Such a high flying experience in history.

Posted on March 19, 2009 at 9:13 a.m.

How awesome.

What a wonderful story about one of our hometown heroes. Thank you for this, Caller Times and THANK YOU, Mrs. Flournoy for your service to our wonderful country.

Posted on March 19, 2009 at 9:52 a.m.

Beautiful story, very inspiring....and believe it or not, I had no idea there were any women pilots in WWII...fascinating to know this!

Posted on March 19, 2009 at 10:04 a.m.

This is great!

My daughter did a HISTORY project on the WASP!! and she invited and got to meet some members of the WASP, it was a great experience for her , and we cherish those moments!

Thank you Maxine Flournoy for " looking over " during rough times! and may you and other WASP members get the GOLD MEDAL that you so deserve!

Posted on March 19, 2009 at 11:08 a.m.

Thank you, Mrs. Flournoy, for your service to our country. You are an excellent example of what is known as the Greatest Generation. All generations that have come after you (mine included), owe you and your peers a huge debt of gratitude for leading the USA to victory in WWII and making us the pride of the post-war world. Today's generation of what's-in-it-for-me slackers are clueless of the sacrifices necessary to accomplish success for the greater good. I salute you and offer my sincere thanks!

Posted on March 19, 2009 at 12:20 p.m.


I love hearing stories like this. I'm glad to hear she's finally getting the recognition she deserves!

Posted on March 19, 2009 at 1:03 p.m.

Great story about a great woman!

Posted on March 19, 2009 at 4:42 p.m.

"Mamo", I'm so proud of all of your many accomplishments and hope to be as great as you.

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