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Posted on Fri, Jul. 03, 2009 10:15 PM

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Area woman and other former WASPs are no longer forgotten

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH
The Kansas City Star

She tucks a tiny white curl back into her hairdo, folds her hands just so and tells of her adventures during World War II.

"We did maneuvers on the new planes when they first rolled them out of the factory. We made sure they worked right before they went into the war," said Marjorie Ellfeldt Rees, 87. "We put them through loops and chandelles — that's a steep incline and you bank it just before it stalls."

Her hand becomes a tiny airplane, swooshing in the air.

She giggles, and for a second she is 22 again, graduating from cadet school in 1944 as one of the first women trained to fly American military aircraft.

This week, President Barack Obama signed a bill honoring Rees, of Prairie Village, and the other civilian women pilots who flew for the military between 1942 and 1944. They were known as Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASPs.

The surviving WASPs soon will receive Congressional Gold Medals in a ceremony in Washington — about a generation overdue, supporters say.

Rees and her sister pilots flew every type of airplane that male pilots flew, doing the same jobs they did, with one big exception — they were forbidden from flying combat missions.

But their flying was still dangerous. The WASPs flew airplanes that had never flown before. They also flew old, worn planes. They flew planes towing targets on steel cables so that male gunners could practice with live rounds — sometimes accidentally riddling their aircraft with bullets.

"We took over every domestic flying job there was. Some men didn't like that," Rees said.

Rees fell in love with flying before she graduated from the University of Kansas City in 1942. Her boyfriend was a pilot, and so was his mother. Rees used a graduation gift of \$1,000 to buy flight lessons.

Her uncle saw a newspaper article that said the military was searching for women pilots. She applied.

But because she weighed only 100 pounds — the minimum was 108 — it took her two tries to pass the physical. For her second weigh-in, she hid fishing sinkers in her hair, her bobby socks and her bra. Even with all that lead, she made it by only half a pound.

After a long bus ride to Texas and months of cadet school, she earned her wings.

She was issued a uniform — a flight suit and bomber jacket, slacks, a shirt, a skirt and a hat.

But the best part was the silver wing pin that told the world she was a pilot.



As a WASP, Marjorie Ellfeldt Rees was barred from battle, but the work was still perilous.



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"We were treated often like we were officers, which of course we would have been if they had recognized us officially," she said.

Of the 25,000 women who applied to become WASPs, 1,800 were accepted into the program and 1,074 graduated. But after the war, the WASPs were grounded, their service largely forgotten.

Thirty-eight of the women died while flying. They received no military honors — they were civilians working for the military. Their mothers weren't allowed to display gold stars, nor were they allowed to drape flags on their caskets. Their families had to pay to get their bodies home.

The government locked away records of the WASPs' service because the war was still going on.

Rees went back to Kansas City, marrying, raising a family, working, volunteering, going back to school to earn a master's degree and a doctorate. She is still active, competing in ballroom dance competitions.

But she never piloted again.

In the 1970s, the government allowed women to enter U.S. service academies. The Air Force Academy announced that its new female cadets would become the first women to fly military aircraft.

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To reach Lee Hill Kavanaugh, call 816-234-4420 or e-mail lkavanaugh@kcstar.com.

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EverydayCitizen wrote on 7/7/2009 2:51:07 PM:

Also, read about Mabel Rawlinson's gold medal here:
http://www.everydaycitizen.com/2009/07/obama_signs_bill_congressional.html

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EverydayCitizen wrote on 7/7/2009 2:50:22 PM:

The Kansas based blog, EverydayCitizen.com, has some great stories about one of these pilots. Mabel Rawlinson was one of the 38 WASP that made the ultimate sacrifice and she definitely deserves the congressional medal. 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 Mabel's 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

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Dannie wrote on 7/4/2009 9:08:48 AM:

God Bless ya, Honey!!!

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bahed wrote on 7/4/2009 5:42:14 AM:

Another forgotten story now told. Congratulations to you and your fellow WASP's efforts to keep this country and the world safe from oppressors.

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Albanaich wrote on 7/4/2009 5:22:28 AM:

The WASP's were the US counterpart of the British ATA, which was formed in 1939.

The United Kingdom, like most of Europe, but unlike the USA has a system of recognising Civilian service and courage. Most of them were awarded the MBE.

The USA should have something in place similar to the George Cross, Medal and Queen's Gallantry Medal,. For instance the British would have awarded the NY Fire department a group GC (which is equivalent to the Congressional Medal of Honor, but for civilians) for actions on 9/11.

The women of the British ATA operated under combat conditions but were not combat pilots. The only nation to use women in air combat in WW2 was the USSR, the only female 'Ace' pilots being Lydia Litvak and Katya Budanova.

The finest pilot of the 20th century was undoubtedly Hanna Reitsch, Iron Cross who test piloted the first helicopter, jet aircraft, rocket and cruise missile and who broke the world record for gliding age 66.

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Walleye wrote on 7/3/2009 11:54:49 PM:

Good Job, Ladies. Thanks to all the Greatest Generation and theirs.

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