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S.J. woman was a trailblazing pilot during World War II

By Mark Gomez mgomez@mercurynews.com Posted: 07/21/2009 05:42:03 AM PDT Updated: 07/21/2009 10:43:06 AM PDT

Marcella Tucker is sitting on a couch in her San Jose home and gazing at a black and white photo of herself taken so many years ago. She's just 23 in the photo, sitting on the wing of an airplane used during World War II, her feet dangling.

Tucker, 89, quickly points out she wasn't just posing with the BT-13, a single-engine propeller airplane used to train American pilots during the war.

"I can fly that," she said proudly.

The BT-13 was just one of several military airplanes Tucker flew all across America on noncombat missions during World War II. She was among a select group of about 1,000 trailblazing women who became the first female pilots in U.S. history to fly military aircraft.

Though the contributions of these pioneering women had gone largely unnoticed for decades, they will soon be receiving a thank you from the nation. On July 1, President Barack Obama signed into law a bill to award the Women Airforce Service Pilots with the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest award given to civilians in the United States. A ceremony to honor the women is in the making.

"I think it's tremendous for the recognition," Tucker said Thursday in a home she shares with her son, Gary Tucker. "It's fantastic to have contributed to our country's need."

Facing a shortage of pilots, the Women Airforce Service Pilots program was established in 1942 and tasked with carrying out noncombat missions in the United States. Once the war was well in hand and male pilots began returning home, the civilian WASP program was unceremoniously disbanded in 1944.

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"We were heartsick," Tucker said. "In those days, they weren't favoring women." so the women were once again shooed under the carpet."

Wearing the same military-issued pilot's wings she earned in 1943, Tucker recalled her journey from Santa Clara to Love Field in Dallas, where she was assigned for nearly two years and flew a variety of planes. She once co-piloted a B-24 bomber from Dallas to March Field near Riverside.

After graduating from Santa Clara High School in 1937, Tucker (who then went by her maiden name, Fatjo) enrolled at San Jose State, which offered a flight training program out of Oakland airport. At the urging of her "forward-thinking mother," Jessie Fatjo, Tucker enrolled in the program and was the first in her 20-person class to earn a pilot's license.

When the military began recruiting female pilots in 1942, Tucker was one of 25,000 women to apply for the program. She was accepted and sent to Howard Hughes Airport in Houston, for extensive flight training. The program's training was similar to that of male pilots serving in the Army Air Force.

After earning her wings, Tucker was stationed at Love Field in Dallas. The women pilots were assigned to 120 air bases across America.

"It was a wonderful experience because we had orders to go all over: east, west, north and south," Tucker said. "We

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Marcella Tucker, wears the wings she earned during her civilian service in World... (Dai Sugano)

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picked up airplanes at the factory and delivered them to the training fields.”

Tucker’s orders sometimes required her to deliver light cargo or do a flight check to make sure a plane was fit to be shipped overseas. She often would ferry new and repaired airplanes from factories and deliver them to training fields throughout the U.S., she said.

“It was hard on the ego of these men at the training schools,” said Tucker, who last flew a plane about 20 years ago. “They haven’t received their wings yet and here comes a female flying in a plane they can’t even check out. That was all right. A bit of glory.”

Though the women weren’t flying combat missions, they often put their lives on the line, said Nancy Parrish, executive director of Wings Across America, a group dedicated to ensuring WASPs place in history. The women often acted as test pilots, running a repaired airplane through its paces to make sure everything worked. Tucker said she was required to circle the airfield for 15 minutes before each trip to make sure it was ready for flight.

Thirty-eight women pilots and trainees were killed while flying for their country, Parrish said. After the program disbanded, WASP records were sealed, marked secret and stored in archives for more than 30 years, Parrish said. The records were unsealed in 1977 after an Air Force press release that erroneously stated it was training the first women to fly military aircraft for the U.S. The women who flew military airplanes during World War II lobbied Congress and with the help of Sen. [Barry Goldwater](#) got a bill passed that gave WASPs veteran status.

“All it really did was give them the right to have a flag on their coffin,” Parrish said.

To this day, Tucker relishes her experience as a WASP and called the opportunity a blessing.

“It was just a fantastic opportunity for a woman in those days,” she said. “You didn’t know, day to day, what orders you’d receive, what you were going to fly and where you were going to take it.”

Contact Mark Gomez at 408-920-5869.

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