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Mary Helen Foster, 89, flew planes during World War II as a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots. Recently, she received her commercial pilot's license.

By Alan Blinder Special to The Tuscaloosa News

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**NORTHPORT** | Mary Helen Foster has had a busy year. In March, she received the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest award Congress can present to a civilian. She turned 89 and spends plenty of time doting on her grandchildren. And she received her pilot's license.

For Foster, who moved to Northport in 2000, taking the controls of an airplane is far from a new experience. Piloting has been a passion of hers for nearly seven decades.

During World War II, she was one of the earliest members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, a special unit that flew military aircraft throughout the United States while men served in combat theaters abroad.

Her craving to take to the skies originated during a brief vacation in Corpus Christi, Texas, in the early 1940s.

She took a Delta plane, her first flight, to the coast, which triggered her interest.

That trip didn't stop when her plane landed in the city on the Gulf of Mexico. Some acquaintances who were also Navy pilots showcased their skills by flying over the beaches while Foster and a friend watched.

Upon returning to San Antonio, where Foster was working as a secretary at Fort Sam Houston, she went to the nearby Brown's Flying School and informed the instructor that she was going to learn to fly.

"I thought it would be a new experience," Foster said. "(The flight instructor) was hesitant, but I looked at him and said, 'You're going to take me up.'"

The instructor often said he didn't expect Foster to enjoy learning how to pilot an aircraft. Foster said her teacher soon overcame his uncertainty about teaching a woman, because she soon was flying more often.

"I was spending all of my money out there," she said.

The instruction paid off: She successfully completed her certification flight in 1944, as snow fell over Texas.

During her career in the cockpits of military planes as one of the fewer than 1,900 women accepted into the special program, Foster flew DC-3s, which had commercial and military purposes.

She was the only woman to fly out of Malden Army Airfield in Missouri before it closed as a military base in 1960.

Still, after the war concluded and the service was disbanded, Foster couldn't land a job as a pilot. Airline executives told her that while they needed pilots to accommodate the nation's growing interest in flight, they did not want women in the cockpit, even those with previous experience.

"It was such a terrible thing to have to give up," said Foster, who, like the other female pilots, were not

allowed to collect veterans benefits until Congress passed a bill that was signed into law during the Carter administration.

Her hopes of remaining an active pilot dashed, Foster worked as a librarian and substitute teacher in the Houston area as she raised her five children.

It was one of those children who conspired with a family friend to persuade Foster to recently reapply for her pilot's license.

She said she did it to appease their wishes, but she never thought she'd receive the license again, since she had not flown in decades. She mailed in the paperwork and she soon received a card similar in size and texture to a driver's license. She was, pending a specialized physical exam and a final check flight, a licensed pilot once more.

In recent years, federal officials have broadly revised standards for pilot age to reflect improvements in medicine and aviation technologies. In 2007, a law allowing pilots on a domestic commercial flight to be as old as 65 went into effect.

However, Foster said she isn't planning to fly on a regular basis, even with her updated license.

"At my age, family is more important than anything right now," she said.

Foster said she will limit her adventures in the sky to when she is visiting family members in Texas, where a friend, who is also a flight instructor, has a plane he said that he'll let her fly.

Even as she has vowed not to allow flying to consume her time, Foster said she is energized as she prepares to return to the skies. "(The family friend) hasn't let me land a plane since I've gotten my license again," Foster said. "Maybe he'll let me do that again soon."

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