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Sunday, October 25, 2009 |

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Margaret Tunner, one of the first female pilots in the U.S. military, dies

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Published: October 24, 2009

Margaret Ann Hamilton Tunner, it could be safely said, loved to fly.

As a young woman during World War II she joined the select Women's Airforce Service Pilots, the first women trained to fly American military aircraft. In her 70s, she learned to fly ultralight aircraft, and for her 78th birthday she was granted special permission from the Clinton White House to co-pilot an F-15 Eagle fighter jet from Langley Air Force Base.

Strapped into the cockpit that day, Mrs. Tunner was asked by the pilot if she would be more comfortable with a normal takeoff or a rapid one that employed the after-burners. She went for speed.

"Let's go for it!" she said, according to her daughter, H. Suzanne Tunner Hudson.

"She had a remarkable life," Hudson said in an interview yesterday.

Mrs. Tunner, 92, died Oct. 13 at her home, Hockley Farm, in Gloucester County, where she had lived since 1958.

Mrs. Tunner was born in Enid, Okla. She became a civilian pilot and purchased her own Piper Cub before entering the WASP program, which trained female pilots to ferry aircraft, including bombers and fighters, tow targets for gunnery and serve as instrument instructors, though not participate in combat. The women were considered civilians until 1977, when President Jimmy Carter signed legislation providing procedures for former WASPs to gain veterans' status. Mrs. Tunner was stationed at an air base in Romulus, Mich.

After the war, she moved to Japan to work for the U.S. forces occupying Japan. She returned to the United States, and in 1951 married Lt. Gen. William H. Tunner, who had commanded the Berlin Airlift. They moved to Gloucester in 1958. Mr. Tunner died in 1983.

In later years, Mrs. Tunner remained active in the community with groups such as the Garden Club of Gloucester, and she continued raising sheep on her farm. On several occasions, she was invited to events at the Clinton White House.

"She had a wonderful time with that," her daughter said. "She loved it."

In addition to her daughter, Mrs. Tunner is survived by a stepson, William Sams Tunner; six grandsons; and two great-grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held today at Ware Episcopal Church in Gloucester. She will be buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery on Dec. 11.