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Weatherford woman was original Air Force fly girl

Posted Wednesday, Apr. 14, 2010

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By Jennifer Acosta Scott For [Weatherford Telegram](#)

Jo Wheelis sat at a table in her Weatherford home last week, poring over a cardboard box of memorabilia.

Nestled in the box were photographs and news clippings - but there weren't any pictures of high-school graduations or programs from family reunions. There was a black-and-white photo of Wheelis, standing with two other women in Army fatigues. In another, fuzziier print, Wheelis sits in the cockpit of an airplane, squinting against the sunlight above.

"My sister saw me on a newsreel and asked the theater owner for the film and made a print from that," the 91-year-old laughed, running her finger over the sepia-toned photo.

It's a far cry from the memories that most people collect, but common when you're a former member of the WASP - the Women Airforce Service Pilots. Wheelis, along with 1,073 other women, was a member of this elite group, which employed trained women to fly military aircraft for the United States Air Force during World War II. In March, Wheelis traveled to Washington, D.C. and received a Congressional Gold Medal for her service as a WASP. For Wheelis, the reason she became a WASP is simple.

"I didn't have a plane to fly and I was going to get to," Wheelis said.

Born in Royce City, Wheelis - then called Jo Myers - moved to Dallas with her family and graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School in 1936. She married fairly quickly after leaving school, and she and her husband took flying lessons and received their pilot's licenses. The marriage didn't last, but Wheelis' love of flying stuck around.

"He thought the flying would save it, but it didn't do it," Wheelis said.

In 1943, through people who worked at a local airport, Wheelis got word that a new women's paramilitary outfit was forming. The group would help the Air Force (then called the Army Air Forces) fly non-combat missions while their male pilots were fighting overseas in World War II. Wheelis was intrigued.

After a trip to Rhode Island for her sister's wedding, Wheelis returned to Texas and promptly reported to Avenger Field in Sweetwater to begin her WASP training. A photograph of her graduating class shows Wheelis and four other women standing among about 20 male pilots.

"We were the first class to train at Sweetwater," Wheelis said. "It was coeducational for a while, since the men were in the process of moving out."

By the fall of 1943, Wheelis was a member of the 3rd Ferrying Division, stationed in Romulus,



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Michigan, just west of Detroit. Their job was to transport planes to their proper locations.

"We'd go to a factory, pick up a plane and take it to the field it was designated for," Wheelis said. She and her "fly girl" coworkers bounced across the country, zipping in and out of air bases, where often faced criticism from male Air Force members.

"It was usually people in the Air Force that didn't fly," Wheelis said. "They resented it because they couldn't get into flying."

The job of a WASP was also, at times, dangerous. Thirty-eight female pilots lost their lives in crashes while in the service of the group, and Wheelis had a couple of close calls herself.

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