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Late Billings woman recognized for service during World War II

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MARY PICKETT Of The Gazette Staff | Posted: Friday, March 19, 2010 11:10 pm | (3) Comments

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Marjorie and Ken Rolle were photographed with their Beechcraft Bonanza in 1988. Marjorie flew 22 months as a WASP during World War II.

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WASP members can get medal replicas

All women who were in the Women's Airforce Service Pilots program are eligible to receive a bronze replica of the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor given by Congress.

The gold medal, which was presented to the women as a unit last week, will be donated to the Smithsonian Institution, said Calista Rollogas of the Women's Memorial Foundation.

Any former WASP or the family of a deceased member of the group may contact the foundation public-relations department at 703-533-1155 to obtain a replica medal.

Billings aviator Marjorie Logan Rolle posthumously will receive a congressional medal honoring women who were pilots in military service during World War II.

Rolle's widower, Ken, will receive a bronze replica of the medal given out last week in Washington, D.C., to former Women's Airforce Service Pilots, said Calista Rollogas with the Women's Memorial Foundation, which is handling distribution of the medals.

Marjorie Rolle is one of six Montana women whom Rollogas found on WASP records. Others are Irene Robertson of Billings; Frances Blakeslee, Polson; Margaret Goldhahn, Fort Benton; Kathleen Titland, Kalispell; and Juanita Cooke, Helena. All are deceased.

Betty Cozzens, who lives in Cody, Wyo., also is on the list, although she didn't want to be interviewed.

Rolle was the daughter of aviation pioneer Dick Logan, who homesteaded land on top of the Rimrocks where the Billings airport is now. Rolle grew up on the cattle ranch, riding her horse with her three sisters to a country school, according to her obituary.

Logan sold the land to the city for the airport, then was the facility's manager from 1927 until his death in 1957. It was named after him in 1958.

Marjorie Rolle's mother ran the airport restaurant, where Marjorie worked when not in school.

There, she "bummed airplane rides and worshiped pilots like all girls do," she said in a 1988 interview with The Billings Gazette.

After graduating from Senior High, Rolle went to college and became a secretary. While in college, she was in the Civilian Pilot Training Program and received her private pilot's license in 1940.

She joined the WASPs in 1943.

Gen. H.H. "Hap" Arnold, commanding general of the U.S. Army Air Forces, created the WASP program to free male pilots for combat duty during the war.

Rolle was one of 1,074 women flying in the program.

She served 22 months as a WASP, ferrying planes from factories to U.S. air bases and testing planes after they were serviced.

She flew as a pilot and co-pilot on planes including single-engine Piper Cubs and B-24 Liberator bombers.

Though WASPs did not fly combat missions, it still could be dangerous duty. Thirty-eight WASP pilots died during the war.

Some flight instructors and male pilots saw the women more as potential dates than pilots, Rolle said in the '88 interview.

One of Rolle's barrack mates was washed out of the group when she refused to date her instructor. But most men with whom the WASPs worked with treated the women with respect, she said.

Rolle would remember the day the WASP program disbanded on Dec. 24, 1944, as "the saddest day of my life."

After the war, she joined the U.S. Air Force Reserve, rising to the rank of major. She also was active in the Civil Air Patrol and was a charter member of the Montana chapter of the 99s, the first organization of female pilots formed by Amelia Earhart.

Rolle had met Earhart in the 1930s when the famed aviator stopped at the Billings airport.

The WASPs were considered civilians during the war, only achieving veteran status in the 1970s.

Rolle married U.S. Navy veteran Ken Rolle in 1947. The couple lived in Billings, where Ken was Dick Logan's assistant at the airport and later airport manager.

Marjorie worked for the Federal Aviation Administration.

The Rolles lived in California and Missoula, where Ken managed airports and Marjorie worked for the Social Security Administration. After their retirements, they returned to Billings in 1975.

Marjorie Rolle died in 2002 at the age of 86.

Contact Mary Pickett at mpickett@billingsgazette.com or 657-1262.

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