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Gold Medal Service Finally Recognized



Written by April Scheinoha



Thief River Falls resident Dr. Eloise-Marie Clark held the Congressional Gold Medal that was posthumously awarded to her mother, the late Marie Mountain Clark.



The late Marie Mountain Clark was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal for her service in the Women Airforce Service Pilots program.

Marie Mountain Clark is probably smiling somewhere.

On March 10, Marie was posthumously awarded a Congressional Gold Medal. She was one of the 1,102 women affiliated with the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program who received the medal in Washington, D.C.

"She would've been so thrilled to have been there, but she died a year-and-a-half ago," said her daughter, Dr. Eloise-Marie Clark. Eloise-Marie, a Thief River Falls resident, accepted the medal on her mother's behalf.

"I was thrilled with the huge response to this and all the people who were there --?all the dignitaries," Eloise-Marie said.

The Congressional Gold Medal is the highest award Congress can award to a civilian or to a group of civilians. George Washington, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela and the Tuskegee Airmen are among those who have received the medal. Each WASP recipient received a bronze replica of the WASP's gold medal, which is now located at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. Legislation for the award was signed in July 2009, but the award wasn't presented until March 10, 2010.

"It is a late award. At least two-thirds of the WASPs are gone now," said John A. Clark, who is Marie's husband and Eloise-Marie's dad. Despite this, John and the other WASP family members appreciated the award.

An interest in aviation

Marie was interested in aviation long before she was flying aircraft as a WASP during World War II. Her interest took root in West Des Moines, Iowa.

"As a youth, I was always interested in aircraft and aviation. Perhaps growing up on a farm encouraged my natural affinity for mechanical equipment and engines, and an interest in their operation. Since aircraft are also machines with engines and mechanical equipment, I developed a desire to extend these experiences to the new domain of flight," wrote Marie in her autobiography, "Dear Mother and Daddy: World War II Letters Home from a WASP."

However, Marie had to put a hold on her dreams to fly airplanes since flying was expensive and money was scarce in the 1930s. "I had to put a hold on my dreams of flying although they were always in my mind. I did not consider flying as a vocation, but as an interest, something more than a hobby. I was determined that should any opportunity come along to learn to fly, I would grab it," she wrote.

In the meantime, Marie obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in music from Drake University in Des Moines. Her opportunity to fly aircraft soon came but not without some setbacks.

"To increase the pool of trained pilots, the Civil Aeronautics Administration of the Department of Commerce established the Civilian Pilot Training Program in 1940. This came exactly at the right time for me. My early ambitions to learn to fly had been frustrated by a lack of money, and this CPT program, financed by the government, offered me an excellent opportunity to take flying lessons," she wrote.

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Her dreams are soon realized

Marie applied to the CPT program at Drake University. Her application was rejected. However, she was accepted by Dowling College, which also had a CPT program. She soon began learning how to fly in Des Moines.

Marie received her private pilot certificate June 4, 1941. She applied for the CAA private pilot advanced course. Her application was denied. "Their reason was that the physical stresses involved in the acrobatic maneuvers in the course could cause damage to the reproductive organs of a female. This, of course, was nonsense – but the ruling stuck. Later, as a WASP flying military fighter, I endured far greater 'internal stresses' than would ever have been experienced in the small private aircraft, and I still managed to have babies later without any trouble!" she wrote.

Since her application was denied, Marie instead spent the next two years teaching ground school courses in meteorology, aerial navigation and at least two other subjects for the Dowling College CPT program. She also continued flying solo.

Around the time that Marie received her private pilot certificate, Jacqueline Cochran had developed a plan for the WASP program. The program would train female pilots.

In spring 1943, Marie was notified that she could apply to become a WASP. She was accepted, and she began her training Aug. 9, 1943, in Sweetwater, Texas. "This was the beginning of my opportunity of a lifetime!" she wrote.

In a letter to her parents dated Aug. 23, 1943, Marie wrote, "I was thrown out of the plane today on a bad spin recovery. I am certainly not proud of the spin, but I am proud of the jump. It happened so quickly that there was no time to do anything except the right things very calmly." Marie suffered no injuries despite parachuting 3,000 feet out of the plane.

Marie graduated from her WASP training on Feb. 11, 1944. Marie celebrated the occasion with her parents, Charles and Ethel Mountain. "One afternoon, while they sat below the control tower, I made a series of takeoffs and landings with a group of WASPs in AT-6s and waved to them each time I taxied past the control tower to take off again," she wrote.

Ten days after her graduation, Marie reported to the Las Vegas Army Air Field. While there, Marie provided instrument flying instruction to male pilots. She also flew mock fighter attacks on the B-17 "Flying Fortress." In addition, she served as an engineering test pilot for P-39 and P-69 fighter aircraft.

In a letter to her parents on April 13, 1944, Marie wrote, "Yesterday afternoon, I shot 16 landings in wind which was very strong and gutsy and constantly shifting, and every landing was beautiful, but today –?in a perfectly calm wind condition and smooth air!"

On May 3, 1944, she met the man who would become her husband at the base's Officers Club. "I had settled down in the Officers Club to write a letter home," John recalled. He saw a beautiful woman and began speaking with her. John was at the base for three weeks. They dated and later kept in contact via letters while John flew combat missions overseas.

In the meantime, Marie continued her work in Las Vegas. In a May 25, 1944, letter to her parents, Marie wrote, "This morning, one of Betty Wall's students was given to me, so I flew the two students a total of 3:25 [hours]."

Marie began flying AT-11s that day. "I co-piloted for a while, then we landed and I took the pilot's seat. I taxied to the takeoff point, called the tower and took off and flew out in the practice area awhile, and came back and landed with Skelton as co-pilot. It was my first experience of being the real pilot of a twin-engine ship. I have a total time of 1:10 at present. The AT-11 is a beautiful ship in which to start one's twin-engine experience. It is a cabin ship with twin tails too –?900 HP altogether," Marie wrote.

In a Sept. 10, 1944, letter to her parents, Marie wrote she had test-hopped two P-39s earlier that morning. "Last Wednesday, I was pretty sick of all the bickering over whether we should fly '39' missions or not, so I went to see the chief engineering officer, Major Nixon, whom I like very much. And Thursday, I was in engineering, test-hopping and slow-timing 39s," Marie wrote to her parents on Sept. 10, 1944.

Earlier that year, an effort to grant the WASP military status failed in Congress. "A bill for this purpose was introduced in the House of Representatives in the spring of 1944, but it was defeated by a narrow margin in June. Another factor was that combat losses of male pilots were much lower than had been expected in 1942 when the women pilot program was established. While this was good news in itself, it did mean that by mid-1944 the USAF had a sufficient number of trained and experienced male pilots to meet its needs. Hence the trained WASP pilots were considered superfluous," Marie wrote.

In December 1944, the WASP program was disbanded. "On many of these final days, I flew three or four different missions. My flights were mostly in the P-39 and P-63 fighters, but I also flew the BT-13 and, as co-pilot, in the B-17, 'Flying Fortress.' In the last 10 days, I flew 26 hours or an average of 2.6 hours per day," Marie wrote.

Marie completed her last flight as a WASP on Dec. 20, 1944. She wrote, "As I landed, taxied to the ramp, and shut down the engine, the finality of it all struck me with a deep and profound feeling of sweet sadness. It was over."

By the time the WASP program had been disbanded, Marie had logged about 1,000 hours on military aircraft.

Since Marie was a member of the WASP program, she was considered to be a civil service employee. She and the other female pilots received no entitlements under the GI Bill. They were finally granted veterans' status in 1977.

After the WASP program ended, Marie left Las Vegas. She returned to Iowa. Months later, in April 1945, John arrived in West Des Moines. It was almost one year to the day that he had met Marie. "That's when I made my proposal and she sat on it for a while, and I had to leave to get back to the war, you might say," said John, who went to an air base in Texas.

Marie didn't give him an answer right away. About two months later, she wrote to John, telling him that she was accepting his proposal. They were married July 8, 1945, in West Des Moines. The couple eventually settled in Ann Arbor, Mich., where Marie taught flute. They had five children.

Over the years, Marie flew private planes twice. She also flew along with John, who served in the Michigan National

Guard. After having flown countless military fighter planes, Marie just didn't have the heart to fly anything less powerful. Marie passed away Oct. 2, 2008, in Ann Arbor. She was 93. Nine months after Marie's death, President Barack Obama signed the legislation awarding Congressional Gold Medals to the WASP program. Months later, a plaque was placed at Marie's grave, commemorating the honor.

