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## Retired Lt. Col. Marjorie M. Gray dead at 95

BY MATTHEW CHAYES

[matthew.chayes@newsday.com](mailto:matthew.chayes@newsday.com)

February 13, 2008

Retired Lt. Col. Marjorie M. Gray, who helped organize a women's pilots club on Long Island decades after she had been a pioneer for women in the Air Force during World War II, has died, her longtime friend and guardian said yesterday. Gray was 95.

She died Monday in the Long Island State Veterans Home in Stony Brook of a bacterial infection, said the guardian, Madeline Steiner, 70, of Smithtown.

Gray was part of the first class of the Women Airforce Service Pilots in Houston. The group was formed through the Army Air Forces to help shore up the war effort because so many male pilots had gone to fight abroad, said Julia Lauria-Blum, a curatorial assistant at the Cradle of Aviation Museum in Mitchel Field, East Garden City. Lauria-Blum helped create an exhibit to honor the women in 2001 at the American Airpower Museum at Republic Airport in East Farmingdale.

The women honored in the exhibit had flown in every capacity on the homefront except combat, Lauria-Blum said, ranging from training to ferrying planes to their domestic destinations. "They worked extra hard at it because they did have to prove themselves that women could do this job as well as the men could," she said.

After the WASP, as they were called, disbanded in 1944, Gray in 1950 joined the Air Force Reserve, from which she retired as a lieutenant colonel in 1972.

Marjorie Murray Gray was born in Manhattan in 1912, but her family moved to Cliffside Park, N.J., shortly thereafter. After graduating from what is now the Douglass Residential College at Rutgers, she did stints as a children's social worker and an air-traffic controller trainee, Steiner said.

Gray had her first flight on July 4, 1937, at what is now Francis S. Gabreski Airport in Westhampton Beach, Steiner said.



A year later, she got her solo pilot's license. In addition to using her flying skills in the military, she operated her own flight school, Marjorie M. Gray Inc. Aero Service. Later she worked at several aviation companies on Long Island, including Grumman Aviation.

In 1965, Gray helped organize Long Island's chapter of the women's pilot club, the Ninety-Nines, said Doris Abbate, 75, of Glen Head, the chapter's historian and a founding member of the chapter.

The greater New York chapter was growing, Abbate said. Plus, "we didn't want to meet in the city," she said.

Gray never married. Visiting is tomorrow, 3 to 5 p.m. and 7 to 9 p.m., at the Branch Funeral Home, 190 E. Main St. in Smithtown. A religious service and cremation will be at 3 p.m. Friday in Washington Memorial Park in Mount Sinai.

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