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WW2 'Fly Girl' to Finally Get Military Honors

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A pioneering World War II pilot from Detroit will finally receive full military funeral honors today, a tribute denied at her death because she was a woman.

Marie Michell soared as one of 1,000-plus women to earn their wings as members of a U.S. Army Air Force program. On Oct. 2, 1944, the 20-year-old newlywed's plane crashed during a training flight over the Mojave Desert in California.

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"She's finally getting her honors now," said her niece, Cheryl Marie Michell, who recently moved from Florida to Royal Oak and has made it a mission to honor the service of her aunt and 37 other women who died in service as a WASP, a member of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots.

Today, Marie's family, including her 90-year-old brother Roy Michell of Holt, will gather around a green-patina bronze marker -- inscribed with her married name of Marie Michell Robinson -- at White Chapel Cemetery in Troy. Roy Michell will receive the precisely folded American flag, which historically has draped a serviceperson's casket, from a military honor guard. Taps will be played.

"To Marie, flying was just a natural thing. She loved it," said Roy, her senior by 17 months, who enlisted in the Navy after flight training didn't work out. "I figured, right from the start, she was a better pilot than I was."

An important role

Marie was a "Fly Girl" as they were known, women who flew planes stateside for the WASPs to free up male military pilots for combat overseas.

The WASP program was created in August 1943, combining the previous Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron (WAFS) and the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD). Their mission: to work as test pilots or ferry aircraft stateside. But the women's roles weren't officially recognized as military service. They dressed in military-like uniforms they bought for themselves, but were not classified as military or eligible for veteran status.

Veterans such as Marie Michell "deserve every honor they can receive," said David Krall, vice president of White Chapel Cemetery.

"They weren't recognized as veterans or military -- even though they were in service to our country," he said.

As the end of the war drew near, the WASPs were deactivated in December 1944 because critics decried it as a waste with so many male pilots then available.

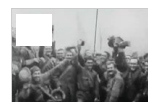
It wasn't until 1977 that President Jimmy Carter designated the women eligible for military veteran's benefits. In 1984, the WASPs were awarded the American Campaign Medal and World War II Victory Medal. In 2009, President Barack Obama signed legislation awarding them the Congressional Gold Medal.

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"It's helped me understand what a great impact that women can have on the world. These women proved it a long time ago," said Cheryl Michell, a mother and grandmother. "For me personally, I've got her blood running in my veins, and it makes me feel more empowered."

At Monday's service, Cheryl Michell will read a poem -- "Celestial Flight" -- composed for her aunt's 1944 funeral. The poem was written by Marie's best friend during WASP training, Elizabeth (Kit) MacKethan Magid.

Now deceased, Magid came to Michell's funeral and wrote the poem on a typewriter in Marie's grandmother's home in Royal Oak. The poem has become a staple at funerals and tributes to WASP pilots.

Smitten with flying

A teenage Marie, then living in the Washington, D.C., area with her mother and stepfather, was smitten with flying when she was smitten by Jack Hayward, who graduated from a military high school with her brother.

"Jack was already a pilot while still in high school," said Roy Michell. "Marie decided to impress him by becoming a pilot, too."

In 1942, Marie graduated from a junior college in Maryland and surprised her dad at graduation by taking off and landing in a plane.

She was accepted into the WASPs in August 1943, one of only 1,800 chosen from a field of 25,000 applicants. A month later, Hayward, then a Navy pilot, died in a military plane crash. Though heartbroken, Marie forged ahead.

In March 1944, she graduated from WASP training and was stationed at Love Field in Dallas. There she met Hampton Robinson, an Army surgeon from Houston, and they fell in love.

"Good place to meet your husband," said Roy Michell, who also was stationed there when he was in the Navy.

Then, on Oct. 2, 1944, Marie Michell took the place of her roommate as copilot on a B25 Mitchell Bomber training flight, with two servicemen aboard. A lieutenant was the pilot when the plane crashed into the Mojave Desert and disintegrated into flames.

Marie's casket was returned to Detroit, accompanied by Hampton Robinson. That's when the family learned the two were secretly wed in Reno just two weeks before the crash.

When Marie Michell Robinson was buried in White Chapel in Troy, there were fewer than a dozen people at the funeral, her brother recalled.

"It was very subdued," he said.

Ceremony in Troy

In 2005, the shifting sands of the Mojave Desert unearthed Marie's wedding ring, her pilot wings, an identification bracelet from her mom and her watch. Amateur aviation archaeologists discovered the remnants and tracked them to Marie. The Michell family donated the items to the Women in Military Service for America Memorial, outside the gates of Arlington National Cemetery.

During today's public ceremony at White Chapel, Michell's grave marker, weathered by time, will be surrounded by 37 American flags to signify the other pioneer WASPs who died in service. About 400 full-size American flags will line the cemetery's roadway.

Leading to Marie Michell Robinson's grave, there will be a stretch of red ribbon laid down to signify the line she crossed, the barrier she broke when she soared.

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