Female WWII pilot from Boca awarded Congressional Gold Medal

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Updated: 5:22 p.m. Sunday, March 28, 2010
Posted: 5:02 p.m. Sunday, March 28, 2010

Mary Hearn doesn’t feel as though she deserves any accolades, but the U.S. government and nearly everyone she meets thinks otherwise.

On March 10, the 89-year-old Boca Raton resident was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award in the U.S., for her service during World War II in the Women Airforce Service Pilots.

She was one of 1,078 women who earned their wings during the war and one of only about 300 who are still alive. More than 65 years after they completed their service, all of them were recognized for their wartime contributions with the Congressional Gold Medal.

Although Hearn admits that her body is failing her (she uses a walker and can’t drive anymore), her mind is sharp and her memory impeccable.

“She’s a firecracker,” said Patti Macchi, Hearn’s daughter and only child, who lives in Coral Springs.

Hearn grew up in a military family and was one of five children. Her father was a U.S. naval officer, which meant that he and his family moved every few years up and down the East Coast, depending on where he was stationed.

Hearn spent her youth as the Marana Army Air Field in Arizona. Every day she would fly for planes in the maintenance department at what was then known only because he assumed that the war would be over before she

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Hearn said she felt compelled to give back to her country and get involved in the war effort in some way. When she told her father she was planning to join the WAVES, a division of the U.S. Navy that consisted entirely of women, he was horrified.

“He said, ‘The Navy is no place for a young lady,’” Hearn said. “He wanted me to stay at home and knit socks and mufflers.”

But she remained persistent, and when she saw an advertisement in The Washington Post with photos of women in flight suits, she knew she had found her calling.

Hearn’s father agreed to let her join the Women Airforce Service Pilots only because he assumed that the war would be over before she would complete her training.

After passing a rigorous training program, Hearn became a test pilot for planes in the maintenance department at what was then known as the Marana Army Air Field in Arizona. Every day she would fly
about five planes, making sure they functioned properly.

"I just took to flying like a duck to water," she said. "I was too stupid to be afraid."

Having women as test pilots during the war relieved the male pilots for combat duty.

Marana Army Air Field also has a special place in Hearn's heart because it was where she met her husband. One hot summer day while she was swimming in the officers' pool, a man who was also swimming bumped into her.

"Seven months later, we were married," Hearn said.

Her husband, Lura, who died in 2003, was an instructor pilot at the time they met. He remained in the military for 35 years. They have one daughter, two grandsons and a great-grandson.

St. Andrews Estates North, the senior community in Boca Raton where Hearn has lived for the past 15 years, recently held a celebration in her honor. When someone at the celebration asked why Hearn doesn't think she deserves the Congressional Gold Medal, she was quick to smile and say, "Because I had so much fun doing what I did."

Hearn and her family attended the Congressional Gold Medal ceremony earlier this month in Washington, D.C.

Each gold medal recipient was taken around by an escort, and Hearn was in awe of hers — a female Air Force captain with two young children. Seeing a young mother pursuing her dreams really brought to light the importance of the work Hearn did during World War II.

"I guess we kind of broke the glass ceiling," she said.