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**WWII women pilots to get 'long-overdue' honor; Local woman who died while serving as a WWII pilot is among them**

By Kalamazoo Gazette staff  
September 20, 2009, 11:11AM



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From the left, Dorothy Dodd Eppstein, Hellen Skjersaa Hansen, Doris Burmester Nathan and Elizabeth Chadwick Dressler, walk in front of a B-25 plane, as they were Air Force engineering test pilots for the B-25 during World War II.

By Aaron Aupperlee | Kalamazoo Gazette

**KALAMAZOO** -- Mabel Rawlinson was killed on Aug. 23, 1943, when her plane crashed during a training exercise at a military base in North Carolina.

Rawlinson, 26, was a member of a newly formed unit of female pilots serving in World War II. But the pilots were not recognized as enlisted soldiers.

So the U.S. Army did not pay to bring Rawlinson's body back to her hometown of Kalamazoo. It did not pay for the small graveside ceremony at Mount Ever-Rest Memorial Park.

She received no medals.

"She was forgotten," said Pamela Pohly, Rawlinson's niece.

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**KALAMAZOO VIDEO**



**Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs): Dorothy Dodd Eppstein**

Dorothy Dodd Eppstein remembers her time as a pilot during World War II, where she served as a WASP.

- [Women Airforce Service Pilots \(WASPs\): Doris Burmester Nathan](#)
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But not anymore.

Sixty-six years after a group of 1,102 women, including Rawlinson, broke the gender barrier in the sky, enabling generations of women to become military pilots, President Barack Obama has awarded the Women Airforce Service Pilots the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor accorded by Congress.



Courtesy of Pamela Pohly

Mabel Rawlinson, 26, was one of 38 women killed serving as a Women Airforce Service Pilot during World War II. Rawlinson was killed on Aug. 23, 1943, when her plane crashed and caught fire during a training session at a military base. Mabel's August 1943 burial in Kalamazoo. This is Mabel's August 1943 burial in Kalamazoo.

The award places the women alongside other recipients such as Thomas Edison and the Tuskegee Airmen, who received the medal for their landmark and sometimes forgotten contributions to their country. The female pilots did not engage in combat overseas but provided key support in the states, such as serving as test pilots and piloting planes during training exercises.

**WASPs timeline**

Aug. 1, 1941: Jacqueline Cochran, the first woman to fly a military aircraft across the Atlantic Ocean, proposes a women's pilot division of the Air Corps Ferrying Command.

Sept. 10, 1942: The Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron of female pilots is formed to domestically ferry light military aircraft. Sept. 15, 1942: The Women's Flying Training Detachment is created.

Nov. 17, 1942: The first class of recruits, totaling 28 women, report for training with the Women's Flying Training Detachment.

Aug. 1, 1943: Some of the female pilots are transferred to Camp Davis in North Carolina, where their duties are increased. The women serve as test pilots and participate in training exercises, such as pulling targets behind their planes for target practice with live ammunition.

Aug. 5, 1943: The Women's Flying Training Detachment and the Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron merge to form the Women Airforce Service Pilots.

Oct. 14, 1943: The pilots become the first women to fly the B-26 bomber, a twin-engine plane dubbed "the widow-maker" for its terrible training record.

Dec. 20, 1944: Because of political pressures and availability of male pilots, the Women Airforce Service Pilot program is deactivated.

Nov. 3, 1977: Women Airforce Service Pilots are given veteran status.

1984: The pilots are awarded the American

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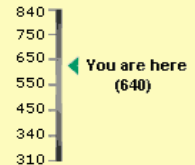
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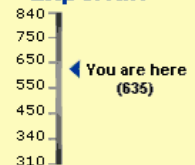
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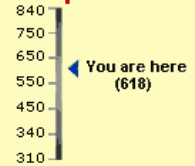
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overseas. They ferried aircraft from factories to military bases, piloted planes during training exercises for male pilots and towed targets behind their planes for target practice with live ammunition. Sometimes the gunners would miss the target and hit the planes.

Dorothy Eppstein, 91; Doris Nathan, 92; and Suzanne D. Parish, 86, still live in Kalamazoo and are among nearly 300 surviving pilots.

Mary Buckley, Mary Lewis, Janet Wayne Tuch and Rawlinson were living in Kalamazoo when they joined the unit, according to Nancy Parrish, executive director of Wings Across America, a Texas-based nonprofit group that is collecting and recording a history of the female pilots. Parrish did not have any information about Buckley, Lewis and Tuch.

**Loved to fly**

Rawlinson's family moved to Kalamazoo from Virginia in the mid-1930s so Rawlinson could attend Western Michigan University. After graduation, Rawlinson returned to WMU to take flight courses.

She helped found a Civil Air Patrol group in Kalamazoo after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and when the Women Airforce Service Pilots started looking for qualified female fliers, Rawlinson signed up.

"She loved flying. ... But she also wanted to help with the war effort," said Pohly, who lives in Kansas and never met her aunt. "My family, my grandmother, my aunts and uncles were just so proud of Mabel. They felt such grief for her loss, but they held their heads high and were filled with pride."

After Rawlinson graduated from flight training, she was transferred to Camp Davis, in North Carolina, where she was killed during the night training exercise.

The Women Airforce Service Pilot program was disbanded in 1944, partly because of objections that the women took away noncombat pilot jobs from men. The unit's records were sealed.

More than 30 years later, the women were granted full military status. In 1984, the pilots received the American Campaign Medal and World War II Victory Medal for their service.

The Congressional Gold Medal will be awarded to the pilots during a ceremony in Washington, D.C. No ceremony date has yet been set. The U.S. Mint will strike one gold medal, which will be donated to the Smithsonian Institution for display. Surviving pilots or their families can purchase a bronze replica.

1984. The pilots are awarded the American Campaign Medal and World War II Victory Medal for service.

March 12, 2009: Legislation passes quickly through Congress to award the Congressional Gold Medal to WASPs.

July 1, 2009: President Barack Obama signs legislation awarding the medals.

**Congressional Gold Medal**

The Congressional Gold Medal is the highest award given by Congress and ranks with the Presidential Medal of Freedom as the highest honor awarded to a civilian.

Congress has awarded 140 gold medals to individuals and groups since awarding the first medal to George Washington in 1776.

The medal has been given to generals, inventors, composers, artists, civil rights activists, ministers and others. Medal recipients include Thomas Edison, Joe Louis, Walt Disney, the Wright Brothers, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Tuskegee Airmen.

Source: *U.S. House of Representatives' Office of the Clerk*

**WASPS on the Web**

- Wings Across America: [www.wingsacrossamerica.us](http://www.wingsacrossamerica.us).
- Texas Women's University Women Airforce Service Pilot archive: [www.twu.edu/library/wasp.asp](http://www.twu.edu/library/wasp.asp).

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