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

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

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 for the small graveside ceremony at Mount Ever-Rest Memorial Park.

She received no medals.

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

Feature, Government, MLive - News »
KALAMAZOO NEWS
The Latest Community, Education & Government News, Blogs, Photos & Videos

View full size
Shawano Cleary | Special to the Kalamazoo Gazette

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 -- 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 for the small graveside ceremony at Mount Ever-Rest Memorial Park.

She received no medals.

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

Related content
• Flying planes made life exciting for Lansing native Dorothy Dodd Epperstein
• Female flier Doris Burmester cherishes a 'blessed life'
• Sue Parish pursued lifelong passion for flying

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 for the small graveside ceremony at Mount Ever-Rest Memorial Park.

She received no medals.

"She was forgotten," said Pamela Pohly, Rawlinson's niece.
WWII women pilots to get 'long-overdue' honor; Local woman who died …serving as a WWII pilot is among them | Kalamazoo News - - MLive.com

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.

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.

“The Congressional Gold Medal is a long-overdue recognition and thank you to each and every woman who bucked cultural and gender bias to put their lives on hold and serve their country,” said U.S. Rep. Fred Upton, R-St. Joseph, who supported the bill awarding the medal to the pilots.

Rawlinson was one of 38 women in the unit who were killed during World War II. She was one of seven women from the Kalamazoo area who served as pilots in the roughly two-year program, created by Congress.

Acceptance into the unit was difficult: Eight of every 100 women who applied were approved, but nearly half of those approved didn't successfully complete training.

The female pilots helped to free male pilots to fly

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.


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 Ferrying 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 Legion Gold Star.

1990: Live Blog: Minnesota Vikings at Detroit Lions

2009: Rep. Fred Upton, R-St. Joseph, introduces a bill awarding the medal to the women, who bucked cultural and gender bias to put their lives on hold and serve their country.”

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.
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.

Ravlinson’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.