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WWII Congressional Gold Medal female pilot from York remembered

Mary Reineberg Burchard died recently at the age of 95.

By MIKE ARGENTO Daily Record/Sunday News

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In early January, Eileen McDargh visited her mother in her assisted-living facility in southern California to tell her that she had to go away for a few days.

Her mother asked where she was going, and McDargh said it was a retreat in Santa Barbara.

"I'll go with you," her mother said. "Let's be daring. Let's have an adventure."

Even as she was looking at the end of her life, as her health and body failed her, Mary Reineberg Burchard wanted to embark on an adventure. That was how she lived, and she was going to live that way until the end.

She died Jan. 28, a month shy of her 96th birthday.

The short biography of Burchard would describe the daughter of a well-known York businessman, a woman who went on to serve as a pilot during World War II and earn, decades later, a congressional honor. A woman who became a doctor when women doctors were rare.

It would only tell part of the story.

"She was incredibly, incredibly remarkable," her daughter said.

Burchard was born in York on Feb. 29, 1916 - a Leap Year baby. Her father, Jacob Reineberg, owned Reineberg Shoes in York. She went to St. Mary's School.

It was there, when she was 12, that she declared her life's ambition.

"I'm going to be an aviatrix," she said.

That year, Amelia Earhart became the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, and it apparently had a profound effect on her.

She went on to college and medical school, graduating from Temple University and moving back to York to start up her podiatry practice. But she never forgot the dream she had when she was 12.

A boyfriend gave her her first flying lesson. She was hooked. She took lessons and got her pilot's license. She pitched in with two other pilots and bought a plane, a small Taylorcraft.

"Such a sweet plane," she told her daughter once. "Papa wouldn't go up with me, but Mama did. Every time I banked she would grab on to me that I almost lost control. She was scared, but I think she was secretly thrilled, too."

When World War II began, she was serving with York Squadron 301 of the Civil Air Patrol. Watching the boys march



Mary Reineberg Burchard with her Congressional Gold Medal. (SUBMITTED)

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off to war from her second-floor office window, she decided she wanted to serve. She announced she planned to join the women's aviation unit, the WASPs. She hung a sign on the door - "Gone to war" - and went off.

She paid her own way to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, and signed up. She was assigned to a base in Marana, Ariz. She was a test pilot, charged with putting new airplanes through tough tests to make sure they were ready to be deployed. She would fly long distances over the southwest desert, navigating by roads and rail lines. She would stall the plane, perform loops and barrel rolls.

The WASPs were paid meager wages. When one of their fellow pilots would die in a crash, they'd have to pass the hat to collect money to ship the body home. When the war ended, they were thanked for their service and cut loose. They had to pay their own way home.

After the war, she traveled with the American Red Cross to southern Italy to serve the occupying Allied forces. She fell in love with Naples - "Bella Napoli" she called it. She met Pope Pius XII at the Vatican. On her way home, in 1947, she met her husband, Jack.

They moved around frequently. They had three children - twins Eileen and John, and Susan. The marriage lasted 25 years.

Eileen remembers her mother had no fear. Once, when they were living in Fort Lauderdale, she recalled, they played cards by candlelight in the middle of a hurricane.

"Whenever people would say she couldn't do something, she would answer "Why not?"" McDargh said.

Her service - and that of her fellow women pilots - wasn't recognized until 1974, when they were finally awarded formal recognition and honorable discharges. Burchard framed her discharge and hung it on the wall, her daughter said.

And then, in 2010, the WASPs were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor given out by Congress.

Burchard's health prevented her from attending. Later, she was given her medal at her assisted-living facility. She was honored, but at the same time, didn't think she did anything all that remarkable.

"We didn't do anything that anybody else would have done," she said at the time.

"She was an adventurous woman," her niece, Kate Redshaw, of York Township, said. "She, and the others who served with her, paved the runway for other gals to follow."

In her last days, after her left side was numbed by a stroke, Burchard would hear a plane overhead and turn her blue eyes to the sky. When she spotted the aircraft, her daughter said, she would point with her good arm and say, "You lucky so-and-so."



Memorial service

A memorial Mass will be held 1 p.m. May 4 at St. Mary's Catholic Church, 309 S. George St. in York.

Keffer Funeral Home is arranging the details.

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