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# Hodgson recalls honor, courage of WWII WASPs

By Judith McGinnis

Posted March 28, 2010 at 12:01 a.m.

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Photos courtesy of Texas Woman's University Still single, WASP pilot Marion Stegeman was flying planes to and from Love Field in Dallas when this photo was taken in 1943.

Spring can be pretty raw in Texas but by the time you get to Sweetwater, as the old-timers say, there isn't anything to hold the wind back but barbed wire.

"It was just tumbleweeds and sand," said Georgia native Marion Hodgson, recalling her first view of Avenger Field in March of 1943. This was where she and 1,000 young women trained to become Women Airforce Service Pilots — WASPs — during World War II.

"It was flat and unbelievably hot in the summers but that's where we met some of the best people in the whole wide world."

And so began the adventure of a lifetime, a contribution to the war effort that took more than 65 years to be fully recognize. A group of surviving WASPs were recently awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in ceremonies in Washington, D.C.

The plan, promoted assertively by pioneer female aviators Jacqueline Cochran and Nancy Harkness Love, was to train women to handle domestic, noncombat flights for the military to free up male pilots for combat duty. They would ferry freshly minted planes to training bases and embarkation ports, tow targets for anti-aircraft practice, simulate strafing missions and transport cargo.



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Photos courtesy of Texas Woman's University WASP recruits Marion Stegeman and Jill McCormick on cleanup duty in their Avenger Field barracks. Hodgson described the barracks as having "one board thick walls. It was hot in the summer, cold in the winter and dusty all the time." McCormick was one of more than 60 WASPs who lost their lives either in training or active duty.

All recruits would first have to be licensed pilots so at age 19, with the help of a special family friend, then Marion Stegeman got her mother's consent to enroll in the Civilian Pilot Training Program.

"She said she felt like she was signing my death warrant," said Hodgson, "Ultimately she was very proud of what I accomplished, but I know she worried."

Sweetwater training days including rigorous physical training ("physical torture" the women called it), classroom and in-flight pilot training. Recruits marched formation and cleaned their own barracks. Their "Sunday dress" uniform was an ensemble of khaki pants, white shirt and an overseas cap. No adornment or fingernail polish was allowed "but a lot of girls painted their toenails just to keep their spirits up."

"We were issued two 'zoot suits,' for everyday training," Hodgson said, describing the heavyweight G.I mechanics coveralls. "At the end of the day we'd wear them into the shower and use soap and a brush to scrub the grime off, then rinse and hang them up to dry."

After weeks of training it was time for Hodgson to earn her wings. She struggled with spot landings, the terrestrial version of a carrier landing requiring pilots to touch their craft down on an exact spot on the landing strip.

"There I was trying to stick it in a West Texas crosswind. I thought I might wash out, I was sick all over. But the instructor never told me to leave," Hodgson. Cochran presented her wings.

During the next 14 months, there were many other tense moments. The engine of an AT-6 caught fire on the field; true to training Hodgson jammed the throttle to kill the flames, but they only grew stronger. She jumped out as two airmen with fire extinguishers put out the fire.

"On my worst day I was actually a passenger on a DC3 catching a flight out of LaGuardia when both engines went out, Somehow that 24-year-old captain got us back," Hodgson said. "He did what we were trained not to do, bank to the dead engine. Then the other engine went out and I can remember looking out the windows and seeing high tension wires we must have cleared by

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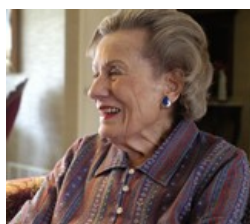


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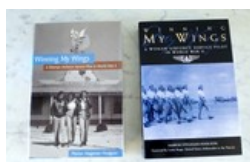


CLAIRE KOWALICK/TIMES RECORD NEWS

Marion Hodgson and a group of surviving Women Airforce Service Pilots recently received the Congressional Gold Medal in ceremonies at Washington, D.C. Hodgson joined the WASP in 1943 at age 19.



Claire Kowalick/Times Record News Marion Hodgson smiles Tuesday as she recalls pilot training days at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, during World War II. Women's Army Service Pilots like Hodgson freed male pilots up for combat duty by delivered freshly manufactured planes to ports of embarkation, towing targets for anti-aircraft practice, simulating strafing missions and transporting cargo.



Claire Kowalick/Times Record

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News Marion Hodgson's book, *Winning My Wings* (from two different printings), tells the story of her days as a WASP through letters exchanged with her mother and soon-to-be husband Ned Hodgson.



Photos courtesy of Texas Woman's University Still single, WASP pilot Marion Stegeman was flying planes to and from Love Field in Dallas when this photo was taken in 1943.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

WASP recruits Marion Stegeman and Jill McCormick prepare for cleanup duty in their Avenger Field barracks. Marion Hodgson described the barracks as having "one board thick walls. It was hot in the summer, cold in the winter and dusty all the time." McCormick was one 60 WASPs who lost their lives in training or active duty.



less than an inch. Somehow he got that plane and all of us on the ground safely."

Other WASPS were not so fortunate; 38 were killed in the commission of their duties and another 22 in training accidents; Hodgson knew a number of them.

Considered civilian service personnel, they were buried without military honors.

"In 1977 the law was finally passed giving us veterans status but for most it was too late for any G.I. benefits. It meant we would be able to have a flag draped on our coffins," Hodgson.

Throughout her WASP enlistment, Marion Stegeman exchanged letters with that special family friend, Ned Hodgson. Himself a Marine pilot, while Marion was delivering war planes to the east and west coasts, he was recovering from injuries sustained during night flights in the South Pacific. They wrote almost every day.

"I wasn't a really popular girl though high school and college (University of Georgia) but once I became a pilot boys were buzzing around like flies," she said and laughed. "But I knew Ned was the one."

After their first kiss he addressed his letters to "Miss Lovely" and she to "Darling Ned." These and Hodgson's other wartime correspondence are part of her book, "Winning My Wings: A Woman Airforce Service Pilot in World War II."

By 1944 the destiny of the WASPS was becoming clear; more male pilots were becoming available as they returned from war service and groups like the American Legion demanded men be given back their places as civilian pilots and instructors.

"I delivered by last plane, an AT-6 to West Point. It was very emotional. I kissed it goodbye," Hodgson said with a sigh. "I remember taking the ferry back to New York. It was a slow, sad trip."

The tall, lean girl from Georgia never flew again. She and Ned were married less than a month later.

"It was such wonderful opportunity for so many of us, to serve and to make a contribution when our country



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really needed us. The friends I made and the people I met made it one of the greatest experiences of my life.”



CLAIRE KOWALICK/TIMES RECORD NEWS

Marion Hodgson's book, "Winning My Wings," tells the story of her days as a WASP through letters exchanged with her mother and soon-to-be husband Ned Hodgson.

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