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Phyllis Tobias Felker; Pilot, Business Owner

By [Joe Holley](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, August 15, 2006; Page B06

Phyllis Tobias Felker, 86, who flew with the Women Airforce Service Pilots squadron during World War II, died of cancer July 22 at her home in Springfield. Mrs. Felker also was the former owner of a Springfield printing business.

Born in Detroit, she was the daughter of a Ford dealer who enjoyed taking his daughters to air shows in the Detroit area. Mrs. Felker got to go up in a biplane, an experience that nurtured an early love of flying.

She graduated from high school at age 16 and received an associate's degree in 1938 from Stephens College in Columbia, Mo., then a junior college. She received a bachelor's degree from Indiana University in 1940. While at Indiana, she obtained her pilot's license.

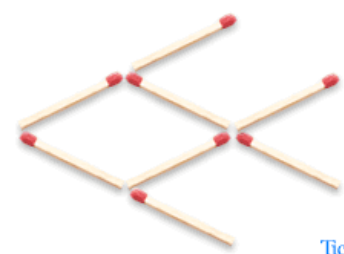
She worked briefly for a Detroit law firm, went back to Stephens to work in public relations and then in 1943 became a WASP. In 1944, Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold, commander of the Army Air Forces during World War II and a WASP champion, pinned the wings on Mrs. Felker and her classmates at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Tex. (now home to the National WASP WWII Museum).

She became one of about a thousand WASP pilots who ferried military aircraft across the United States during the war, freeing male pilots to serve in the European and Pacific theaters. Unlike fighter and bomber pilots, who flew the same type of plane regularly, the ferry pilots had to be prepared to fly whatever equipment was assigned to them. Mrs. Felker flew everything from single-engine fighters and trainers to multi-engine bombers and cargo aircraft.

When male military pilots began coming home after V-E Day

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(May 8, 1945), they began complaining that the women had put them out of work. Mrs. Felker and her fellow WASP pilots were suddenly and unceremoniously disbanded with no recognition of their efforts and no GI Bill benefits. Mrs. Felker's flying career ended when she was 25. (She and her fellow pilots finally received veterans' benefits in 1977.)

Mrs. Felker became an Air Force wife and lived with her husband, a pilot, on three continents. In 1949, when her husband was based in Shanghai as the Communist Revolution swept over the country, she tried to avoid being evacuated by throwing her passport into a canal. "My mom just loved China," a son recalled. "Loved the people, the culture. She wanted to stay."

The family settled in Springfield in 1961.

After her divorce from Alex Felker in 1974, Mrs. Felker became an executive secretary at a Springfield environmental engineering firm, Water Resources Engineers. She decided that Springfield needed what she called "a store that sells copies." Despite having no entrepreneurial experience and no experience of any kind in printing, her business, Copy Right Printing, grew to have more than \$1 million in annual revenue.

She sold the business in 1997 but stayed involved with the Springfield business community. At the time of her death, she was treasurer of the Central Springfield Area Revitalization Council. She also remained active within the WASP and military communities, speaking to church and school groups about her days as a pioneering aviator. She was a charter member of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation.

She was a member of New World Unity Church in Springfield.

Survivors include three children, Alex Felker of Sanibel Island, Fla., and Sally Beecroft and Frank Felker, both of Springfield; a sister; and six grandchildren.

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