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Aspen pioneer pilots finally honored for WWII service

60-plus years later, the U.S. thanks Ruth Brown, Betty Pfister
Janet Urquhart
Aspen correspondent
Aspen, CO Colorado

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Her WASP days over, Pfister polishes the propeller on her P-39 fighter plane, which she named Galloping Gertie. She remained an avid aviator for much of her life.

Courtesy Betty Pfister



Ruth Brown, left, with friends during her days with the WASP.
Courtesy Ruth Brown

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Ruth Brown holds her Congressional Gold Medal. She received the honor in March, some 65 years after the Women Airforce Service Pilots were disbanded.
Rustin Gudim/Aspen Times Weekly

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opportunity arose.

"The war started and everybody wanted to do something," she said.

"You had to have 35 hours or something [of flying]," to join the WASP, "so I quickly went and got my 35 hours so that I could join," Brown said. "They accepted me right away."

ASPEN, Colorado — Creased faces, gnarled hands, unsteady legs. The frailties of age belie the accomplishments of youth, but their eyes, still sparkling, reflect the pride captured more than 60 years ago in the black-and-white photographs of two young women in uniform.

Two Aspen octogenarians, Ruth Brown and Betty Pfister, are among the corps of pioneering female pilots whose country has finally recognized their contribution to both military service and aviation history.

They are among the fewer than 300 surviving members of the WASP — the Women Airforce Service Pilots — a select group of female aviators who were the first women to fly military aircraft for the United States. In a March 10 ceremony at the U.S. Capitol, WASP members were presented with the Congressional Gold Medal, a belated honor that drew national attention to a long overlooked chapter of American history.

'Everybody wanted to do something'

Ruth Humphries Brown and Elizabeth Haas Pfister were among some 25,000 young women who, in the early 1940s, applied for inclusion in the WASP program. Pfister was already a pilot; Brown would quickly become one.

The short-lived program accepted 1,830 women, but only 1,074 graduated. Thirty-eight of them lost their lives in service as WASP, flying non-combat missions in the United States, ferrying planes and helping train men for battle during World War II.

Brown, now 89, was born in Denver. Her family owned a private plane — a rarity in those days, and her uncle founded the region's first commercial airport, near the future site of the city's former Stapleton International Airport.

"I used to dislike flying intensely," recalled Brown, a reluctant passenger in the family plane.

But, like many Americans of her generation, Brown was swept up in the desire to serve her country when the

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Pfister, now 88, was already a pilot when Jackie Cochran, the female aviator credited with helping launch the WASP, put out a call for applicants. Cochran had urged the use of woman pilots in stateside roles, freeing up men for combat duty, initially pitching the idea to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in 1939, two years before the attack at Pearl Harbor drew American forces into the war.

"Jackie Cochran sent out telegrams to all the women who had a pilot's license, asking if we'd be interested," Pfister said. "There weren't that many of us in those times."

Aviation assignments

Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas quickly became the headquarters for WASP training. Trainees split their time between flight school, where they learned to pilot a range of aircraft, including bombers and fighters, and ground school, where they took such courses as physics, meteorology, navigation and math, and received instruction in aircraft engines and Morse code.

While Pfister would be assigned to ferry command, a job that took her to various military posts as she shuttled various types of aircraft from factory to base or between bases, Brown stayed put at Childress Army Air Base in Texas, training bombardiers and gun crews. While she piloted planes like the legendary B-17, nicknamed the Flying Fortress, bombardiers practiced dropping bombs on targets. At other times, she dragged a target behind the aircraft to give ground artillery crews shooting practice.

Pfister, a New York native, learned to fly while she was a student at Bennington College in Vermont. One plane ride and she was hooked, threatening to drop out of school if her family wouldn't agree to fund flying lessons, she said.

After graduation, Pfister headed for Texas to enter the Army Air Forces training program, but left when her brother, Navy pilot Bob Haas, was killed in training. After a month with her family, Pfister was back in the program.

Close call

Though the WASP were limited to non-combat duty, service was not without its dangers. Women died in training accidents and crashes blamed on mechanical failures. Brown said she survived some close calls; Pfister remembers her one crash vividly. She was on her first twin-engine solo flight with the program, accompanied by a WASP co-pilot but no instructor, when one engine and then the other quit.

"It got very quiet," she said. "Suddenly, we were a glider."

Pfister crash-landed the plane on its belly in the dirt, and the two-person crew walked away unscathed — a day after two pilots and an instructor had both been killed in another accident.

"We totaled the airplane, but we didn't have a scratch," she said.

Disbanded and forgotten

The program was barely two years old when it ended abruptly in December 1944, leaving its pilots to find their own way home.

"We offered to fly for free and they still said they didn't need us," said Pfister, who would pursue a lifelong love affair with aviation.

"I would have loved to stay in," Brown said. "I enjoyed being in a thing like the WASP — we were doing stuff for the country."

"And having a good time doing it," Pfister added quickly.

The two Aspenites did not meet in the WASP program, but discovered their shared experience later in Aspen, in a conversation neither woman now recalls.

The records of WASP service, meanwhile, would be sealed and their contribution all but forgotten until 1976, when the U.S. Air Force Academy announced its co-ed class of graduates would include the first women to fly military aircraft.

The WASP had mothballed their uniforms, but not their memories. Some members spoke up about the apparent oversight.

"They spoke for all of us," Pfister said with quiet defiance.

Congressional Gold Medals

Another 30-plus years would pass before, last July, President Barack Obama signed into law a bill awarding a Congressional Gold Medal to the WASP for their unselfish, extraordinary service during World War II, an event that culminated with last month's emotional ceremony at the Capitol.

Some women wore their original uniforms. Some came in wheelchairs and others walked with canes. Family members of deceased pilots came to collect an honor that came too late for their mothers and grandmothers.

Pfister attended, meeting old chums and reuniting with women she hadn't seen since the WASP disbanded.

Brown was unable to make the trip, but daughters Darcey Brown of Moab, Utah and Lorni Cochran of Vermont attended in her stead.

"They were such inspiring women — they were just incredible," Darcey Brown said. "It was so neat. The first woman Thunderbird pilot (Lt. Col. Nicole Malachowski) saying, 'I stand on your shoulders.'"

Later, the elder Brown, suddenly the center of attention, jokingly chided her family: "I hope you're going to

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treat me with more respect now.”

“That cracked us all up,” Darcey said.

Post-war

After the war, Ruth met D.R.C. Brown in Denver; they married in 1947. He served as a PT boat captain with the U.S. Navy during the war, but was an experienced civilian pilot who handled the flying duties for the family. Ruth didn't fly again, according to Darcey.

The Browns were avid skiers and D.R.C.'s multi-faceted career would including ranching, a term as a state senator and a stint as CEO of the Aspen Ski Corp. Ruthie's Run on Aspen Mountain is named after Ruth. Her husband died in 2008.

Pfister also married a pilot; she met Art Pfister in the lift line at Aspen Mountain and they married in 1954. He attended flight school after World War II began, was a flight instructor and flew C-46 planes from India to China, delivering gasoline. Art's varied post-war career included time on the Aspen Skiing Co. board of directors and helping develop Buttermilk Ski Area. He died in 2007.

Betty's passion for flying would take her in many directions. She owned and flew a single-seat P-39 fighter plane after the war, before ultimately donating it to the Smithsonian. She was also a stewardess for Pan-Am for a time, because there was no place for women in the cockpit of a commercial airliner in those days.

Pfister learned to fly helicopters, competed as a helicopter pilot and was instrumental in developing a heliport at Aspen Valley Hospital. She also pushed the Federal Aviation Administration to provide a control tower at the Aspen airport and founded the Pitkin County Air Rescue Group, an organization of local pilots who would search for downed planes and lost skiers in the surrounding mountains.

Pfister was also the founder and first member of the Aspen chapter of The Ninety-Nines, the International Organization of Women Pilots, and was inducted into the Colorado Aviation Hall of Fame in 1984.

She helped blaze a trail of opportunity for generations of women who followed, but had Pfister's career begun after those doors were opened, she knows exactly what path she'd have chosen: "I'd be in the space program, for sure," she declared.

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