



Suzanne Parish's passion for flight lives on at Air Zoo

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Pink pilot: Suzanne Parish's pink Curtiss P-40 Warhawk hangs in the lobby of the Air Zoo.

PORTAGE — In the lobby of the Air Zoo, a Curtiss P-40 Warhawk hangs from the ceiling.

But this isn't the World War II fighter aircraft of documentaries and air shows: its iconic shark face is grinning and wearing lipstick.

It's a man's airplane with a feminine touch, a pink war machine that longtime Kalamazoo resident Suzanne DeLano Parish turned into her trademark.

Parish, a local philanthropist, actress, photographer and co-founder of the Air Zoo, died May 12 in Palm Springs, Calif. A memorial service will be held for her Saturday at the Air Zoo.

A granddaughter of Dr. W.E. Upjohn, founder of The Upjohn Co., Parish lived in New York City, Cincinnati, and Europe before coming back to Kalamazoo in 1929. At 18, she sprained her ankle on a horse and couldn't ride for six weeks, so her mother, Dorothy Dalton, suggested she take flying lessons. She was hooked and flew 350 hours in her first year.

Parish wanted to join Women Airforce Service Pilots. Although she had ten times the required flight time to join, she didn't meet the 21-year-old age requirement. She eventually joined in 1944, serving as a ferry and a test pilot. Of 1,078 who completed training, about 300 WASP pilots are still alive.

In March, Parish was one of three women who were still living in the Kalamazoo area who were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal by President Barack Obama for their service during WW II. She was joined by Dorothy Eppstein, who died on June 7, and Doris Nathan.

"She didn't bother to question authority and invaded worlds women normally didn't," said Bob Ellis, who knew Parish for more than 40 years and is the Air Zoo's president and CEO.



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Suzanne Parish, second from right, was a member of the Women Air Force Service Pilots during World War II. After the war, Parish could not find employment as a pilot. She married Preston "Pete" Parish in 1948 and gave birth to five children. When her former husband purchased a share in a single engine 35C Bonanza in 1959, her passion for flight was rekindled.

The couple flew the plane often and soon purchased a Stearman, an AT-6, a Grumman Wildcat, and finally the P-40. By the mid 70s, they decided to turn their collection into a museum.

While Kalamazoo does not have much of a history in aviation, Ellis said the Parishes wanted to share their passion of flight with the community.

When the museum opened in 1979, it had nine airplanes and attracted 3,200 visitors. Over the years the Air Zoo added more

planes, larger facilities, a restoration center and a series of flight simulators. Today it features more than 80 planes and drew 220,000 visitors in 2009.

Bill Painter, the Air Zoo's first volunteer and registrar, said Sue Parish always had high standards for the museum and didn't mind sharing how things should be done, from the positioning of aircraft in the hangar to the goods stocked in the gift shop.

The biggest change came in 2004 when the Air Zoo opened a new, 120,000-square-foot facility with the goal to attract people who were not the typical airplane enthusiasts, Ellis said.

"She wanted people to know that aviation is filled with dreamers, not just airplanes and flying," Ellis said.

For longtime friend Mary Helen Wilson, the Air Zoo was the culmination of Parish's lifelong passion for flight.

"She was always involved with it," Wilson said. "It gave her a purpose."

When Parish stopped flying in 2000, she became less involved with the day-to-day operations at the Air Zoo, but was still supportive and attentive to the museum's quality and the experience people had there, according to Ellis.



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Suzanne Parrish poses with two of her planes during a 1980s air show in Kalamazoo.

Whenever they spoke, Ellis said, Parish always asked about what was going on at the museum. She was excited when admission became free in 2009.

"She thought it was the greatest thing," Ellis said.

Throughout the 1970s, '80s and '90s, Parish would bring her pink P-40 to air shows across the country, performing barrel rolls, loops and fly-overs. When she got out of the cockpit to meet the audience in her pink jumpsuit, she would take off the pink helmet and put on a cowboy hat decorated with flowers.

"They would see she wasn't just another John Wayne in the cockpit," Ellis said. "Young girls flocked to her."

While Ellis said the color of the P-40 was a mark of Parish's attitude, it was also historically accurate. P-40s were painted pink in the Libyan desert as camouflage. She also painted her Cessna and T34 pink as well.

Dr. Bill Harrison, senior director of the Warbirds of America and an orthopedic surgeon in Tulsa, Oak., said Parish was always a major draw at air shows.

"She was a pilot who happened to be a woman," Harrison said. "She was always welcomed to any air show she wanted to go to."

Ellis said Parish's biggest influence to the world of flight was that she "was a woman invading a world dominated by guys."



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Miriam Bat-Ami, left, takes a look at a display of different types of WASP uniforms Wednesday at The Air Zoo. The Air Zoo is hosting a traveling exhibit called Fly Girls of World War II. The exhibit showcases the WASP, Women's Airforce Service Pilots of World War II. The exhibit, created by WASP Deanie Parrish and her daughter, Nancy Parrish, of Wings Across America, shines a

light on the contributions the WASP made to fight for America's freedom. The Air Zoo is the first in the Midwest to show the traveling exhibit.

Parish even defied the limitations inherent in her signature airplane. The P-40 was designed for young men in their 20s and the controls required a good amount of strength. As Parish grew older, Ellis said she began exercising with weights to be able to fly the airplane.

At 71, Parish realized she could no longer fly the P-40 and in October 1993, she flew it for the last time. It was an emotional day, Ellis said, and friends and family came to the Kalamazoo/Battle Creek International Airport to see her fly. When she landed, Parish got out and patted the plane.

But that wouldn't be the last time she would sit in the cockpit. In December 2003, Parish sat in the cockpit of the P-40 again as it was towed into the lobby of the new Air Zoo facility. She was working the controls, turning the knobs and "reliving a lifetime of flying" that logged between 6,000 and 6,500 hours in the air, Ellis recalled.

When the plane was inside, Ellis approached Parish. "I said 'Sue, this airplane will be flying forever for children to enjoy.'"

Parish got out of the cockpit and patted the P-40 again.

"Now you can see Suzie sitting in the cockpit everyday, still making an impact," Ellis said, referring to a life-size mannequin of Parish that sits in the plane.

"The passion she shared throughout her whole life continues."

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