

Pilots in Service

Alturas woman was member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II



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— Alturas resident Virginia Crinklaw Pierce, Women Airforce Service Pilot



By JEAN BILLODEAUX
H&N Correspondent

Sixty-eight years ago, a diminutive college student at San Jose State University made a decision that would shape her future and assure her a place in history.

Alturas resident Virginia Crinklaw Pierce was approached by one of her professors and encouraged to apply for what was to become the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP.

During the early months of World War II, there was a severe shortage of combat pilots. It was determined that licensed women pilots, if given the same training as the Army's aviation cadets, would be equally capable of flying military aircraft and could then relieve some of the stateside male pilots for combat duty.

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exciting and patriotic thing to do," Pierce said.

Her professor took her flying in his Stearman. When they were at altitude, he turned to her and said, "OK, take over."

"I flew that plane, and then knew that I would apply to be in the WASP," Pierce said.

Pierce, along with 25,000 other women, applied. She was notified that she was one of 1,830 women accepted for flight training.

"I only had another month of college before graduation, so I didn't go in the first class," she said. "I really had to stretch to make the 5-foot-2 ½ height requirement."

Training

In March 1941, she went to Texas and enrolled in basic training. The classes were the same as the men's classes, only restricted to women. After graduation she was sent to Michigan for advanced training.

"We were proud to serve our country and excited about flying planes," Pierce said.

Pierce received advanced training and was soon flying aircraft from the factories



Photo by Jean Bilodeaux

TOP: Alturas resident Virginia Crinklaw Pierce, 88, was a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP, during World War II. She flew American and Canadian planes from coast to coast.

ABOVE: Pierce's War Department Identification card. "We were proud to serve our country and excited about flying planes," Pierce said of the WASP.

to bases, from base to base, never knowing when, where or how long she'd be gone. She flew American and Canadian planes from coast to coast.

"Once you learned to fly one type of plane, you could fly them all," she said. "Basically they were the same."

Among the aircraft Pierce regularly flew were the P-51, P-40, P-39, P-47, P-63, BT-13 and AT-6. She co-piloted the B-17 and the B-24.

"Once I taxied up to a group of pilots in a P-51. The pilots told me they

wished they could fly a plane like mine. They were flying little puddle jumpers and were a bit jealous."

The 1,074 graduating WASP were stationed at 120 Army air bases and flew more than 60 million miles. They flew every type of assignment flown by male AAF pilots, except combat. They even test flew the B-29 to prove to male pilots they were safe to fly.

Pierce still remembers with regret and pain a woman in her outfit named Hazel Lee. As

Lee was cleared to land, the tower cleared another plane at the same time. The second plane landed on top of Lee's aircraft, killing her.

Thirty-eight WASP lost their lives while serving their country. Their bodies were sent home in pine boxes, and burials were at the expense of family or classmates. No American flag-draped coffins were allowed, Pierce said.

"Once I was flying, and the ground crew forgot to fill the tank on my plane," she said. "I ran out of fuel. It was suddenly very quiet. I was at a high altitude so wasn't too worried as I had plenty of room to coast in."

"I called into the closest landing field stating my problem and requesting permission to land. The controller told me to circle the field and get in line to land. I responded, 'What part of "out of fuel" don't you get? I'll be damn lucky to make the field.'"

Pierce hung up the radio, and coasting in, landed her plane safely.

End of the war

As victory seemed imminent, Gen. Hap

Arnold, on Dec. 7, 1944, addressed the last WASP class saying in part, "I salute you... We of the Army Air Force are proud of you. We will never forget our debt to you."

Thirteen days later, the WASP were quietly disbanded and sent home. They received no military benefits.

Congress voted to give the remaining WASP veteran status 33 years later, but still no benefits. No WASP members were invited to attend the bill signing. Seven years after the bill was signed, they received their service medals in the mail.

Pierce has been a brine shrimp harvester, high school teacher, judge and justice of the peace. She sailed around Hawaii in a catamaran with rocket scientist Werner Von Braun. She retired from teaching at Surprise Valley High School at age 72.

"I'm not retired. I'm just tired," she said. "At age 88, I just want to stay alive as long as I can. Every day I wake up is a good day. I'd really like to see us get veteran medical benefits, though."

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