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Kula woman to receive medal for service

May 30, 2010 - By HARRY EAGAR, Staff Writer

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KULA - Even after nearly 70 years, Virginia Elaine Jones still gets teary eyed when she thinks about getting her pilots' wings.

"My mother was going to be my first passenger, but she passed" before Jonesy - as she prefers to be known - graduated from the Women Airforce Service Pilots program in 1943.

Until recently, not many people knew that American women flew military airplanes during World War II. They were treated as second-class pilots then and forgotten afterward.

Earlier this year, after a long campaign, Congress finally acknowledged the patriotism and service of the WASPs with a gold medal. Jonesy will receive her medal Tuesday. Still, her memory of not being treated as an equal remains vivid.

The men in the Army Air Corps (later Air Force) "were a bunch of asses, and you can say that," Jonesy said. "We tried to do as much harm to them as we could. We would break their heads against the plane's ceiling," she said, demonstrating how a WASP pilot would send a plane into a steep climb followed by a steep dive to throw the passengers up into the air.

When she picked up a passenger in the "rumble seat" of the BT-15 trainers she mostly flew, "I would almost try to scare them to death," she said. "I'm not a nice person."

But a few minutes later, she teared up again when she thought about young people. She "grieves" for them, anger mixing with her tears on the porch of Kula Hospital, where she lives. "I get vicious when I see how they are wasting their lives."

"The world is a big oyster. They should be grabbing it," she said.

Jonesy did. She grew up in Wichita, Kan., the world center of aviation in the early 1940s, and she dreamed of flying ever since she saw the newsreels of aviator Charles Lindbergh's return from Paris where he completed the world's first solo, nonstop transatlantic flight in 1927. She is 94 now, so she would have been 11 or 12 years old then.

Living right across the street from a Boeing airplane factory kept planes in mind. She said she "wasn't doing anything" up to the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor, just dancing. "I was a jitterbug."

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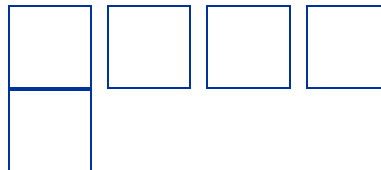
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The Maui News / MATTHEW THAYER photo

World War II pilot Virginia Elaine "Jonesy" Jones points



When all the boys signed up to fight, so did she. The Army Air Corps, with some reluctance but a desperate need for pilots, agreed to train some women for noncombat duty. About 1,000 eventually got their wings, and 38 lost their lives while flying for their country.

Jonesy, who went by Elaine in those days, was in the third class of women pilots.

"We flew everything," she said, including the hottest fighter planes and the trickiest bombers (such as the B-26, nicknamed "Widowmaker"), although she flew mostly the noisy BT-15 and the somewhat less noisy AT-6 advanced trainer.

"It's a wonder I have any hearing left," she said.

Most of her flights were delivering trainer aircraft from Wichita factories to Midwestern bases, sometimes in atrocious weather. Even when the skies were clear, she said, "I never, ever knew where I was."

When thoroughly lost, she would follow train tracks, looking for water towers she could recognize.

A picture taken in Houston shows Jonesy with a group of WASPs, in every imaginable combination of Army fatigues. "We wore whatever we had on to fly," she said. "Have you ever seen such a motley group?"

For formal occasions, the WASPs had slate-blue uniforms and a snappy mascot named Fifinella (designed by Disney Studios) on the shoulder patch.

She said she was known as the Ladybird of Wichita, and it gave her a thrill when she landed when people who knew who she was rushed up to the fence to watch.

Although she had "a passion to fly," by the end of the war, she had had enough of noisy cockpits. "I don't think I ever set foot in a plane after that."

She stayed in the Air Force for a time, serving in Korea. Then she went back to Wichita, looking for a job, first in "the five-and-dime," and later working for Turner Oil. "I loved that job," she said.

She kept dancing, and took up swimming and golf. Her first husband was the "champion southpaw golfer of Kansas," and although she was never as good as he was, she did get her handicap under 10.

Earlier this year, after a long campaign, Congress finally acknowledged the patriotism and service of the WASPs with a gold medal.

On Tuesday, Brig. Gen. Gary Ishikawa, the deputy adjutant general of Hawaii, and Col. Lloyd Sodehani will present the award to Jonesy. "They shouldn't waste their time," she said, not entirely believably, as she is pleased that the WASPs are getting the attention they earned.

But the thought of wasting time brings back the thought of aimless young people. "Please get this message to them," she said, with a mixture of tears and anger: "Kids, get off your butts."

For more information about the WASPs, go online to www.wingsacrossamerica.us/.

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