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Women Airforce Service Pilots from World War II saluted by Gov. Crist and the Florida Cabinet

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Photos:



Virginia Wise, center, a WASP during World War II is honored by the Florida cabinet on Tuesday, April 13, 2010, in Tallahassee, Fla. (AP Photo/Steve Cannon)

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Women from Miami and Tallahassee who were among the first females to fly military aircraft during World War II were saluted Tuesday by Gov. Charlie Crist and the Florida Cabinet.

Virginia Wise, who took up flying as a teenager in her native West Virginia, is among the dwindling number of surviving members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, a civilian organization during the war that won veteran status 40 years later for their service.

The 88-year-old former real estate agent, who now lives in a Tallahassee retirement home, was joined by the granddaughter of another Florida WASP, 90-year-old Frances Sargent of Miami, at the Capitol ceremony. They received a standing ovation from a room full of people when the resolution was read.

Sargent, who also lives now in a retirement, taught aviation for more than three decades in South Florida.

"When it comes to flying, she can tell you stories," said Sargent's granddaughter Jessica Williams, who represented Sargent at the ceremony.

"It was all about the flying," Williams said. "We had some friends that would take her up in airplanes when she couldn't fly anymore. It was her passion."

Wise, who learned to fly in 1939 on a sod airstrip named the Half Moon Airport, was escorted Tuesday by her son, John Wise. They attended a similar ceremony last month at the White House where President Barack Obama presented a Congressional Gold Medal to WASP members.

"It was just like they were back in time," Wise recounted about the White House gathering.

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Nearly 1,100 young women, all civilian volunteers, flew virtually every type of military aircraft, including the B-17, B-26 and B-29 bombers. They ferried new planes from factories to military bases across the country and tested overhauled planes and towed targets for ground and air gunners to practice shooting with live ammunition. In all, their operations covered more than 60 million miles.

But the recognition for these women volunteers came well after their service and, now, fewer than 300 are alive today.

As civilians, who weren't given any veteran recognition of any type for more than three decades, the WASP members had to pay their own travel costs from their homes to the training center in Sweetwater, Texas and return costs after the group was disbanded in 1944. Thirty-eight women died during their time in the WASP operation and their bodies were shipped home with their colleagues passing the hat to collect enough money to have the coffins returned.

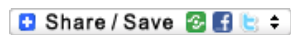
It was a far different era some 70 or more years ago when the WASP organized.

"There were very, very few paved runways anywhere back in those days," John Wise said.

As civilians, they weren't allowed to even have the American flag put on the coffin.

But it didn't deter the nearly 1,100 women to added significantly to the U.S. military effort during the critical stages of World War II.

"We were strong, independent women," Mrs. Wise smiled. "We couldn't be told what to do much of the time."



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