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She left her heart in the P-51

Virginia Sweet, a ferry pilot in World War II, dies at 88

By PAUL GRONDAHL, Staff writer

First published in print: Friday, July 17, 2009

SCHENECTADY -- Inspired by a story she read as a young girl about Amelia Earhart's trans-Atlantic flight, Virginia Sweet became a pioneering female aviator in her own right.

She was a pilot with the Women's Airforce Service Pilots, ferrying every imaginable type of military aircraft from factories to air bases during World War II to free male pilots for combat overseas.

Sometimes Sweet was assigned to fly shot-up, barely functional aircraft in for repair. Thirty-eight of her fellow women fliers were killed during duty.

After the war, when these Rosie the Riveters of the skies no longer were needed, the nation essentially turned its back on Sweet and hundreds of WASP pilots like her.

The longtime Schenectady resident died Sunday at 88, two weeks after President Barack Obama signed a law at the White House that offered recognition and Congressional Gold Medals, the highest award Congress can give to a civilian, to the WASP fliers.

Sweet flew 52 different types of military aircraft, including the B-17 Flying Fortress and B-29 Superfortress bombers, but she left her heart in the cockpit of the P-51 Mustang.

"She was a honey to fly," she said of the long-range, single-seat fighter plane that helped beat Hitler's Germany.

At the July 1 signing ceremony, Obama acknowledged that the honor was long overdue and thanked WASP members, who were granted only civilian status during wartime and not considered members of the military. Obama praised them for "courageously answering their country's call in a time of need while blazing a trail for the brave women who have given and continue to give so much in service to this nation since."

Obama was joined by three WASP pilots representing more than 1,000 women who joined the WASP unit in 1942 and 1943. They were the first women ever to fly American military aircraft and flew almost every type of plane operated by the Army Air Forces in non-combat missions during the war, logging more than 60 million miles.

Following the end of World War II, the women were released from duty and returned home, largely forgotten. They were even required to turn in their WASP leather bomber jackets. It wasn't until 1977 that the Air Force finally granted the women veteran status.

Sweet had been in failing health after a stroke earlier this year and was only semi-conscious in recent weeks. Her niece, Betsey McBride of Niskayuna, said Aunt Ginger may not have understood what relatives told her about the hard-won honor she received on July 1.

McBride will accept Sweet's Congressional Gold Medal posthumously at a ceremony that is being planned for Washington, D.C., later this year.

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"She liked to say she would have been a general if she was a man," said a nephew, Edward Grinter of Schenectady.

Sweet wasn't shy about articulating the bitterness she felt for being treated as a second-class citizen because she was a woman in a man's realm during the war. She felt she could fly as well as any male, even if she was issued men's flight jumpsuits that never fit quite right across her sinewy 5-foot-6, 100-pound body.

She could curse like a guy, too, her relatives confirmed.

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