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### NEW THIS ISSUE:

THE ONLINE ICON DIRECTS READERS TO THE WEB FOR ADDITIONAL STORY CONTENT, PHOTOS, PODCASTS AND VIDEOS. THE ENTIRE MAGAZINE CAN BE FOUND ONLINE AT UTEPMAGAZINE.UTEP.EDU.

Cover photograph of Xochitl Rodriguez '09 taken by Ugyen Phuntso in Bhutan.



# American Flyer

BY ARLEENE BARRIOS

## MINER EARNS CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL



Photos courtesy of Andy Hailey



**T**hey were the first women to fly American military aircraft, from trainers to attack planes to heavy bombers such as the B-17 and B-29.

During World War II, they logged more than 60 million miles on every type of military aircraft. These aviatrixes were part of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), pioneers who volunteered for noncombat duty as test pilots and trainers to free up their male counterparts, who were needed to fight the war in Europe.

Their contribution to the war effort was so controversial that all military records were sealed, stamped as classified and archived by the government. They served as civilians from 1942 to 1944, and it was not until 1977 that they were acknowledged as military veterans.

Now, almost 70 years later, Congress has recognized their efforts with the Congressional Gold Medal—the highest honor Congress can bestow.

Wearing their WWII-era uniforms, about 175 of the 300 living WASP, along with hundreds of family members and supporters, packed into Emancipation Hall at the Capitol Visitor Center in Washington, D.C. on March 10, 2010.

Among the sea of people were Andy Hailey, a 1977 UTEP graduate in electrical engineering, and his daughter Dawn. They traveled from Houston to receive the Congressional Gold Medal on behalf of Andy Hailey's frail 95-year-old mother, Lois B. Hailey, a 1953 Texas Western College (now UTEP) alumna.

"It was overwhelming, too much to take in," said Andy Hailey. "The recognition is nice, but it's not something these women sought out."

When he presented his mother with the medal, she reacted much as he had expected.

"What's this for?" Lois Hailey asked.

To her, it was like any other job. To her son, this was a moment to cherish.

"You had male pilots doing the same thing, but it was expected of men. It was not expected of women at that time," he said.

With the men at war, pilots were needed in the U.S. to ferry new military planes across the country. In 1943, the Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron (WAFS) and the Women's Flying Training Detach-

ment (WFTD) merged to form the WASP in Texas.

Lois Hailey, a music teacher at the time, had become interested in aviation after watching a stunt pilot performance near her hometown of Reno, Nev. She earned her pilot's license at 25 and became one of the first commercially licensed female pilots in Nevada.

"Once she learned to fly, she couldn't get enough of it," Andy Hailey said.

She was initially not interested in joining the WASP, but was talked into taking the physical exam and passed. She had to pay her way to Texas. The job paid \$250 a month.

More than 25,000 women applied for the program, but only 1,830 were accepted and 1,074 completed the 21 to 27 weeks of training.

A few days after graduation, Lois Hailey was assigned to a "new top secret program" to tow targets for artillery practice. The A-24, single-engine fighter plane had a banner trailing about half a mile behind, while male trainees shot at it with live ammunition.

"They were flying heavy-duty aircraft. These



were major sized aircraft that were not built for women. Physically, you had to be able to handle those aircraft," Andy Hailey said.

His mother was stationed at Biggs Army Airfield in El Paso.

The WASP were stationed at 120 bases across America, doing everything from serving as tow targets to testing repaired airplanes before they were put back in service. They ferried planes, transported cargo and served as instructors.

With America near victory, the group was disbanded in December 1944. Thirty-eight women died in the line of duty, including two of Hailey's friends, but they were not given a military burial.

After the war, Hailey settled in El Paso, working as an instructor at a local flight school before returning to the classroom. She retired from the El Paso Independent School District in 1985, where she taught music for 31 years. Hailey now lives with her son in Friendswood, Texas, near Houston.

Her story and the stories of the other WASP will live on. In addition to the recent recognition at the U.S. Capitol, Hailey has been inducted into the El Paso Aviation Hall of Fame and the Texas Aviation Hall of Fame.

"They all play this down; they say they were doing their duty," Andy Hailey said. "To them, it was just an assignment." ☒

*Editor's note: Lois Hailey passed away April 24, as the magazine was going to print. She was 95.*

**Top left:** Andy Hailey presents his mother, Lois, 95, with the Congressional Gold Medal. The former WASP was not able to attend the ceremony in Washington, D.C., due to failing health.

**Top right:** Lois B. Hailey '56, center, partnered with her stepbrother and a friend to purchase a \$3,000 single-engine Taylorcraft airplane. She learned to fly and became one of the first commercially licensed female pilots in the country.

**Left:** Lois B. Hailey, 1944

➔ **TO READ MORE ABOUT LOIS HAILEY AND VIEW ADDITIONAL PHOTOS, VISIT**  
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