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WWII's women pilots awarded top U.S. medal

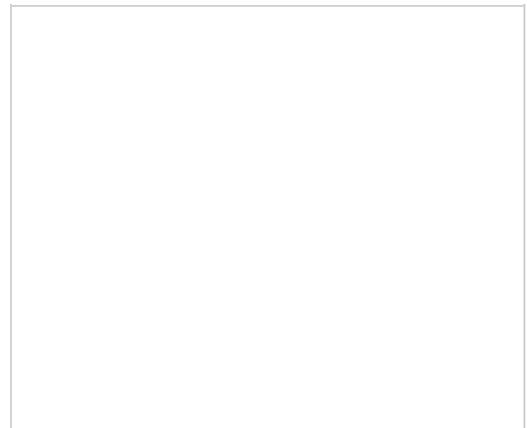
By Michael Collins

Posted March 10, 2010 at 5:59 p.m. , updated March 10, 2010 at 7:18 p.m.

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Deanie Parrish(C) of Waco Texas, accepts the Congressional Gold Medal while flanked by Tom Brokaw(L) House Minority Leader John Boehner (2nd L), Sen. Harry Reid (3rd R) Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)(2nd R), and Sen. Mitch McConnell during a ceremony to honor the Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASP) of WWII at the US Capitol on March 10, 2010 in Washington, DC. Photo by Kris Connor



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WASHINGTON — Patricia Thomas always knew her mother had been a pilot during World War II, but it was years before she really came to understand what an important and historic feat that had been.

Audrey Tardy Brady seldom talked about her days as a civilian flier with the Women Airforce Service Pilots. It's not that she wasn't proud of her service. She was, so much so that she kept her WASP class photo book on the coffee table in her home.

But Brady and other female aviators had been discouraged from talking about their experiences flying the skies for their country once their service abruptly ended. As a result, it was years before most Americans — even the pilots' children, like Thomas — really began to appreciate just how much they had contributed to the war effort.

"My mother never flew again. Ever. Not in an airliner, not in any kind of plane," said Thomas, a professional genealogist who lives in Camarillo. "I think she probably had a lifelong depression because that time in her life — probably the happiest, most exciting time of her life — just ended very unceremoniously."

On Wednesday, nearly 70 years after their trailblazing efforts, Brady and her fellow female pilots were lauded by the U.S. government as patriots and heroes and were given one of the nation's most prestigious awards, the Congressional Gold Medal.

Women Airforce Service Pilots



"We are all your daughters — you taught us how to fly," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told about 200 of the remaining aviators and their families during a ceremony in the Capitol.

Deanie Parrish of Texas, who accepted the Gold Medal on behalf of all of her fellow WASPs, said the women gladly did their part without any expectation of recognition or rewards.

"It was a privilege and an honor to serve our country in some of the darkest days of World War II," she said.

From 1942 to 1944, at the height of the war, more than 25,000 women applied to the WASP program. Just 1,102 were selected, and although they were civilian pilots, they became the first women ever to fly military aircraft under the direction of the U.S. Army Air Forces. Their job was to fly noncombat missions during the war so male pilots would be available for overseas duty.

Brady and most of the WASPs have long since died. Thirty-eight of them were killed

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in service. Those who survive are in their 80s and 90s, and many of them who came to the medal ceremony arrived in wheelchairs.

Thomas showed up at the ceremony in honor of her mother, who grew up in the San Gabriel area and died in 1964 at age 46. While the accolades were long overdue, she said, they were not only a way to pay tribute to the aviators' service, they also were a chance to remember the women at one of the most thrilling times in their lives.

"When they were WASPs, they were young, they were vital, and it was the most important time in their lives for some of them," Thomas said. "It was a time they will tell you they remember so vividly. So being here allows us to keep the memory of our mothers alive."

Sharon Sweeney of Carpinteria and her brother, Bill Sweeney of Camarillo, attended the ceremony as a tribute to their mother, Dorothy Sweeney, who started in the WASP program in 1943.

Dorothy Sweeney, who lived in Camarillo and died in 1989, transported planes to various locations for the military and taught aviation instruments to male pilots so they would be able to fly across the English Channel.

Sweeney would have been thrilled that the long-overlooked pilots are finally getting recognition, her daughter said.

"She was very modest, but she would be grinning from ear to ear, and her heart would be swelling with pride," Sharon Sweeney said.

Thomas never really began to understand her mother's role in World War II until nearly two decades after her death. Growing up, she remembers looking at the photo book on her mom's coffee table and thinking, "Everybody's mom did something in World War II, I guess."

It wasn't until 1982, when she wandered into a library and saw a book about the WASPs and their service, that she really became curious. She started doing research and began to see her mother in a whole new light.

Her mother, she learned, had dreamed of flying even as a teenager. In her application to become a WASP, Audrey Tardy talked about answering the phones at the airport and fueling airplanes in order to get flying time. She entered WASP training in Sweetwater, Texas, around April 1943 and graduated the following November.

She was sent to Pecos, Texas, to do engineering test flights and was later transferred to Love Field in Dallas, where she ferried aircraft from one place to another. With the war winding down, the WASPs were abruptly disbanded in December 1944, and her days as a pilot came to an end.

Thomas' gradual discovery of her mother's exploits as an aviator "has helped me to reframe my life with my mother to include that time when she was much younger and



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had such great joy in her life," she said.

For that, Thomas said, she will always be grateful.

As for the Congressional Gold Medal, "I think my mother would be amazed — and thrilled," Thomas said.

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March 10, 2010
8:07 p.m.

Rascal writes:

What a bunch of great ladies! In my time I have had the privilege of knowing one of these talented and brave aviators when I was earning my Flight Instructor license at Santa Monica airport; a finer or more dedicated professional you couldn't ask for. All and all these ladies set the bar quite high, and they opened up doors that we take for granted today.

Please join me in a salute to the WASPs!

Suggest removal

Reply to this post

March 11, 2010
8:10 a.m.

maddog1 writes:

Nice job ladies it's about time you got recognized

Suggest removal

Reply to this post

March 11, 2010
9:46 a.m.

cassandra2 writes:

Hear, hear.

This generation of women opened so many doors for women only to have them closed in their faces after the time of danger and sacrifice. But the history of them and their times led the way for the revolutionary period of our own.

Many kept their enterprising and daring spirit long after.

Check out the obituary of Doris "Granny" Haddock, who walked cross country at age 89 for campaign finance reform and who just died at age 100.

Suggest removal

Reply to this post

March 11, 2010
10:16 a.m.

14_Fore writes:

Holy smokes, I AM AGREEING WITH CASSANDRA2 (And Rascal and Maddog)! Not all of our heroes are men.

Too bad they had those politicians there to give them their medals. It would have been more appropriate for high ranking women officers to do this.

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March 11, 2010
10:54 a.m.

harrypotter writes:

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