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Airport Day provides nostalgia for crowd, local veteran aviatrix

By **larry E. Binz**
 The Press Register

Wednesday, October 20, 2010 8:07 AM CDT

Watching vintage World War II planes in flight at Saturday's Clarksdale-Coahoma County Airport day brought back vivid memories for Betty Archibald Fernandes, one of the nation's relatively few women who flew fighter planes during WWII and recent winner of the Congressional Gold Medal.

"I never got scared in an airplane – not once," Fernandes said as she sat and watched visitors treated to 45-minute flights.

The 90-year-old Memphian was one of only 137 women selected as fighter pilots out of 1,100 who underwent training in the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program. Thirty-seven died either during training or on active duty.

Fernandes, who was accompanied by a granddaughter, SaraLyn Archibald, to Clarksdale for the program, received the Congressional Gold Medal – the nation's highest award to a civilian – on March 10 at a ceremony in the rotunda of the nation's capital.

Dressed in a WWII pilot's uniform, Fernandes visited with Hal Fiser among other Clarksdale business leaders who stood watching the aerial show that culminated the daylong program blessed with sunny skies and a mild breeze.

Fernandes said she wanted to become a pilot from her youth and when the military began looking for pilots at the outset of WWII she jumped at the opportunity.

"I was attending a junior college in Chicago," Fernandes said. "FDR (President Franklin D. Roosevelt) saw we were going to need a lot of pilots."

Fernandes said she was the only female chosen along with eight men during that recruitment stop.

Fernandes said the Army chose Sweetwater, Texas as the site for the pilot training. She did her first training aboard a cub, graduating to the AT6.

"I flew every kind of fighter plane," including P-30s, 51's, 39's, 63's, 47's and 40's, Fernandes said. As a WASP, Fernandes flew 30 different kinds of military planes, including fighters, bombers, transport and training aircraft.

Her primary job was to pick up a plane at the factory where it was built and fly it to the east coast so it could be shipped abroad.

"We couldn't fly them overseas because the planes didn't have enough fuel to make that long a trip," Fernandes said.

Fernandes served in the WASP from September 1942 until December 1944. She became a civilian pilot after WWII. Fernandes said she was also the first woman to become an air traffic controller in the late 1950s. She retired as an ATC official in 1970.

Her scariest experience occurred when the carburetor malfunctioned on a plane, Fernandes said.

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“The carburetor heater had been put on backward,” Fernandes recalled. “I was in a plane out over Lake Erie. I pushed all the buttons but it wouldn’t start. I didn’t want to bail out. I pushed the carburetor button again and it started again.”

Fernandes said as with many professions for many years female pilots were discriminated.

If a female pilot was killed in action “the family had to pay to have the body brought back,” Fernandes said. “Women pilots didn’t get the same GI benefits until President Carter signed it into law in 1977.”

Fernandes recalled at the end of WWII when the Soviet Union became an ally the US. provided planes to the Russians. Russian pilots – male and female – flew to Alaska to pick up the planes and return them to the Soviet Union.

Several hundred spectators attended the airport day – many coming from Arkansas and Tennessee for the event that included the chartered 45-minute flights, an aerial show and tour of the planes parked near the runway.

David Huggins, chairman of the Clarksdale-Coahoma County Airport Commission, said the airport day had been held since the 1990s. Huggins said two jets, 10 twin engine planes and 12 single engine planes are maintained at the airport.

Col. Larry Lumpkin of Omaha, Neb. oversaw the activities and gave numerous rides aboard the “Gunfighter”, a WWII-era P51 Mustang. The Gunfighter is assigned to Lumpkin. The plane is the property of the Commemorative Air Force, formerly known as the Confederate Air Force, with headquarters at Midland, Texas.

Some 8,000 P-51s were built for action during WWII. Today only about 140 exist and are maintained in museums worldwide.

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