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Bay Area aviation pioneers finally get their due

By Jonathan Morales
Contra Costa Times
Posted: 03/18/2010 08:30:19 AM PDT
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Betty Budde grew up with her gaze fixed toward the sky and the planes rising from and landing at the Oakland airport.

Deciding that flying would be more exciting than a clerical job, she got her pilot's license, and by 1943 was among the first American women to fly military aircraft.

Budde was one of the more than 1,000 members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, the WASPs, who flew noncombat missions in the United States during World War II, freeing male pilots for combat duty overseas.

The Concord resident remembers flying some of the most powerful military planes, such as the Curtiss Helldiver fighter-bomber, and buzzing troops with a target in tow so the soldiers could run for cover or shoot.

Never given military personnel status, the WASPs didn't receive veterans benefits until 1977 and spent more than 60 years as an afterthought in the annals of World War II.

Last week, they got their due as more than 3,000 people gathered at the U.S. Capitol to honor them.

"They closed down the Capitol for us, had thousands of people come, and speakers," said Budde, now 89. "Lots going on. Very exciting."

About 175 of the WASPs, more than half the estimated 270 still alive, were on hand March 10 to receive the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest award given by Congress to civilians. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, called the gathering one of the largest ever inside the Capitol building.

For Budde and the other

women, it was a welcome and surprising honor.

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"I had no idea that so many people were interested in it," she said. "And the gold medal itself is a beautiful thing. I guess I just feel honored, kind of like a celebrity."

Barbara Heinrich, now 93, was part of the ceremony, too.

At home in Hayward, she said she loved her flying time.

"Oh, it could be great fun," she said. "Of course, during deliveries (of new planes), it was kind of boring, sitting up there and watching the clouds go by."

Many say recognition was long overdue, although the WASPs, the first women to pilot military aircraft, are considered pioneers.

Their missions were dangerous — 38 died during service, including one of Budde's colleagues. She burned to death when her plane crashed into a tree and the cockpit canopy failed to open. They didn't receive military funerals, and U.S. flags didn't drape their coffins.

The women expected integration into the Army Air Corps, said retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Wilma Vaught, president of the Women In Military Service For America Memorial Foundation.

Instead, the WASPs were disbanded in 1944 and had to pay their own way home.

"It was just different times," said Maggie Gee, of Berkeley. "Women were really discriminated against. It's hard to believe today that things like that happened, but they did."

Growing up in Berkeley, Gee also went to Oakland airport to watch the planes. By the time she was 18, she had her pilot's license and the required flying time, so she joined the WASPs — one of its youngest members.

"I felt that I wanted to do something during World War II for the country," she said.

The women became like a family, Budde said, and many wore their WASP scarves throughout their Washington

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Betty Budde of Concord, Calif. holds up the Congressional Gold Medal she received in Washington...

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"So you see a blue scarf, you run over and start talking to them," she said.

Vaught said many of the women keep up with aviation news and are still active pilots.

"Many of (the WASPs) in their late 80s still fly," Vaught said. "They just have an indomitable spirit, and that's what strikes me more than anything else about them."

Lafayette resident Beth Ferree said when her mother, Mildred, began getting depressed after her WASP service, starting to fly again pulled her out of it. She continued flying until she was physically unable.

"It must have been a really interesting time, and after that kind of experience, when they were disbanded. I wonder what you do from there," Beth Ferree said.

Mildred Ferree, who met her husband when he gave her a ride home from the airfield after her unit disbanded, is in a nursing home in Massachusetts and was unable to attend last week's ceremony.

Other surviving WASP members in the Bay Area include: Alice-Jean Starr, of Moraga; Marie Jones, of Walnut Creek; Margaret Phillips and Jeanette Rhamsey, both of Tracy; Margaret Taylor, of Palo Alto; and Madeline O'Donnell, of Menlo Park.

After the war, Gee became a physicist at Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. She has even had a children's book written about her service, "Sky High: The True Story of Maggie Gee."

It was remarkable to see how many of the WASPs were still alive and made it to Washington for the ceremony, she said.

"We felt that we were honored," Gee said. "We were kind of forgotten for many, many years, and it was a really a wonderful feeling that the nation had remembered us."

Staff writer Eric Kurhi contributed to this story. Contact Jonathan Morales at 925-943-8048. Follow him at [Twitter.com/sosaysjonathan](https://twitter.com/sosaysjonathan).

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