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Women pilots in WWII honored

BY LARRY GRARD

Staff Writer

KENNEBEC JOURNAL Morning Sentinel

08/03/2009



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Staff photo by David Learning

LIVING HISTORY: Betty Brown, of Skowhegan, speaks recently about serving as a WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilot) during World War II. Brown and surviving members of the division will be awarded a Congressional Gold Medal. A wall of photos and service memorabilia is behind her.

SKOWHEGAN -- Following World War II, they waited 34 years for military recognition and veteran status.

Now, the Women Airforce Service Pilots have won another accolade that might be considered overdue. President Obama on July 1 signed a bill that awards the Congressional Gold Medal to the women who flew non-combat military missions in this country, which allowed men to conduct the overseas combat missions.

About 300 of the 1,102 women who served as WASPs remain. Three are from Maine. The ceremony could take place before the year's end.

"We're hopeful it won't be that long," former WASP Betty Brown said last week from her Skowhegan home. "We did a great job, and we're glad that we're being recognized for such an important role in World War II."

Whenever the Washington, D.C., award ceremony will be held, Brown, 86, and her husband, Ron, will make the trip down. Phyllis Paradis, also to receive the medal, might go with them.

"I would love to go with Betty," said Paradis, 90, from her Bass Harbor home. "As long as I'm on my feet, I'll go."

The two have not met.

Edith Beal, 93, of Bridgton, was a classmate of Brown when they trained in Sweetwater, Texas. Beal and Brown haven't seen each other since graduation day, when they earned their wings.

"I think (the medal) is great, but I just hope I live long enough to see it," Beal said. "I think we were due it, really. But I can't make it to Washington."

A group known as Wings Across America is dedicated to preserving the history of the WASP program, and its members are just as eager to get word of a ceremony date.

"My mother is a WASP," Wings Across America director Nancy Parrish said from her Baylor University office, "so I know. We're all chomping at the bit."

Parrish said that Congress passed the Gold Medal bill "in record time." But the medal must be designed and minted before Congress can schedule a ceremony, she said.

In addition to towing targets fired on by ground troops, WASPs ferried thousands of new aircraft from the factories to points of embarkation to the battlefield. They also flew missions for aerial-gunnery practice and tested aircraft.

At her home, Brown displayed a photo, showing her flying a plane towing gunnery targets 75 feet behind it.

"Our purpose," she said, "was to take the place of the men, so that they could go overseas. I towed targets for aerial-gunnery practice, for the cadets in Texas."

Born in Iowa and raised in Michigan, Brown was working at a General Motors diesel office in a Detroit suburb when the flight bug hit her, in 1941. Her office was close to a grass-strip airport.

"I wondered what in the world the world looked like from up there," she recalled. "I got a ride, liked what I saw and began training. I got the required hours to enter training with the WASP training group."

At the age of 19, Brown began training in Sweetwater.

"I wanted to contribute to the war effort," she said.

Brown was on duty for about four months when the WASP program closed on Dec. 20, 1944. By that time, male pilots had begun returning home in increasing numbers.

"We had accomplished what we set out to do," Brown said. "Now, the award brings to light that we were

indeed a great help in World War II."

On her piano, Brown displayed a copy of a book called "Yankee Doodle Gals: Women Pilots of World War II," by Amy Nathan.

"WASPs weren't allowed to fly in combat, but they put their lives on the line every day," Nathan writes on the book's sleeve.

Brown has several copies of the book, and hopes to get some out to libraries -- and to "school-aged young ladies, to show them how to make up their minds to do something, and go for it."

Larry Grard -- 861-9239

lgrard@centralmaine.com

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