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North Salem parade to honor women who flew planes in WWII

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NORTH SALEM -- Carla Howard Horowitz joined the Women Airforce Service Pilots in 1944 because, as she says, "I wanted to be a hero."

She was among hundreds of WASPs who flew millions of miles during World War II in every type of military aircraft, forever changing the role of women in aviation.

On Monday, North Salem will dedicate its Memorial Day parade to Horowitz; another North Salem WASP, Louise Brand Hyde, who died in 1999; and all women who served or are serving in the military. It's fitting because the North Salem American Legion post was founded by a woman, Vivian Arnold, a World War II Army nurse.

Horowitz, who is in her late 80s and lives in Manhattan, won't be able to make it to the parade but said she is humbled that her former hometown is recognizing her and all women in the military.

"I'm very honored," Horowitz said Thursday in a phone conversation in which she spoke about her time flying. "It was very gratifying to be part of a worthy cause. The issues in the war were clear, unlike the present conflicts. I had no question about the importance of what I was doing and the worth of what I was doing."

The women flew 78 types of aircraft, not in combat, but shuttling new or repaired planes, towing targets for anti-aircraft and gunnery training, searches and passenger transport, all for \$250 a month, according to the Texas Woman's University library, which maintains an extensive WASP collection.

Herb Geller, commander of the North Salem American Legion post, met Horowitz at a Memorial Day parade several years ago.

"I promised her that we would recognize her in the parade one year," Geller said. "This is the year."

The WASPs were the first women in the nation's history to fly U.S. military aircraft. The unit was organized because there were not enough male pilots to test and deliver the aircraft needed in combat theaters. More than 25,000 women applied to join the WASPs in 1943, but only 1,830 were accepted. Of them, 1,074 passed the training; 38 were killed in accidents.

"The training was very challenging. Half of my class washed out," said Horowitz, an engineering test pilot at Blackland Army Airfield outside Waco, Texas. "The challenge of learning to fly was the issue of learning to deal with bigger and more powerful aircraft. We moved quickly through the training process. It was exciting. Flying itself was not as thrilling as learning to fly because flying is a routine job."

Her training began in March 1944. She had to have 35 hours of flying time and a private pilot's license before she could apply. There was no such requirement for men, she said. She graduated in September 1944 and was assigned to Blackland. The WASPs were sent home in December 1944 when the military determined it had enough male pilots.

It took more than 50 years before she and about 300 other surviving WASPs were honored with the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian award, in a Washington ceremony in March 2010. Family members of roughly 800 WASPs who had died were also given medals.

"For me, it was brief but glorious," Horowitz said of her service. "It was a wonderful time, and we were proud to be part of a worthy cause."

She and three women assigned to her barracks became lifelong friends, she said.

"The bonds among us who were learning to fly were strong. I was close to the (three) others until they died," Horowitz said.

She later married Dr. Milton Horowitz, and they lived in New York City. Dr. Horowitz, who died this year after a long career as a psychoanalyst, was a lieutenant commander in the Public Health Service, which became the medical arm of the Coast Guard. The two, who were married 64 years and have a son, a daughter and a grandson, often returned to North Salem to march in the Memorial Day parade.

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