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Oroville woman, 90, among wartime pilots to receive congressional medals

By HEATHER HACKING - Staff Writer
 Posted: 08/03/2009 12:00:00 AM PDT

OROVILLE -- More than 60 years ago, Henrietta Sproat earned her wings. This summer, she was told she earned a Congressional Gold Medal, the highest award Congress can award a civilian.

The Oroville resident, now 90, was one of a select group of women who served the United States during World War II by training to be a Women's Airforce Service Pilot (WASP).

The group was needed during the war to fly non-combat military missions, to free male pilots for combat overseas.

The WASPs transported planes overseas, tested military aircraft, taught aerial navigation, provided target towing and transported personnel and cargo.

On July 1, President Barack Obama signed a bill awarding the women the Congressional Gold Medal. The WASP women were also awarded veteran status in 1977.

During their brief existence, the WASPs delivered approximately 12,650 planes and flew more than 60 million miles. They were stationed at 120 Army bases across the United States.

One story in the WASP legacy was in 1943, when male pilots refused to fly the B-26 Martin Marauder, which was nicknamed "the Widowmaker, because it was difficult to fly.

Twenty-five WASPs trained to fly the plane. When the men saw the women master the machine, their attitude changed.

Sproat (born Henrietta Speckels) said she remembers seeing planes as a child and being interested in them. Then, as a young woman, she was able to fly.

In her mid-20s and not yet married, Sproat was living in San Antonio, Texas,



which was surrounded by air bases.

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In 1942 she worked in the hospital lab at Kelly Field, an advanced flight training base. Later she moved to the San Antonio Aviation Cadet Center, where men were tested and classified for training as pilots, navigators and bombardiers. It was there she worked with her future husband.

She had heard about the a group, the Texas Wing of Women Fliers, and joined the class, attending after work.

While at that training, Jackie Cochran — later the first woman to break the sound barrier — came and gave a talk about the Army Air Corps training program for women. Cochran was the director.

Sproat applied, passed the Army physical exam and aviation cadet qualifying exam, and was accepted to class 44-10 at Sweetwater, Texas.

Of 25,000 applicants, she was one of 1,830 accepted and 1,074 who earned her wings.

During that time, the war was in full swing, and Sproat lived among the other female fliers, six to a bay, sleeping on cots and doing laundry in a tub. Although they were civilians, they had military inspections including open lockers and bed inspections. The women marched to meals, did calisthenics and studied War Department manuals on flight

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theory, flight instruments, radio telephone procedures, physics, air navigation, meteorology and more.

"Our 50 hours of primary flying was in the PT-17 Stearman," Sproat wrote for a talk she gave some time ago. "We were taught spins, stalls, forced landings."

She recalled that an old Army truck took them to the field to practice take-offs and landings. It was so dry and dusty that at the end of the day when they took off their goggles, the women had "raccoon" faces.

After the first solo flight, other classmates would throw the flier in a small fountain pool.

They were tested by a civilian instructors. Those who failed were given an Army test drive, and those who "washed" left the program.

Basic training was in a BT-13, which was called the "baby carriage" because it was easy to land. One flight student was in the rear cockpit, flying by instruments, while the other was in the cockpit, watching for other planes. They flew by radio signals.

After mastering that plane, they moved to the AT-6, an advanced training plane, in which the women learned to fly cross country, night flying and aerobatics.

Sproat recalled the training was rigorous and the women were expected to master their tasks perfectly.

During a recent interview at her daughter Debby Henderson's home in Oroville, Sproat recalled that it was the friendships that were the most important at that time in her life.

The women trained during the day, then spent the evening studying, and sharing stories from their day.

She remembers the women as "young, daring and dedicated — women of honor."

About a third of the women did not complete training, and were missed by the others.

While Sproat earned her wings, the program was only active for about 16 months, and was deactivated by the time she would have been ready to fully join the program.

The loss of male combat pilots overseas was less than expected, and combat pilots were returning to the United States.

But receiving her wings from Jackie Cochran and Gen. "Hap" Arnold of the Army Air Corps was one of the highlights of her young life.

Sproat was assigned to other air bases for two weeks before the program was deactivated in late 1944.

She said it was very difficult to say good-bye to the other female fliers.

Over the years, Sproat has kept in contact with many of the women who also served in the program. There was a 25th anniversary, and a 50th anniversary celebration. There was another reunion in Dallas last fall.

As for the Congressional Gold Medal, Sproat said it is much more than she expected. But most of all, she is excited for the celebration, which has yet to be announced, in hope of seeing other women from the program.

Her daughter said the government will be minting the medals and announcing a ceremony, likely in the fall or later.

The medals will be given in Washington, D.C.

Staff writer Heather Hacking can be reached at 896-7758 or hhacking@chicoer.com.

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