

Jean Landis, 104



Jean Landis was born on Sept. 28, 1918, to Felix Landis and Alice Katherine Nesch Landis in the small farming community of El Cajon, Calif. The family lived in a tent that Felix had purchased from the Hotel Del Coronado's "Tent City."

Jean was the middle child of three — Felix Jr. was two years older, and Jerry was 10 years her junior. Jean was a tomboy and loved sports, the outdoors, and riding her horse, Apache Maid, bareback through the fields.

After high school, Jean attended San Diego Teachers College (now called SDSU), where she was Homecoming queen and active in campus clubs. Upon her graduation in 1940 with an A.B. degree in physical education, Jean taught at Grossmont High School in San Diego. That same year, she took the first step in pursuing her lifelong dream of flying. With Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart as her inspirations, Jean joined the Civilian Pilot Training program (CPT).

When the country entered World War II, Jean volunteered and was chosen for the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), a paramilitary organization where women flew military aircraft on non-combat missions, freeing male pilots for combat roles. She was one of a few women trained to fly the P-51 Mustang and spent the bulk of the war flying these amazing machines from the factory in Long Beach, Calif., to Newark, N.J., where they were loaded onto Liberty cargo ships and sent across the Atlantic. Jean would then fly a P-47 Thunderbolt back across the country where it would be used in battle in the Pacific Theater. She also flew the B-17, C-47, P-39, P-40 and the P-63 on special missions.

Jean served until the WASP program deactivated in 1944. WASP records were classified for many years, and the women who served went unrecognized as American patriots. That ended when the U.S. Congress passed a bill (signed by President Barack Obama in July 2009) to award the Congressional Gold Medal — the highest award of honor for civilians — to Jean Landis and all other female WASP pilots, giving them full veteran status.

After the war, Jean couldn't find a job that allowed women in aviation, so she went back to teaching physical education, which she also loved dearly. She attended graduate school and obtained her M.S. degree from Wellesley College in Massachusetts. During her academic career, she held faculty positions at several colleges including Park College, West Chester State Teachers College and Ball State Teachers College. Her last faculty post was at her alma mater, San Diego State. She held the position of assistant professor of physical education from 1968 until her retirement in 1979, then was awarded the status of emeritus assistant professor of physical education.

In 2015, Jean was awarded the SDSU Alumni Association's prestigious "Monty" award from the College of Health & Human Services in recognition of her contributions to SDSU and the country.

In retirement, Jean lived in El Cajon and at her vacation home in North Idaho. At age 98, she was living independently and sharing her experiences as a WASP pilot at the El Cajon Historical Society, Lakeside Historical Society and the Borrego Springs Film Festival (to name a few). Jean moved to assisted living at Lantern Crest in Santee in 2017 and that is where she peacefully passed on Tuesday, Dec. 13 at the age of 104.

A film about Jean's life, "She Wore Silver Wings" received five regional EMMY Awards in 2009. Books about her life and career have also been published. She loved all animals and was a big supporter of animal rights.

Jean is survived by her niece, Daylene Landis Polich; nephew David Polich; nephew David Landis; niece Sharon Landis; niece Dana Landis; nephew Noah Landis; and several great-nephews and nieces; as well as lifelong friends, Carmen Moreschini and Gail Tissier.

A private family service will be held early in 2023. A plaque in her memory will be added to the Veteran's Memorial on Mt. Soledad.

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