

Jean Landis soared on 'Silver Wings'



Jean Landis.

(Courtesy Photo)

By

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During World War II, Jean Landis flew with the Women Airforce Service Pilots, a paramilitary organization where women flew military aircraft on non-combat missions, freeing up male pilots for combat roles.

As far back as Landis could remember, she always wanted to fly. Raised in El Cajon, Calif., near San Diego, she was only 9 when Charles Lingberg left San Diego for his a record-setting flight from San Diego to New York City, with a stop in St. Louis, in 21 hours and 40 minutes on May 21, 1927.

Landis attended San Diego Teachers College and upon graduation had the opportunity to join the Civilian Pilot Training Program. Landis heard the announcement at the graduation rehearsal. The program was offered to the first 20 students to the dean's office.

Landis took a shortcut through a canyon, jumping over cactus.

"I was the first one in the Dean's Office," she said with a smile.

After college, Landis went on to teach high school. Once Pearl Harbor was struck, the U.S. was short of pilots and male pilots who were tasked with delivering planes were needed at the war front.

Female aviators Nancy Harkness Love and Jacqueline Cochran separately organized women flight teams in order to assist with ferrying planes to the front. The two organizations were later combined to form the Women Airforce Service Pilots on Aug. 5, 1943.

In the 16 months WASP existed, more than 25,000 women applied for training; only 1,879 candidates were accepted. Among them, 1,074 women pilots — including Landis — successfully completed the grueling program at Avenger Field — a better "wash-out" rate than 50 percent of male pilot cadets.

Landis was promoted to squadron commander at 25 and was qualified to fly at graduation. She went on to test pilot fighters, including the P-51 plane.

She was stationed in Long Beach, Calif., flying planes to New Jersey to be taken overseas for the war effort.

A total of 38 WASP members were killed in the service of flying from attacks by enemy fighters, plane wrecks and possible sabotage.

"Many WASPs complained about poor maintenance of planes," Landis said in the film.

She added there was suspicion of sabotage as engines were found with sand in them.

"We had no rank, no insurance and lower pay [than male pilots]," she said. "When a girl was killed, we had to take a collection to send her clothes home."

Due to the WASP members being civilian volunteers, when they died in service to the country they did not have a flag draped over their coffin.

Landis served until the WASP program deactivated in 1944. When male pilots returned after fighting in Europe, they took the positions ferrying planes. Once the program was disbanded WASP members had to pay for their transportation home.

Landis said, for her, the transition home was easy, since she lived in California, but many of her friends were from the East Coast and had to find a way home.

“No thanks was given,” she said.

Landis had been gone from work for two years. Her request for military leave of absence was denied, since she was only a civilian pilot and her teaching position had been given to someone else. She never flew again.

Thirty-five years later, Landis along with WASP pilots, received a certificate of honorable discharge in the mail dated December 1944. There was no letter attached.

“We risked our lives and nothing was done. [There was] no fanfare.”

She said if she had been allowed to come back and fly for the country, she and many of her friends would have said “yes” and that they had the skills and ambition to continue fighting, especially since the war was not over.

In 2010, 66 years later, Landis and all other WASP pilots received the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest award given to civilians under President Barack Obama’s administration.

Landis, unable to attend the ceremony in Washington, D.C., was honored at a local airport and received a replica of the medal.

“Thank you for paving the way for women like me,” Laura Scotty, CDR of the Naval Air Forces, told Landis in presenting the award.

Landis said that she would have served again in a heartbeat.

She lived in Bonners Ferry from the the early 1980s until 2009.

A documentary film about Landis’ time in the WASPs called “She Wore Silver Wings” was made by her great-nephew Devin Scott in 2010. The short film received five regional EMMY Awards in 2009.

Landis died Dec. 13, 2022, in Santee, Calif., at 104.

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