

Lueders Congressional Gold Medal Recipient, WASP Passes at Age 90

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Local WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots) and Congressional Gold Medal Recipient, Mary Alice Putnam Vandeventer, passed away Tuesday, January 28, at the age of 90.

Services will be held at 11 a.m. Saturday at Lueders Methodist Church, followed by graveside services and color guard in Throckmorton Cemetery at 2 p.m.

Her family requests donations to the WASP Museum (<http://waspmuseum.org/>) in Sweetwater in lieu of flowers. Tankersley Funeral Home of Stamford coordinated her final arrangements.



Mary Alice was born and in Lueders to Tom and Eunice (Smart) Putnam on March 18, 1923. Raised a banker's daughter, she daydreamed of becoming a famous pilot like Amelia Earhart. She spent her childhood summers at the Putnam Ranch in Throckmorton County and at Eagle Nest, New Mexico where she kindled her love of nature and travel.

In high school, she played basketball, the trombone and jitter-bugged at Buttermilk Tavern in Anson. She also took flying lessons from a crop duster at Stamford. The young pilot earned her wings in college at a Love Field flight

school in Dallas.

Graduating from Lueders in 1940, Mary attended SMU and graduated from Texas State College for Women in Denton (now TWU), with a BA in Speech and Theater—and high hopes of Broadway or the silver screen.

During WWII, a Life Magazine cover story about the Women Air Force Service Pilots training at Sweetwater sent Tom Putnam and his daughter to Avenger Field to interview with Jacqueline Cochran, famed pilot and WASP Director. Cochran waved the 21 age restriction for Marv. who was one month short. and Marv joined

the class of 44-W-7. Nicknamed “Put-Put.”

She was one of 1830 accepted from the 25,000 women applicants between 1943 and 1944, and only 1074 to complete the rigorous training to become the first women to fly US military aircraft. Mary flew Stearman, AT6, PT19, UC-78 and C-45. She was stationed at Eagle Pass and Moore Field on the Texas-Mexico Border where she ferried planes and towed gunnery targets until December 20, 1944, when WASP were disbanded by a thank you letter from General Hap Arnold, U.S. Army Air Force.

WASP hitch-hiked and paid their own way home. Their records were sealed and unavailable to historians until the Freedom of Information Act Amendments of 1996. By then, half the fly-girls were gone. WASP received military status, along with the Tuskegee Airmen by Congressional Act in 1977, and a Congressional Gold Medal on March 10, 2010 in Washington DC.

Mary reconnected with fly-girl pals at WASP Reunions and global tours—she explored Africa and traveled five continents—and told the WASP story as an advisory board member of the National WWII WASP Museum at Sweetwater. She was “the local WASP.”

The war ended and Mary traveled with sister Maurese Vinson across California, and taught briefly at Lueders before acceptance to The American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City in the spring of 1946. Off to the Big Apple during the hey-day of Broadway Musicals—South Pacific, Guys & Dolls, and George Gershwin’s Porgy & Bess—John Cassavettes and Don Rickles were classmates. Mary returned to Texas and joined American Airlines in Dallas 1948-52. No, not as a pilot. Women were still prohibited from piloting commercial aircraft. Disappointed, Mary declined being a “a glorified waitress on a flyin’ bus” and was a reservationist rooming with two “stews” in Dallas.

In 1951 she married Bob Vandeventer of WBAP radio in Dallas, an ABC Radio newsman during the war with Paul Harvey in St. Louis. Bob became News Director for WFAA-TV, the first televised news in Dallas. They had two daughters, Teresa and Sheri.

In 1965 Mary returned to Lueders with her tween girls and updated teaching credentials. She taught 6th through 8th grade English and History, coached Jr. High Basketball, and settled on 5th grade before she taught High School Drama for UIL Competition.

Her theater students went to State one year. In 1979, she was recognized as the Memorable Teacher and retired in 1983 to serve many years on the school board. In 2010, her address changed to Vandeventer Street in honor of her Congressional Medal.

Locally, Mary was Secretary of the American Legion Post in Lueders for many years, and was a lifetime member of the WASP Museum in Sweetwater.

She was active in her church, Methodist Northwest Council, and lived independently in the home where she was born until November 2013. She enjoyed numerous cats and one dog that didn’t “talk back.”

She is survived and missed by many: daughters Teresa Dominy of Potosi TX, and Sheri Vandeventer and husband Dave Seltenrich of Valley Center, CA; grand-daughters Joni Dominy Mckinnon and Rich McKinnon, Julia Dominy Watkins and David Watkins; five great grandchildren: Kaitlyn Bone, Kyler Bone, Corbyn Mills, Alora Mills, and Keelan McKinnon, and numerous Putnam cousins from Albany and across the state.

Pall bearers are Sam Vinson of Belton, Jerry Shiever of Austin, Dave Seltenrich, John and Robert Putnam of Albany, and Chef Sandy Davis of Abilene.

The family thanks WASP Museum, Home Instead, Mesa Springs and Covenant Place for her superior quality life.

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