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Sarasota resident Pauline White, 90, served as a Women Airforce Service Pilots during World War II. She recently was honored by Congress for her service.

By [Billy Cox](#)

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Several weeks have passed since their largely forgotten World War II adventures were spotlighted by a formal salute from Congress. But for two local honorees, the ceremonies only reminded them of those for whom recognition came too late.

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"Well, unfortunately, most of the girls have died," says Dorothy "Dot" McCracken of Englewood. "And the ones who started this flying business, like Jackie Cochran and Nancy Love, they're all gone."

McCracken, 92, and 90-year-old Pauline "Polly" White of Sarasota, were among 174 surviving members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) invited to receive the prestigious Congressional Gold Medal on March 10. A third local recipient, Leonora Anderson of Sarasota, was unable to travel to Washington, D.C., because of illness.

For White and McCracken, outnumbered by ghosts, the event was a makeup call for the shabby treatment of patriotic female aviators more than six decades ago.

Some 25,000 young women applied when Uncle Sam needed to alleviate manpower shortages for military aircraft flying domestic noncombat missions. And 1,102 of those made the cut to become civilian WASPs.

McCracken and White hoped to enjoy extended flying careers. But all were unceremoniously dumped at the end of 1944.





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Englewood resident Dorothy "Dot" McCracken, 92, below, also flew with the WASPs.

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"We were told we had 24 hours to get out -- just like that," White says. "And we had to pay our own way home. We were not happy about it. In fact, we were disgusted. Because we liked what we were doing and we worked hard and we proved we could do everything men could do. If they had militarized us I'm sure we all would've said yes."

The WASPs were formed in 1943, when pioneer flyer Jackie Cochran convinced Army Air Forces Gen. Hap Arnold that women had the skills to transport warplanes and assist with training exercises.

Operations were headquartered at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, where Nancy Love -- who became a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force Reserves after the war -- ran ferrying operations.

Strangers when they converged in Sweetwater, White and McCracken were ecstatic over the prospects of joining the guys in the skies. The main requirement was a pilot's license, which required logging 35 hours of flight time. Both took lessons immediately after learning of the WASP program.

White had two brothers deployed overseas. Upon earning her license, she hopped a train from New Jersey to Sweetwater. McCracken was a new young widow. Her husband was a military pilot who died in a mid-air collision over Mexico. Living in Dallas, she arrived in Sweetwater just hours ahead of the midnight application deadline.

"Schoolteachers, nurses and secretaries," McCracken recalls of the career fate she thought she was escaping. "That's about the limit of what women were supposed to do outside the home."

Fitted with baggy denim "zoot suit" overalls beneath wool-lined flight gear and leather helmets, "We were definitely not glamorous," says White. Confronting an old photo of herself sporting a turban, White says she has "no idea" what that particular headgear was all about. "All I can tell you is, it was colder than Billy-be-damned up there at 5,000 feet."

White and McCracken spent most of their time tugging tow-target banners in gunnery practice for aspiring combat pilots. They logged hundreds of hours of flight time.

After the war, they stayed in touch via reunions, and they wound up living within 20 miles of each other in Southwest Florida by chance. But their mutual dreams of pursuing aviation careers were dashed after the abrupt pink slips disbanded the WASPs. Opportunities for women remained limited.

"They performed wonderfully," says retired Brig. Gen. Wilma Vaught, president of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation in Washington, which hosted the Congressional Gold Medal ceremonies. "And every time I think about what they contributed, it's hard for me to believe our country treated them the way it did."

Thirty-eight WASPs died during the outfit's brief run. The government refused to pay for funeral expenses, or to even ship the remains home to relatives. The WASPs had to take up collections for that.

"There was one friend in our class who was killed, but I don't know the details," says McCracken. "I do know a man was flying."

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