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 by Diane Betzler
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2/23/2011 - **LANCASTER, Calif.** -- The Antelope Valley lost one of its heroes this year when Marguerite "Ty" Killen, who was one of the early members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, died Jan. 17. She was 86.

A longtime resident of Lancaster, Calif., Ty, as she was affectionately referred to by friends and relatives, served as a WASP during World War II and is considered to be one of about 1,000 trailblazing women pilots from the early 1940s.

WASPs were a group of women who were the first in history to fly American military aircraft and Ms. Killen flew just about every aircraft the military had to offer including the massive bombers of that era.

Col. Dawn Dunlop, 412th Flight Test Wing commander, said the Antelope Valley lost a great American with the passing of Ms. Killen.

"As Americans we owe a debt of gratitude to Ty Killen and all WWII veterans for securing this nation's peace and prosperity and protecting our freedoms for generations to come."

The colonel said Ty Killen and the 1,074 Women Airforce Service Pilots accomplished even more.

"More than 60 years ago, they flew as ferry, trainer, and test pilots on the home front to ensure America remained strong on the battlefield. With no fanfare, no military status, and no accommodation, they blazed a trail that ultimately opened the door for all of today's women military pilots," Colonel Dunlop said.

Fanfare and military status did ultimately come to Ty Killen and the other Women Airforce Service Pilots, when they were finally granted military status in 1977.

Known at the time as fly girls, Ms. Killen and the other women pilots flew new planes from the factories to their designated military bases. When they weren't delivering airplanes, they were flying supplies to different military installations.

The "fly girls" took over jobs that were normally filled by Army Air Corps male pilots so they could be relieved of their stateside duties and free to fight for their country overseas.

Ms. Killen's story begins in 1924, the year she was born. She was an adventuresome little girl and developed a love for flying early in her life.

As she grew, so did her passion for flight, which drove her to get a job at a local airport in Arizona where she was living at the time.

She was 18 and spunky.

"I told the manager they can't run the airport without me. I can fix the airplanes and service them and keep them flying," she said during an interview in 2009.

She obviously convinced the manager because she got the job. After work, Ms. Killen and her flying instructor took to the skies and her dream of learning to fly became a reality. By the time the call went out for women pilots to help in the war effort, she was ready and armed with a pilot's license.

"Our country was desperate," she said about America shortly after entering WWII. "We were losing the war."

She said the Japanese were shooting American planes down every which way.

"The Battle of Midway turned the tides in our favor," she said.

Ms. Killen was especially proud of her service as a WASP. It's been written when the call went out, some 25,000 women pilots applied, but only 1,860 were accepted, and of those, 1,074 earned their wings.

She said 38 of her "sisters" lost their lives while serving their country during WWII.

She believed the war bred a brotherhood and a sisterhood like no other.

"You all go through it together. It's a rough deal, but you do it."

She would know, she suffered first-hand the heart-wrenching effects of the war when her first husband, bomber pilot Fred Hughes, was shot down somewhere over the Himalayas.

"War is not fun," Ms. Killen said about her wartime experience. She said war is a terrible way countries settle their differences.

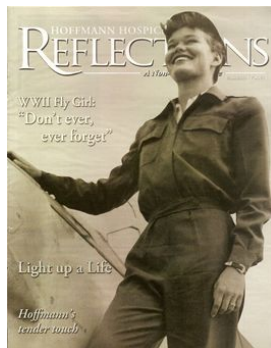
After the war, she and her WASP sisters were relieved of duty and sent back to their civilian lives.

Eventually, Ms. Killen remarried and started a family.

Although it is well known that Ty Killen took pride in her role as a WASP, her daughter Kelly said her mother was not a victim of

Photos

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Marguerite "Ty" Killen's photo was featured on the cover of Hoffman Hospice magazine, "Reflections." Ms. Killen, a Women Airforce Service Pilot during World War II, died Jan. 17 at age 86. A public memorial is scheduled Feb. 26 at the Desert Vineyard Church located at 1011 E. Ave. I, in Lancaster, Calif. (Photo courtesy of Jamie Goodreau)

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pride.

"My mother walked with her heart held high, never her head," Kelly Killen said.

The children didn't even know about their mom being a WASP until her brother Jim found a box filled with memorabilia when he was in his early teens.

Kelly Killen and her sister Tally Killen Medford introduced the personal side of their mother in an interview last week.

"My mom was an expert marksman and an outstanding athlete," the younger Tally Killen said.

She said Ms. Killen ran her own dance studio in Eloy, Ariz., and played tennis like a professional.

"When my brother was young, she ran a young doe down and caught it so he could pet it," Kelly proudly shared.

Tally also shared some fond memories of her mother. She said most all of her childhood friends loved her mom.

"Our house was the gathering place. Mother always had snacks ready for everyone," Tally said.

Tally considers her mother a super achiever, "She worked her way through college teaching others to fly."

She said her mother raised all five of her children to be life-long learners. "Her meaning in life was that everyone is here to make a difference, so get out there and do it, make a difference."

Tally said Ty Killen was also a gifted artist, "Mother left her gallery, which is too beautiful not to share. We're sending it to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, where she trained. It will be put on display in the museum there."

Tally said her mom didn't fly much while raising her and her siblings, but that she got back into it after moving to Lancaster in the early 1970s.

"Mom loved her children and grandchildren with a deep regard for their individual talents and challenges," said older sister, Kelly.

She said their mother was, without a doubt the most intelligent person she has ever known.

Ms. Killen will also be greatly missed by Antelope Valley students and teachers.

"Each time we have to say good-bye to one of our community's WWII heroes it is so hard," said Jamie Goodreau, history teacher at Lancaster High School.

Ty Killen, along with her WASP sisters Irma "Babe" Story and Flora Belle Reece, were frequent visitors to Mrs. Goodreau's classroom to talk to students about their World War II experiences.

"Ty was so incredibly unique in so many ways. Especially in her passion and dedication to students," Mrs. Goodreau said.

She said the former WASP inspired thousands of students by challenging them to follow their dreams and never, ever give up.

"She would step right up to students as they sat at their desks, lean right into their personal space and look right in their eyes, and tell them she loved them and that they are important."

Mrs. Goodreau said students' lives changed after an encounter with Ms. Killen. "I saw this happen year after year."

The local history teacher said since Ms. Killen's death she's received many emails and phone calls from past students who expressed their sadness over the news of her passing. "Ty was one of a kind."

Today, there are less than 200 former WASPs left and the number of all World War II servicemen and women are dwindling.

As Bob Alvis, president of Friends of the Lancaster Cemetery and a veteran himself once said, "As time marches on the window of opportunity to say thank you to a World War II veteran is closing."

Ms. Killen was on hand to receive a thank you from a grateful nation on March 10, 2010, when WASPs were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. Ty Killen sat proudly in the audience that day with Ms. Story and Ms. Reece.

Lancaster High School is planning two lasting memorials to honor Ty Killen and her service to the nation, community and its students.

"First we will be designing and painting a beautiful mural here on campus that will honor Ty for her service as a WASP, as an educator and for her service to our students for the past decade," Mrs. Goodreau said.

Mrs. Goodreau said an annual student service award will be established and named after Ty. "It will be presented to a deserving graduating senior based on pre-set criteria that reflect Ty's life and community service."

A celebration of Ty Hughes-Killen's life is scheduled to take place Saturday, Feb. 26, at the Desert Vineyard Church located at 1011 E. Ave. I, Lancaster. The service is scheduled to start at 11 a.m. and is open to the public. A reception will follow in the Van Dam Pavilion at the Antelope Valley Fairgrounds. All those who wish to say a final farewell to Ms. Killen are welcome to attend.

 Comments

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