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A Local Life: Margaret Kerr Boylan, 89, piloted military planes around U.S. during World War II

By T. Rees Shapiro

Washington Post Staff Writer Saturday, November 20, 2010; 5:50 PM

The course of Margaret Kerr Boylan's life was changed at age 19 by an out-of-the blue gift from her father.

It was a canvas-sided Piper Cub airplane.

Mrs. Boylan, a horseback-galloping, polo-playing speed junkie, thrived as a junior pilot and often took to the skies on trips across the country.

From her home in Oklahoma, she'd fly her plane to Roswell, N.M., to visit a cousin who was a student at the New Mexico Military Institute.

She'd fly to Minnesota to pick raspberries when they came in season and take home several crates' worth of the fruit to have for breakfast.

If she became disoriented during her trips, she'd spot a highway from the air, land in the nearest pasture and flag down a car for directions.

Mrs. Boylan, 89, who died Oct. 11 of complications from dementia at her home in Staunton, Va., became such an experienced pilot that by the beginning of World War II, she was among the first women to take part in an experimental flight program.

In 1942, Mrs. Boylan took her first commercial flight to Sweetwater, Tex., where she began training as a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots.

The WASPs, as they came to be known, played a crucial role during the war by ferrying newly minted planes to air bases around the country. From there,



Margaret Kerr Boylan, who served as a pilot during World War II, helped lead a successful lobbying effort in the 1970s to secure federal benefits and veteran status for WASPs. (Gerald Martineau/Post)

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men would fly the planes across the U.S. border for missions overseas.

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The important - if unglamorous - task fell largely to the capable hands of female pilots to free up men for air combat in the Pacific and Europe. Women were prohibited from taking part in the fighting abroad.

Unlike their male counterparts in the military, Mrs. Boylan and the more than 1,000 other WASPs received no federal benefits during their service from 1942 to 1944.

"We just didn't question things that much during the war," Mrs. Boylan told The

Washington Post in 1977. "We were so pleased and delighted to have the chance to fly those aircraft."

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