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Dennis McCarthy: Recalling a WWII flier who stole a heart

By Dennis McCarthy, Columnist
Posted: 09/27/2011 01:00:00 AM PDT



Mary Lou Neale climbs into the cockpit of a PT-19 Primary Trainer. Neale was assigned to the Ferry Command, criss-crossing the country flying military aircraft bound for overseas.

Hello Mary Lou. Goodbye heart.

There was definitely something special about this one, the young Navy captain thought as he watched the petite brunette slide into the cockpit of his P-38 trainer, carrying a parachute and a pillow to sit on so she could see through the window.

Something about Mary Lou Colbert told Ray Neale she wasn't going to wash out like many of the other women training to become WASPs -- Women Airforce Service Pilots -- in 1942.

Our guys had their hands full overseas, and the military brass had finally given the OK for women fly stateside duty, ferrying thousands of new aircraft between West and East coast military bases.

"She had the knack," Ray would tell his daughter, Denise Jensen, years

later. "Training was intense. Not everyone -- man or woman -- had the ability. But your mom sure did."

Sparks flew between the instructor and trainee, but there was a war on and they both had an important job to do. Dating was off limits and would have to wait.

Mary Lou was assigned to the Ferry Command, criss-crossing the country for almost two years, flying just about every type of military aircraft bound for overseas.



Breaking News

- Supervisors keep the status quo in district lines
- Lancaster mom pleads not guilty in alleged DUI crash that injured 6 kids
- CSUN can't find man who claimed to have gun; library to remain closed till tomorrow
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- Photo gallery: Opening statements at the Dr. Conrad Murray trial in the death of Michael Jackson - Arrivals, gallery 2
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Ray, after his training duties ended stateside, was transferred to Guam to help evacuate the wounded.

When the war ended they met again in Maryland where Mary Lou was living with her parents.

"What dad didn't know was that mom's father was a rear admiral in the Navy," Denise says. "When he went to the hallway closet to hang up his coat, he sees an admiral's uniform hanging there.

"He thought, 'Oh, my gosh, what have I gotten myself into?'" she said, laughing. "It turned out to be a great romance."

Mary Lou and Ray married and had four children. He became chief pilot of flying operations and test pilot for Lockheed Aircraft in Burbank.

Mary Lou raised the kids and did hospital volunteer work in the couple's Santa Clarita Valley community. She also became a member

Mary Lou Neale, seen in her flight gear, was among 1,079 women who served as a part of the Women Airforce Service Pilots.

of the San Fernando Valley 99s Women Pilots Organization -- a group of incredibly talented women who took to the skies to help their country win a war.

In 2010, Mary Lou received the coveted Congressional Gold Medal for her service as a WASP during World War II.

"Mom basically clipped her wings to raise her kids, but she went up flying every now and then with dad," Denise said Monday, making arrangements for her mother's private memorial service today.

Mary Lou Neale died this month at 97, leaving behind a large, loving family, including her 95-year-old husband of 65 years.

The young flight instructor who said goodbye to his heart the moment he said hello to Mary Lou.

Dennis McCarthy's column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday.



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Mary Lou Neale poses with entertainer Bob Hope.



Mary Lou Neale joined the Women Air Service Pilots in 1942, where she met her future husband, instructor Ray Neale.



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