

THE GILROY DISPATCH

A gift of wings

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In 1943, a young woman who dreamed of becoming a pilot laced up her combat boots, zipped her leather bomber jacket, buckled her helmet and earned herself the wings she proudly wore for the next year as a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots.

Nine days before her 23rd birthday, as World War II raged on, Margery Moore Holben graduated from flight school and became one of the first women in United States history to fly military aircraft. She joined 1,074 women from across the country who played a crucial part in the war effort.

Despite the role these "Fly Girls" played in U.S. history, Uncle Sam deactivated the WASP program in 1944. Their contributions went largely ignored by the government for nearly 70 years.

"They closed the records, labeled them 'Classified' and locked them away," said Gilroyan Ann Zuhr, Holben's daughter. "This was a piece of history - American history, women's history, Air Force history - and it was ignored and forgotten for a very long time."

But on March 10, those women got their due. About 200 WASPs gathered at a ceremony on Capitol Hill to accept the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor Congress can bestow.

"It was good. It was wonderful. It was affirming," Zuhr said. "It was about time."

Accompanied by her oldest daughter, Beth, Zuhr carried a photo of her mother at the ceremony. Holben passed away in 2000 of bone cancer at the age of 79. Even though Holben couldn't make it in person, "I think she knows," Zuhr said.

Born in Roanoke, Va., Holben got her first taste for flying as a teen. After a campfire accident burned her arms and face, Holben spent a year recovering in the hospital. Her love for flying helped pull her through the traumatic experience, Zuhr said. Initially interested in becoming a nurse or a stewardess, those plans went out the window after her first time in the cockpit.

Right about that time, Jacqueline Cochran, one of the most accomplished aviators in history, was starting a program that trained female pilots to perform stateside wartime duties so that male pilots could head overseas for combat.

"Anyplace they had to go, they marched," Zuhr said. "There was no sloughing around. They had to be good. They had to be better than good. They had to be always on."

Assigned to the Fourth Tow Target Squadron, one of Holben's primary duties was assisting male coastal artillery gunners with target practice. She piloted a plane that towed a target at which the men shot live ammunition, Zuhr explained.



Ann Zuhr wears a replica of a uniform worn by her mother, Margery Moore Holben, who in 1943 as a Women Airforce Service Pilot became one of the first females to fly in the military.



Holben sits in the cockpit of a plane in July 1943.

For many WASPs, the experience shaped the rest of their lives, Zuhr said.

"I'm really, really glad she got to do it because she was so happy when she was talking about this," she said.

But as a child, Zuhr never heard about how her mother towed targets, never saw the weathered leather helmet and scarf her mother wore, never flipped through the photographs of her mother behind the controls of a dive bomber.

"Mom didn't talk about it when I was a kid," she said.

After the WASPs were sent home, Holben hung up her uniform and put away her photos. She returned to Virginia with a commercial pilot's license and worked as a flight instructor. In fact, an aspiring Marine officer who enrolled in one of Holben's classes ended up proposing. She and Col. Donald Holben, Zuhr's father, married Feb. 9, 1946.

Holben's life as a pilot gave way to life as a wife and mother, but the discipline she learned as a WASP molded her parenting style, her daughter said.

"She had her standards," Zuhr said. "She had her expectations of us. But she wanted us to know we could do anything we set our mind to. She wanted to make sure she didn't do anything to stop that. She gave us wings."

For 30 years, Holben tucked away memories of her days as a WASP. But in 1977, when the U.S. Air Force announced that, for the first time, female pilots would be flying military aircraft, the memories of service surged to the surface.

"Wait a minute, now you've done it! We served and then you told us to go home and we were quiet about it," Zuhr remembered her mother saying. "That's when they started to speak out. It raised their ire and woke people up to the fact that these women had done a service."

In 1977, the women received veteran status, but even then, their medals arrived in the mail in unmarked, brown envelopes.

The Congressional Gold Medal that pilot Deanie Parrish accepted on behalf of all WASPs "was an affirmation that they could talk about it again," Zuhr said. Each WASP's family received a bronze replica of the gold medal.

When Holben finally did open up about her time as a WASP, she gathered her family and told her story. Her daughter recorded her words for posterity, and to form the groundwork for a future project of Zuhr's to keep her mother's story alive.

These days, Zuhr, 60, a retired Gilroy High School math teacher, travels about the state reenacting her mother's story. Wearing Holben's uniform, Zuhr tells the story in the first person. Her favorite response followed a presentation in Malibu before a group of veterans who were so captivated, they mistakenly asked Zuhr about her own experience during the war.

"They got so into it," Zuhr said. "It was a very rich experience. It was great for me because I love prompting that feeling in people."

Zuhr has also presented her mother's story to the Gabilan chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, of which she is a member.



Zuhr holds a bronze replica of the Congressional Gold Medal.



Margery Moore Holben entered the Women Airforce Service Pilot program in February 1943 in Houston, Texas.



Women Airforce Service Pilots at Camp Davis, N.C. in 1944 with Jacqueline Cochran.

Daughters of the American Revolution, of which she is a member.

"The presentation is wonderful," said Verona Flint, a fellow member of the Gabilan DAR. "It puts us in touch with our past and with our mothers in many respects."

Hearing Zuhr's presentation is the first time some audience members learn that female pilots flew during World War II.

"I didn't even know women flew," said Mary Beth Nagareda, another Gabilan DAR member. "It was great how Ann brings her mother's story to life the way she did."

Until she learned the story of a young woman who helped break down barriers for generations of female pilots after her, Zuhr said she thought history was boring. But listening to her mother tell the story of 1,074 female pilots who embarked on a mission to serve their country changed all that.

"It's not just names and dates," Zuhr said. "It's stories. It's life. It's your life. And there's nothing boring about that."



Margery Moore Holben





Live ammunition was used as women would tow an target either 1,500 feet away from the plane at lower altitudes or 3,500 feet from the plane at higher altitudes as training for the ground artillery gunners.



Margery Moore Holben flew single engine aircrafts ranging from small liaison crafts to large dive-bombers and multi-engine aircrafts of varying horsepower ratings.



Margery Moore Holben entered the Women Airforce Service Pilot program in February 1943 in Houston, Texas.



Margery Moore Holben entered the Women Airforce Service Pilot program in February 1943 in Houston, Texas. While at Camp Davis in North Carolina Holben flew single engine aircrafts ranging from small liaison crafts to large dive-bombers and multi-engine aircrafts of varying horsepower ratings. Holben transferred to Camp Stewart in Georgia in March 1944 and remained there until deactivation of the WASP in December 1944.

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