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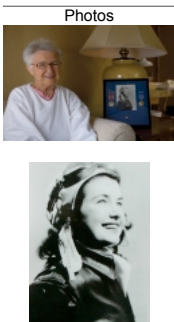
Palo Alto Online News

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Palo Altan to receive Congressional Gold Medal

World War II civilian pilot will get honor 65 years later

by Mimm Patterson



An 85-year-old Palo Alto woman will receive the Congressional Gold Medal, the White House announced on Wednesday, July 1.

Margaret Phelan Taylor, a World War II civilian pilot, will be honored, along with 300 women who flew for the military and still survive.

President Barack Obama signed the bill to award the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) the medal, which is the highest civilian award, equivalent to the Medal of Honor. It is the first time the women have been honored, 65 years after service.

Taylor never expected to receive recognition for her service. And she didn't take the commendation seriously until she received a letter from U.S. Congresswoman Anna Eshoo. At first, she didn't even open it.

The medal will have to be designed and struck, and that could take some time. Taylor is thinking about traveling to Washington, D.C. to receive the medal.

"If I can shake Obama's hand," she said.

As civilian pilots, WASP were the first women to fly American military aircraft and opened the door for all women aviators, from commercial pilots to NASA astronauts.

Flying more than 60,000,000 miles between 1942 and 1944, WASP flew military aircraft on every type of assignment except combat. They ferried bombers from assembly line to base, flew tow targets for gunnery trainees on the ground and in the air and were test pilots, instructors and transport pilots.

Their service to the country freed male pilots for combat duty, according to the website for Wings Across America.

The women were paid \$250 per month -- less than their male equivalent -- and received no military benefits or honors. Of the 25,000 women who applied to join, just 1,074 graduated with silver wings.

Taylor said she was committed to being a pilot for her country from the beginning of the war.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, she returned home to Iowa from California to complete her training for a pilot's license. She had read about a program, which trained civilian women pilots to ferry military aircraft.

"If there was any way to do it, I was going to do it. I've always been patriotic. I love everything about the United States -- the geography, the people. No one loves this country more than I do.

"But it was the adventure. I wanted to fly. And it was the war. If you were at home you felt you were missing the whole thing," she said.

Taylor was 19 at the time, but the minimum age to join was 21. Determined, she began her own personal letter writing campaign.

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"I figured I could fly a plane as well at 19 as I could at 21, and waiting two years wasn't going to help the country," she said.

When Taylor received word the age had been lowered, she passed an interview in Des Moines. Immediately after, she drove to Sioux City for a physical with several other women candidates and a chaperone.

But she faced another setback. Taylor was shorter than the 5-foot-2-inch height requirement. She tried everything she could to stretch herself, including hanging from a bar, she said.

The day she was measured, she was still just 5-foot-1 and three-quarter inches tall.

"Well, I wasn't about to fail the physical because of one lousy quarter inch. I asked the doctor if he would measure me again," she said.

Taylor pulled herself up as tall as possible and lifted her heels. She passed the physical.

As part of Class 44-W5, Taylor's six-month training took place at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. She learned to fly "the Army way," she said.

She was sent to Stockton Army Air Base where she flew the "Bamboo Bomber," Cessna's first twin-engine aircraft, the C-78, ferrying planes from the assembly line to Texas.

Perhaps her most harrowing experience occurred during a "graveyard flight" -- retiring a plane -- when she dropped the aircraft off in Texas, she said.

The only way back to California was on a troop train full of men with bunks stacked three high. It was a four-day trip, and she was the only woman on board. Fortunately, WASP pilots could ride in the officer's car.

Taylor was given a bunk in the front and assured no one would bother her. But she still had to walk a gauntlet to reach the food car, walking the length of the train accompanied by hundreds of wolf whistles.

"Well, I couldn't look left or right. I just looked straight ahead and kept going," she said.

The WASP pilots were decommissioned on December 20, 1944. By the end of the war, 38 women had died serving as pilots.

The remaining women hung up their parachutes and purchased their own ticket back home, with no fan fare and no "thank you," she said.

Taylor met her husband, Jim, in Long Beach and the couple moved to south Palo Alto, raising a family. She obtained a degree in education.

She lives in a modest bungalow, surrounded by books. A history buff, volumes fill every corner of her home, from tomes about the American Civil War to poetry.

Being nearly blind from macular degeneration doesn't stop her. She uses a magnifying machine to continue to read. And she always keeps moving, swimming or practicing yoga.

For more information about the WASP visit <http://wingsacrossamerica.us/wasp>.

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## Comments

Posted by EverydayCitizen, a resident of another community, on Jul 6, 2009 at 5:35 pm

### Web Link

Mabel Rawlinson was one of the 38 WASP that made the ultimate sacrifice and she definitely deserves the congressional medal.

Since WASP were technically considered volunteer civilian pilots and not Air Force pilots, no monetary compensation was available to the Rawlinson family for her funeral expenses.

The other female pilots at Camp Davis pooled their extra money and assisted in the expense of transporting Mabel's casket back to Kalamazoo for burial.

Read the whole story about this fallen hero here:

[Web Link](#)

And an update about the Gold Medal for Mabel here:

[Web Link](#)

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Posted by Mike, a resident of the Crescent Park neighborhood, on Jul 6, 2009 at 7:11 pm

Congratulations for an honor well deserved! Your determination at age 19 to overcome the barriers to become a pilot is impressive.

My Dad was Army Air Force (the name of the Air Force through WWII) on Oahu for the entire war-their planes could not have eventually made their way to the airfield without you and your sister WASPs...

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Posted by Gary, a resident of the Downtown North neighborhood, on Jul 6, 2009 at 7:21 pm

"President Barack Obama signed the bill to award the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) the medal, which is the highest civilian award, equivalent to the Medal of Honor."

Yes, honor her service, but don't put it at the level of the Medal of Honor. Too many men have paid too high a price, to have their sacrifice diminished to a civilian level. Not even close.

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Posted by JSD, a resident of the Palo Verde neighborhood, on Jul 6, 2009 at 8:06 pm

(I'll bite, flame-bait or not.)

If I'm not mistaken, men who did the same jobs as the WASPs ended up doing got full military benefits and recognition. So, because they have the "wrong" reproductive parts, the WASPs don't deserve high recognition?

Way to go, Margaret Phelan Taylor!

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Posted by Gary, a resident of the Downtown North neighborhood, on Jul 6, 2009 at 8:40 pm

The Merchant Marine, during WWII got no GI benefits, and generally, got grief from the Navy enlisted, even though their officers were officially part of the Navy. Yet, the MM had some of the greatest casualty ratios of the war.

My issue on this subject is "the highest civilian award, equivalent to the Medal of Honor." It is NOT! Not even close. All those dead MM would have received the equivalent of the Medal of Honor, based upon this weak standard.

Honor this woman for her service but, please, do not make her a hero...she was not. Many WWII vets, who died in service, did much more, and were not so honored.

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Posted by Nut Head, a resident of the Midtown neighborhood, on Jul 7, 2009 at 10:17 am

I'm not sure if the subject of this article was involved in this specific aspect of WASP service, or not, but it really struck me how much guts it must have taken to "tow targets for gunnery trainees on the ground and in the air." Volunteering to get shot at? That takes some serious...well, you know.

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Posted by Marilyn Tomsy, a resident of the Fairmeadow neighborhood, on Jul 7, 2009 at 10:58 am

Bravo! Thank you to all the women pilots! You were wonderful!

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Posted by Paul, a resident of the Downtown North neighborhood, on Jul 7, 2009 at 12:57 pm

"don't put it at the level of the Medal of Honor. Too many men have paid too high a price, to have their sacrifice diminished to a civilian level. Not even close."

Easy there, Gary. She served. You didn't.

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Posted by Lance, a resident of the Barron Park neighborhood, on Jul 7, 2009 at 1:32 pm

What a wonderful story and honor - so many great people here in Palo Alto!

Got to wonder though about 60,000,000 miles (60 million, really?!;-) in two years... Unless I'm reading it wrong, that'd be flying about the speed of the space shuttle nonstop 24/7 for each hour during those two years. Guess the pilot in me that wants the numbers to make sense!

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Posted by Lance, a resident of the Barron Park neighborhood, on Jul 7, 2009 at 1:39 pm

Oh, of course I read it wrong (realizing it just after hitting submit) - 60,000,000 by all the pilots in WASP makes a little more sense! If there were 1074 as stated, then that's about 60,000 by each pilot if they served the two years - a very respectable, and believable, distance.

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Posted by Nora Charles, a resident of Stanford, on Jul 7, 2009 at 7:12 pm

Well deserved! I salute your wonderful, brave service to our country. Brava, and bless you, Mrs. Taylor.

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Posted by Susan, a resident of the Southgate neighborhood, on Jul 8, 2009 at 9:28 am

In response to Gary's complaints about the WASPS receiving the Congressional Gold Medal, wouldn't it be better to honor others appropriately rather than to withhold the medal from the WASPS? I don't know a lot about the subject, but if the MM was part of the Navy, offered courageous service, and received no benefits, then I would think the Navy should honor them in a way specific to the nature of their service. Alternatively I wouldn't object to their receiving the Congressional Gold Medal themselves. Sacrifice without compensation, on a voluntary basis, deserves recognition. That said, I think women who undertook these roles in the context of the limited opportunities for women at the time deserve special recognition for their moxie. Or, you know...

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Posted by Mary, a resident of the Midtown neighborhood, on Jul 8, 2009 at 9:40 am

Congratulations to Mrs. Taylor, I see by your maiden name that you're Irish-American, you'll be part of Irish-American history now! It took the efforts of all young Americans, male and female, to win the war, whether in actual combat or not (you might take a look at levels of males in actual combat, it was still very low in percentage of male veterans). As the niece of a Navy pilot killed in 1942, an uncle who had a Silver Star from the Battle of the Bulge and a father who prosecuted war crimes in Japan, I admire your determination to serve your country at such a young age. I hope you get to Washington and meet the President.

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Posted by Ann Gray, a resident of Another Palo Alto neighborhood, on Jul 8, 2009 at 5:45 pm

Congratulations! You and all Wasps have the undying admiration from the generation which came after you. Your stories inspired me to get my pilot's license at age 40. I've read about all of you, talked with you at Oshkosh, even camped with one of you who flew her airplane there. What a marvelous group!! (Senator Hutchinson of Texas said on Monday June 29 at a talk in Grapevine, TX that you were all deceased. Send her an email; I did!) Do not pay any attention to MEN who say you don't deserve this honor. They have no idea what you women went through. Those of us who care enough to educate ourselves about your heroism do. Let them pull a drone while live bullets tried to hit it! Men refused this job, I understand.

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Posted by Gary, a resident of the Downtown North neighborhood, on Jul 8, 2009 at 6:13 pm

"In response to Gary's complaints about the WASPS receiving the Congressional Gold Medal, wouldn't it be better to honor others appropriately rather than to withhold the medal from the WASPS?"

If the medal is equal to the Medal of Honor, no medal should be struck. To do so would diminish and dishonor those who made the sacrifice "beyond the call of duty".

It would be much more appropriate to send a letter of appreciation to everyone who served, and did their expected duty. The Merchant Marine guys did not even get that. It is long overdue, but they do not deserve the Congressional Medal of Honor, even though many of them signed up for near-suicide missions. Even Edwin J. O'Hara, of the MM, did not get the Medal of Honor...and he probably deserved it.

[Web Link](#)

Let's not make heroes out of people who just did their duty. Honored, yes, but not glorified. The heroes earned it by their actions.

Let's not go overboard here.

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Posted by Garbage, a resident of the Downtown North neighborhood, on Jul 8, 2009 at 6:32 pm

Gary, you a cowardly piece of right wing garbage

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Posted by Gary, a resident of the Downtown North neighborhood, on Jul 8, 2009 at 6:45 pm

"Gary, you a cowardly piece of right wing garbage"

I will consider the source of that statement, as always. However, if you are stating the the Medal of Honor is of no higher honor than a civilian plane taxi service, please just say so.

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Posted by VoxPop, a resident of the Old Palo Alto neighborhood, on Jul 8, 2009 at 8:10 pm

Gary, the Wasps were hardly a "a civilian plane taxi service." When you have done something comparable you might have the standing to comment. Otherwise, keep your peace, please.

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Posted by Gary, a resident of the Downtown North neighborhood, on Jul 8, 2009 at 9:11 pm

"Gary, the Wasps were hardly a "a civilian plane taxi service."

That is precisely what they were. They taxied planes from one base to another. Some of them towed targets. It was a valuable service during WWII, but it was not, particularly, extraordinary. If it was just men doing the same thing, there would be no talk about a civilian equivalent of the Medal of Honor.

Perhaps someone would like to ask Margaret Taylor if she thinks she deserves the Medal of Honor (equivalent). I seriously doubt that she does. She did her job, and that is a good, and honorable, thing. Leave it at that.

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Posted by Shame on Gary, a resident of Stanford, on Jul 9, 2009 at 8:52 am

Really, Gary, have you no shame that you, who has never served his country in any way, is against this woman finally receiving a commendation for her brave service during WWII. You are really a piece of work, Gary. Shame on you.

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Posted by Walter\_E\_Wallis, a resident of the Midtown neighborhood, on Jul 9, 2009 at 11:56 am  
**Walter\_E\_Wallis is a member (registered user) of Palo Alto Online**

I honor the service of WASPs and the Merchant Marines, but agree with Gary that the Medal of Honor requires a higher test than just doing your job. As long as I have the power I salute any Medal of Honor

winner I meet. My late brother in law was a naval armed guard aboard, one of the gun crews on merchant marine vessels. While the mariners received very good pay, allowances and hazard pay, and could refuse any voyage, the navy boys got \$21 a month and went where they were ordered. I even salute any enlisted recipient of the Bronze Star[ossifers had a different level of merit] because I remember what Nedza, our wireman, did to earn his. Ferry pilots served an important function maintaining front line strength.

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Posted by Shame on Gary, a resident of Stanford, on Jul 9, 2009 at 12:04 pm

But, Walter, this woman is not receiving the Medal of Honor, she is receiving an honor,the Congressional Gold Medal, that is said to be equivalent to it. If you have a problem with that, I suggest you get in touch with your elected officials and register a complaint. This honor was not just invented for her.

[Web Link](#)

"Per committee rules, legislation bestowing a Congressional Gold Medal upon a recipient must be co-sponsored by two-thirds of the membership of both the House of Representatives and the Senate before their respective committees will consider it."

Looks like you and Gary are trying to stir up a tempest in a teapot. I do understand your comments since you have served, but Gary, clearly has not and is just trying to create a new controversy for him to comment on.

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Posted by Radar, a resident of another community, on Jul 9, 2009 at 5:16 pm

Perhaps the "equivalency" stated is that the Gold Medal is the highest award that can be bestowed upon non-military personnel, just as the MoH is the highest military award - does not mean the stakes are the same

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