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WWII pilot to finally get her honors



Brad Vest

Jim Seip holds a plaque commemorating his sister, Margaret Seip, who was killed in 1943 during a crash in a UC-78 Bobcat while on a training flight. Seip said of his sister's recent recognition from the Air Force, "I'm glad she's getting the recognition just because she's such a great gal. I loved her."

Salute set for WASP who died in 1943 Texas crash

By [Meg Jones](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Eleven more days and Margaret Seip would have gotten her wings.

Her family says Seip wasn't even supposed to be aboard the UC-78 Bobcat that day in August 1943, but they learned later that she had volunteered to replace a pilot at the last minute.

The Wauwatosa woman was with another student and their instructor when their plane's tail broke off at 10,000 feet and they spiraled into the Texas dirt, killing all three.

Seip, 27, had earned her private pilot's license three years earlier, was one of the first women to join the Wisconsin Civil Air Patrol and taught instrument flying to military pilots. She jumped at the chance to join the Women Airforce Service Pilots, known as WASP.

The United States was embroiled in a two-front war, and the women played a critical supporting role. But they were not considered part of the military; their families could not hang gold star flags when they died and no American flag covered their coffins.

More than six decades after she died serving her country, Margaret Seip will be recognized Thursday at a graveside memorial service with full military honors.

"It's a shame this wasn't done a long time ago," said Tammy Schroeder, an Air Force veteran who spearheaded the effort for memorial services for Seip and other WASP pilots killed in the line of duty. "These women are my heroes."

Seip was among the 38 WASPs killed in plane crashes. She's the only WASP casualty from Wisconsin.

A Wauwatosa High School graduate, she earned a degree in English at Lawrence College in Appleton and traveled through Europe with two friends, keeping a diary her younger brother, Jim, still keeps in a box along with photos, yearbooks and other mementos of his sister.

Jim Seip, 90, remembers going to what's now called Timmerman Airport with his sister, whom he called Maggie, and their older brother, John, when they were kids and watching the airplanes take off and land.

Their aunt paid for a plane ride for the children, and Jim Seip vividly recalls the pilot flying them over their home at 71st and Wells and dipping the wings. Hooked on flying, Jim and Maggie later earned their pilot's licenses at the same time.

Jim Seip, three years younger than his sister, was in Georgia training to fly B-17s when a chaplain told him the terrible news.

"It was an awful shock," he recalled Monday afternoon at his Helenville home. "She was my father's favorite. When I got home he was still crying."

After graduating from college, Margaret Seip worked at Chapman's department store on Wisconsin Ave. before earning her pilot's license and traveling to Binghamton, N.Y., to attend Link Trainer school so she could train students on the flight simulator.

Margaret Seip loved to play golf and swim and was active in Girl Scouts. "She was real easy to get along with. She had a lot of friends," said Jim Seip, who keeps a plaque on his living room wall of his sister in her flight suit.

Jim Seip's son, also named Jim Seip, earned his pilot's license 25 years ago at the age of 40. While visiting EAA AirVenture a decade ago, Jim's son stopped at the tent dedicated to WASP history and introduced himself to the pilots who were then in their 70s and 80s. Some remembered his aunt, and one of them pulled him aside and said, "I want to tell you what happened. Maggie was in the office that day and answered a long-distance phone call," Jim recalled.

"She jumped into a Jeep and drove out to the airfield. The engines were running and the pilot had gotten a call from her husband so Maggie said she'd fly." The plane she perished in was nicknamed the "Bamboo Bomber" because its wings and tail were made from wood. More than 4,500 twin-engine UC-78 Bobcats were manufactured during World War II and were used as a transition trainer so pilots could learn to use multi-engine aircraft before moving to bigger bombers or heavy transports, said Bill Fischer, executive director of EAA Warbirds of America.

With a critical shortage of qualified aviators, WASPs ferried thousands of planes from factories to the coasts for eventual use in combat. They also towed training targets and worked as test pilots. Their role was to free up as many male pilots as possible for overseas duty. An attempt to make WASP part of the military was defeated in Congress in 1944, which meant the women did not qualify for veterans' benefits or honors. The unit was quietly disbanded at the end of the war.

Not until 1977 were WASPs officially recognized as veterans; last year they were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. Of the approximately 1,000 WASP pilots, about 300 are still living.

"They flew 60 million air miles in every type of aircraft the Army Air Force had - from the fastest to the heaviest, they flew it and they proved that women could do it," said Schroeder, Minnesota AMVETS Department chaplain.

Schroeder has campaigned for memorial services for several of the 38 WASPs killed in the line of duty and contacted Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs officials to arrange Seip's service. At noon Thursday at Seip's grave at Forest Home Cemetery, an Air Force honor guard will unfold and fold an American flag to present to her brother. An American Legion post rifle detail will fire a salute. Taps will be played. And Margaret Seip will finally be recognized for her sacrifice.

Memorial service

The graveside memorial service for Margaret Seip, who died in a plane crash while training for the Women Airforce Service Pilots, will be held at **noon Thursday** at Forest Home Cemetery, 2405 W. Forest Home Ave., Milwaukee.

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