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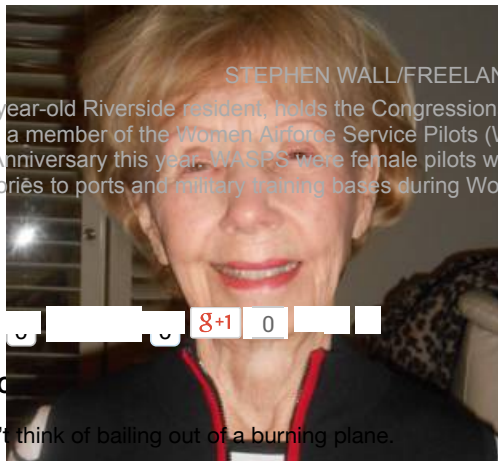
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RIVERSIDE: Woman, 92, recalls days as WWII aviator



STEPHEN WALL/FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER

Margot DeMoss, a 92-year-old Riverside resident, holds the Congressional Gold Medal she was awarded for serving as a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), who are celebrating their 70th Anniversary this year. WASPs were female pilots who delivered battle-ready planes from factories to ports and military training bases during World War II.

BY STEPHEN WALL | C

Margot DeMoss wouldn't think of bailing out of a burning plane.

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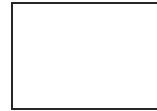
- They freak me out. Maybe I've seen too many vampire movies.
- They are fascinating, and generally harmless, creatures
- Like any wild animal, they're just fine if left alone
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DeMoss, a female aviator during World War II, shut off the motor and glided to a successful landing.



“It was very dangerous,” she said. “You got flames and a big tank of gasoline. The fire would have blown me up if I hadn’t turned the key off.”

DeMoss, 92, recalled the experience as a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), who are celebrating their 70th anniversary this year. She and another female pilot were honored at a military ball in November at the Pechanga Resort and Casino near Temecula.

In a recent interview, DeMoss said she was transporting an injured male pilot to a hospital in Texas during the war. On her way back to the base, the engine on the plane caught fire.

“The people in the radio tower said I should bail out,” she said from her home in a military retirement community near March Air Reserve Base. “I said, ‘I’m not going to do it.’ I said, ‘I can see the base tower. I’ll just glide in until I make it to the runway.’”

When she landed, ambulances and fire engines were waiting. The plane was scorched, but she walked away without a scratch.

“They said, ‘Go up to the officer’s club and have a Bloody Mary.’”

DeMoss, a Massachusetts native, said she wanted to become a WASP after reading an article in the Boston Herald.

War was raging in Europe and the Pacific. As the death toll mounted and more men were sent overseas, women pilots were needed to deliver battle-ready aircraft from factories to ports and military training bases.

After her older brother was wounded in the war, DeMoss couldn’t stand to sit on the sidelines.

“I thought, ‘There’s got to be a way I can help us win,’” she said.

More than 25,000 women applied for training. Nearly 1,900 were accepted, and a little more than 1,000 passed the training and joined.

DeMoss, who was 22 at the time, took the train from Boston to Sweetwater, Texas, for the seven-month training.

“We worked hard,” she said. “They were tough on us because they didn’t think women could do it.”

After graduating, she said she flew the AT-6, a single-engine advanced trainer aircraft, from factories to military bases in California, Arizona and New Mexico.

“We moved these planes all over the place to wherever they were needed,” she said.

She said she also towed targets behind the planes for fighter pilots to practice shooting at with live ammunition.

After delivering the planes, she had to take buses and trains back to Texas if she couldn’t catch a flight with another pilot heading in her direction.

In December 1944, the WASPs were disbanded.

“They came and told us goodbye,” she said. “The men were coming back and wanted their jobs.”

From September 1942 to December 1944, the WASPs flew 78 kinds of planes and logged more than 60 million miles in the process of delivering 12,650 aircraft.



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For more than 30 years, they were denied military veteran status and did not receive benefits.

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In 1977, President Jimmy Carter signed a bill granting them full military status. In 2009, President Barack Obama signed legislation awarding them the Congressional Gold Medal.

DeMoss was among the approximately 300 surviving WASPs to visit the U.S. Capitol and accept the medal from congressional leaders in March 2010.

DeMoss, who lives with her husband, Chuck, at Air Force Village West, stays busy taking care of her rose garden and exercising regularly. She looks forward to riding on a float with other WASPs in the Jan. 1 Rose Parade.

She remains modest about her accomplishments, even as she acknowledges the gratitude of military women who now serve as full-fledged veterans.

“They call us trailblazers because we paved the way for all the lady pilots flying in combat situations and refueling the planes,” she said. “They say, ‘You broke the glass ceiling and that’s the reason we’re here today.’”

If you have an idea for an Inland People profile, contact Assistant Metro Editor Mark Acosta at 951-368-9362 or macosta@PE.com

INLAND PEOPLE

MARGOT DEMOSS

AGE: 92

RESIDENCE: Riverside

NOTABLE: Served as a member of the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), female pilots who delivered battle-ready planes from factories to ports and military training bases during World War II; received the Congressional Gold Medal in 2010 and was recognized in November at a military ball at the Pechanga Resort and Casino near Temecula

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