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Myriam Marquez

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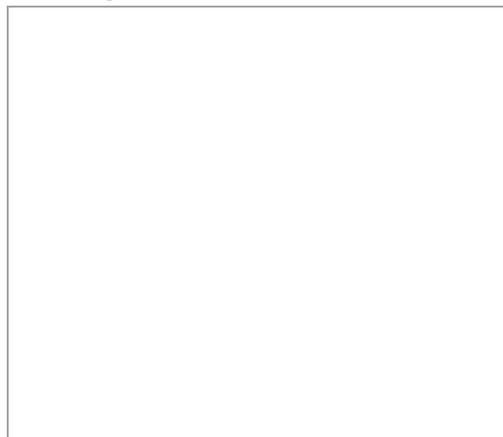
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Patriotic women earn medals after decades of no recognition



Ruth Shafer Fleisher knew she wanted to fly planes as soon as she ``was old enough to walk."

Frances Rorher Sargent caught the flying bug when she was in her early 20s.

The two South Florida women are among the more than 1,100 who joined the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP, from 1942 to 1943 during World War II. Their primary mission: to protect U.S. coasts, freeing up America's men to fight in combat missions abroad.

This wasn't make-work. It was deadly. Thirty-eight women pilots died in service to their country.

Fleisher, who tested AT-6 warbirds, recalls losing "a couple of buddies who were in my class" in

plane crashes.

Sargent flew North Carolina's shores, looking for enemy intrusion from ships, submarines and planes. "We went up and down, every day" she told me. ``We made sure we didn't have anybody come into our country."

Yet these patriotic women's contributions went largely unrecognized for decades. They weren't even eligible for U.S. veterans' status until 1977. They were never awarded full military status nor eligible for officer status during the war.

The women's selflessness was finally honored Wednesday when President Barack Obama signed a law awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to about 300 WASPs still living, mostly in their 80s -- and to the families whose mothers, aunts and sisters didn't live long enough to have their service acknowledged.

"It's wonderful that they're doing this after all these years," Sargent said.

U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen attended the White House ceremony. The Miami Republican was among a bipartisan cadre of women lawmakers who pushed for the medal. "Though they never sought this attention and focus. If anyone has ever earned the Congressional Gold Medal, it is this group of women who served their nation in a time of war expecting nothing in return," Ros-Lehtinen said. ``What heroines they all turned out to be."

60 MILLION MILES

Humble heroines, at that.

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Myriam Marquez
mmarquez@miamiherald.com

During her 18 years at the Orlando Sentinel, Myriam Marquez received numerous awards as a columnist and editorial board member. She has overseen award-winning projects, including the evolving face of Miami's Cuban exile community and coverage of torture suspects at Krome and Gitmo. She has worked at The Miami Herald since October 2005. [More](#)

Patriotic women earn medals after decades of no recognition

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WASPs logged 60 million miles flying missions from coast to coast. They were to new generations of women what the Tuskegee Airmen, who exhibited their skill and courage during World War II, have been to African Americans.

As then-First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt noted in 1942 about the need to tap into women's valuable contributions in defense of this country: "This is not a time when women should be patient. We are in a war and we need to fight it with all our ability and every weapon possible. Women pilots, in this particular case, are a weapon waiting to be used."

Both Fleisher, 87, and Sargent, 89, went on to serve in the Air Force reserves. Both moved to South Florida about four decades ago, married and were widowed. Fleisher never had children; Sargent has two sons and a daughter in Florida.

Time and distance has muddled some of their memories, but Fleisher and Sargent haven't forgotten the pride they felt. After all, this was a time when women were expected to stay home and have babies. Career opportunities were narrowly defined: mostly, as secretaries, nurses and teachers.

"Damn impressive," Fleisher chuckled when asked about the WASP's work during the war.

IN HER BLOOD

Fleisher has flying in her blood. She grew up in Rochester, N.Y., where her father was a pilot who later managed an airport. After the war, she would get a commission as a second lieutenant in the Air Force and retired in the reserves as a major. She met her husband, Maurice T. Fleisher, an Air Force major, in Philadelphia, where she worked in the control tower and he was a reserve pilot.

Today Fleisher manages an avocado grove on her three acres near Homestead. She still drives her car and shares stories with a "nice neighbor," a younger woman who retired as an Air Force colonel.

Fleisher quit flying just a couple years ago: "I'm not as speedy as I used to be."

Sargent grew up in Little Rock, moved to Atlanta and later settled in Miami. After the war she married Floyd Sargent, an Air Force mechanic. Just shy of her 90th birthday, she stopped driving only recently, though "it's only been about seven years since I last flew a plane."

Sargent, who keeps busy in a retirement community in Cutler Bay, spent 30 years at Miami-Dade Community College, speaking to students about her pilot years and the war.

"I still hear from them."

Fleisher's military service in Alabama carried its own culture shock for a gal from New York. "I can remember the bus driver getting up and saying, 'Lady, you can't sit there. You gotta move up.' I didn't realize that down south you didn't sit at the back of the bus."

But in many ways these women were handed a backseat to their true legacy as trailblazers -- pilots piercing the sky and shattering gender barriers with their courage and love of country.

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EIRafiki wrote on 07/06/2009 10:58:40 PM:

EverydayCitizen, were there any Hispanics even in the WAP program? They always claim to be the unsung heroes of the USA Armed Forces history.

I say ALL people who enlist, even myself, did it for the career/job and not "because we wanted to defend the USA." That said, I was proud to have served. Let me say this in a way so my post does not get deleted on a Hispanic message board: I did not make sure any car I drove was NOT made in the USA nor did I insist my foreign car had an obligatory foreign flag hanging from the inside rear view mirror. Nor did I change out of my uniform as soon as I could. Nor did I go into my no-speakie English mode as soon as the workday ended. I wasn't at all ashamed to wear the uniform of the USA.

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EverydayCitizen wrote on 07/06/2009 07:27:26 PM:

http://www.everydaycitizen.com/2008/05/still_my_fallen_hero_fly_girl.html

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:

http://www.everydaycitizen.com/2008/05/still_my_fallen_hero_fly_girl.html

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EverydayCitizen wrote on 07/06/2009 07:25:38 PM:

http://www.everydaycitizen.com/2008/05/still_my_fallen_hero_fly_girl.html

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

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GWMan_FL wrote on 07/05/2009 09:18:33 PM:

Fran Sargent is a classy lady and it is about time her service and the other woman like her are being recognized.

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observer1728 wrote on 07/05/2009 04:05:43 PM:

Bless these lovely ladies, and long-overdue congratulations!

But...UNRECOGNITION is a word? In what language?

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rondoe wrote on 07/05/2009 01:57:11 PM:

I respect these ladies so much, and, I am appalled at the lack of posts concerning their service to America! My wife was a WAVE, and, she also served the USA! I feel that here in the banana republic, more people care

about a boxer from cuba, that pays human smugglers than these heroes that volunteered to keep America free! What a shame!

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palmetto_bug wrote on 07/05/2009 10:29:24 AM:

Replying to ElRafiki (07/05/2009 03:08:30 AM):
"I wonder how may of those women that died in service to the USA were Hispanic. Hispanics are always claiming they were the majority of KIA's (Killed in Action) in every war the USA has ever fought, and demand the USA adopt Spanish as our one and only official language as just compensation. Not only...":

Your posting comments like this at 3 am on a Sunday morning gives us a good indication that you might be suffering from hallucinations. Perhaps a case of mild schizophrenia as well. Seems to me that you should immediately get a prescription for an anti-depressant. Get a life.

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LP3 wrote on 07/05/2009 07:45:36 AM:

My mother was a WASP and trained in Sweetwater Texas in 1943. These pilots are amazing women who served our country. My mother passed away May 18, 2008. She was so proud to have served our Country and would have been proud to receive the Congressional Gold Metal.

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rjscheppy wrote on 07/05/2009 06:53:05 AM:

UNRECOGNIZED? "Both Fleisher, 87, and Sargent, 89, went on to serve in the Air Force reserves. Fleisher, after the war, would get a commission as a second lieutenant in the Air Force and retired in the reserves as a major." LOOKS TO ME LIKE THEY WERE BOTH RECOGNIZED DECADES AGO. Besides, 12 million people served in uniform. Most were happy to come home alive and return to civilian life.

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