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Son accepts Congressional Gold Medal for pilot mother

By DAN DEARTH
MARCH 27, 2010
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[Ruth Goves Kearney: In her own words](#)

HAGERSTOWN — Hagerstown resident Stuart McClung says his mother didn't talk a lot about being a pioneer of American aviation.

As a young woman in the early 1940s, Ruth Groves Kearney quit her job as a school teacher to join the Women Airforce Service Pilots program — or WASPs.

She was one of approximately 1,100 WASPs who flew military planes in the United States during World War II, freeing male pilots for combat in Europe and the Pacific.

On March 10, more than 65 years after the WASPs were disbanded, they were honored in a ceremony in Washington, D.C., and were awarded the nation's highest civilian honor — the Congressional Gold Medal.

Ruth Kearney did not live to see her aviation unit honored. McClung said his mother died Jan. 22, 2005, in Salt Lake City, Utah, of complications from a stroke. She was 86.

Of the 300 WASPs alive today, roughly 175 attended the ceremony. Medals for the deceased were given to family members.

McClung received the medal on behalf of his mother.

"I'm sorry to say she couldn't have been there to get it herself," said McClung, who took his mother's photograph to the ceremony. "I guess she was, in a way."

McClung said he believes his mother's passion for aviation began in the early 1930s, when a pilot would take her flying over the skies of her childhood home in Ravena, N.Y. Those joy rides were cut short, McClung said, when his grandmother discovered that the pilot was taking his mother flying as a cover to smuggle alcohol during Prohibition.

Kearney learned how to drive at age 14 and took flying lessons with her father after high school graduation.

"Her father was notorious in encouraging her to do things — especially things that women didn't do in those days," McClung said. "It wasn't until I got to be much older that I realized what an extraordinary woman she was."

She attended Cortland Teacher's College in Cortland, N.Y., and taught for about a year before joining the WASPs, which were formed



By Ric Dugan/Staff Photographer | Stuart McClung accepted the Congressional Gold Medal on behalf of his mother Ruth Kearney who was a pilot in the Women's Air Corps during World War II.

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taught for about a year before joining the WASPs, which were formed in 1942.

Kearney received her training at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas. McClung said she graduated from flight school in September 1944, just three months before the WASPs were deactivated.

She primarily flew cargo planes, delivering parts to bases across the country.

McClung said his mother and father met after the war while she was working as a saleswoman at the airport in Morgantown, W.Va. McClung said his father, who during the war flew fighter planes on missions over Germany, hung around the airport between his classes at West Virginia University.

Kearney briefly flew private planes after she got married, but eventually stopped when she had children. McClung said the family traveled from town to town after his father joined the newly established U.S. Air Force in 1948.

"She didn't say anything about (missing flying), but I know that she did," McClung said. "She loved flying as much as my father."

He said Kearney was an avid traveler and enjoyed gardening, reading and sewing.

"I got my passion for reading from her," McClung said. "She always had a book."

McClung said he wants his mother's story to be told to help educate people about the WASPs.

"They did blaze a trail for all the women who fly now," he said. "It was fairly exclusive when you figure they were the first women to fly military aircraft."

The bill to award the Congressional Gold Medal to the WASPs was introduced by U.S. Sens. Barbara A. Mikulski, D-Md., and Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas. It was co-sponsored by all 17 women in the U.S. Senate.

During the March 10 presentation, Mikulski said the WASPs weren't treated in the same manner as the men who served during World War II. After their discharge, for example, the women pilots had to pay their own way home, and the families of those who died while flying had to pay the funeral expenses.

"We know that your contributions were unrecognized," Mikulski said. "Your personal service and self-sacrifice was unrewarded, and your love of Air Force and military service was often unrequited and unreturned."

It wasn't until 1979 that the Air Force issued honorable discharges for women who served in the WASPs during World War II.

More on Ruth Groves Kearney

More information about Ruth Groves Kearney or the WASPs program can be found at the Web sites listed below:

- Texas Woman's University Women's Collection Web site. The university in Denton, Texas, says its Women's Collection, which includes material on the WASPs, has information about Ruth Groves Kearney, including some of her writings, a photo of her from her class and her WASP uniforms, including battle jacket, dress jacket and WWII flight suit. www.twu.edu/library/wasp.asp
- The National WASP World War II Museum Web site. The museum is at what once was Hangar One of Sweetwater Airport. waspmuseum.org
- Wings Across America Web site. The project has the stated mission of documenting, digitizing and publishing the history of the Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II. www.wingsacrossamerica.us

Women Airforce Service Pilots quick facts

Applications: 25,000

Applicants accepted: 1,834

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