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Veteran Ruth Roberts receives government's highest civilian honor

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US Senator Amy Klobuchar was in Northeast this morning (Nov. 11, Veterans Day) to present the Congressional Gold Medal, posthumously, to Minneapolis resident Ruth Roberts. Ruth's sister Jean, who lives at Catholic Eldercare, received the medal. The Congressional Gold Medal, the government's highest civilian honor, was specifically designed and made for the WASP pilots of WWII.

Ruth Roberts, 91, of Minneapolis died March 10, 2006. Ruth graduated from high school in Mankato and earned a Ph.D. in Psychology with a focus on linguistics from the University of Minnesota. She was a counselor in the Student Counseling Bureau at the university., working primarily with students from abroad, and students who were having difficulty reading. She retired as an Associate Professor in 1980 after 32 years. Part of the 'Greatest Generation,' Ruth joined the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) during World War II. When Ruth graduated from training at Avenger field in Sweetwater, Texas in October 1943, she was among the first 385 female pilots to receive their wings. Ruth was a strong, independent woman who actively supported nature and the arts with her activities and resources. She was an outdoor enthusiast who enjoyed her cabin on Lake Saganaga at the end of the Gunflint Trail where she spent summers canoeing, hiking and birding.

Photo: US Senator Amy Klobuchar, left, presents the Congressional Gold Medal to Jean Roberts (Ruth Roberts' sister). Jean Roberts lives at Catholic Eldercare in Northeast. Family friend Martha Johnson is at right.



WASP History

During WWII, there was a shortage of male pilots in the U.S. On August 5, 1943, the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) was formed to ease the shortage. More than 25,000 women applied -- with requirements including a pilot's license and many hours experience. The first class graduated on December 17, 1943. A total of 1,830 were accepted into training and 1,074 women graduated from WASP training during its existence, plus 28 WAFS.

The WASP was never militarized, and those who served as WASP were considered civil service employees. There was considerable opposition to the WASP program in the press and in Congress. The WASP was deactivated December 20, 1944, having flown about 60 million miles in operations. Thirty-eight WASP were killed, including some during training.

Records of WASP were classified and sealed, so historians minimized or ignored the women pilots. In 1977 -- the same year the Air Force graduated its first post-WASP women pilots -- Congress granted veteran status to those who had served as WASP, and in 1979 issued official honorable discharges.

Photo and background information courtesy of Catholic Eldercare

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