



By LISA CHAMOFF, Greenwich Time



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When the United States entered World War II at the end of 1941, Gloria Heath and Shirley Thackara, like many women, wanted to do their part to help in the war effort.

But instead of planting victory gardens, or even driving rivets into a bomber, the two women were thousands of feet in the air, dodging bullets.

Heath, 87, a Greenwich, Conn., resident, and Thackara, 91, who lived in Greenwich for about a decade before moving to California in 1992, were among nearly 300 women honored with the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award bestowed by Congress.

About 1,100 pioneering women worked as Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASPs, during World War II, ferrying aircraft from factories to military bases and testing planes. The idea was to free up male pilots to fight overseas.

The recognition comes after the program was disbanded at the end of 1944.

Neither woman attended the March 10 ceremony on Capitol Hill, though Thackara's daughter, Greenwich resident Lucy Kennedy, flew down to Washington with her daughter and son to accept the medal.

Heath, who grew up in Lawrence, N.Y., became interested in flying when she was an undergraduate at Smith College in Northampton, Mass. Her older brother was taking lessons and encouraged her to try it.

"He said, 'Sis, I'll get my instructor to take you up,'" Heath said. "I rushed back to Smith after spring vacation and got 14 other people to buy an airplane and learn to fly."

She and the other Smith students paid \$100 each for the plane, and Heath got her pilot's license before graduating in 1943.

Looking back, Heath doesn't recall how she found out about the WASP program — of the 25,000 women who applied for a spot in the military flight training school, only about 1,800 were accepted. Shortly after six months of training, Heath traveled to Pocatello, Idaho, where she flew a Martin B-26 Marauder and P-47 fighter planes.

During exercises, Heath would fly 6,000 feet in the air, a target attached to the plane streaming behind it, while other pilots would take aim.

"One by one, they would swoop and shoot their aerial guns to hit the target," Heath said. "It was not dangerous in our mind. We would be certainly optimistic that the fighter pilots were always at an angle."

During one exercise, though, that wasn't the case — one of the bullets hit her plane. Heath was the co-pilot, and the male pilot lost his foot.

Though some WASPs, including Thackara, recall not getting respect from men, Heath doesn't remember being treated badly.

In fact, after training, women in the program were given the rank of second lieutenant, and men would

salute them, Heath said. But, because the WASPs were not militarized, they couldn't salute back.

"We found ourselves winking at them," Heath said. "We wanted to acknowledge it, but it was an unusual situation."

After the WASP program ended, Heath used her knowledge for a career in aviation and aerospace.

She became a founding member of the Flight Safety Foundation, an independent, nonprofit organization that worked with airlines, aircraft manufacturers and bureaucratic groups to encourage aviation safety around the globe. She later chaired a committee on space safety and rescue, pioneering the use of satellites to help respond to natural disasters.

Thackara was living in Pelham, N.Y., and working for Pan American World Airways when she found out from a friend that Jacqueline "Jackie" Cochran, who was part of a group of women ferrying planes for the British Air Transport Auxiliary in England, was starting up a similar program stateside.

"That interested me," said Thackara, by phone on a recent afternoon from her retirement community in Carmel, Calif.

Thackara took flying lessons on her own, and in January 1943 was accepted into the third class of the military flight training school for women.

After completing her training, Thackara became part of a group that would tow targets for anti-aircraft artillery practice. While one woman flew, Thackara would sit in the co-pilot seat and radio control a second, unoccupied "target" plane, which the gunners attempted to shoot down.

A few times during artillery practice, the gunners mistook the main aircraft for the target, and shot at it.

"We got very angry at being fired at, naturally," Thackara said, and recalls one time "buzzing" the gunnery crew in retaliation.

Thackara said it was tough getting men to accept the WASPs. Once, while stationed at Hamilton Field, north of San Francisco, Thackara was asked to fly an Army colonel down to Los Angeles.

"He said he wouldn't fly with a woman," Thackara recalled. "They said, 'That's too bad, then you're not going to go.'"

After they touched down in Los Angeles, cutting through thick smog, the man apologized.

"We had to prove ourselves everywhere we went, and I think we did a damn good job," Thackara said.

Little by little, the men became more accepting, but the WASPs never got proper recognition from the military. Considered civilians, they were not entitled to the pay and benefits given to men. They weren't given veteran status until 1977, after a long battle.

"It was upsetting to us, but it had happened from the time we started," Thackara said. "I think it was very upsetting for the young women who didn't have a lot of money and needed to have some help. We did a lot for the country."

When U.S. senators proposed the legislation to award WASPs the Congressional Gold Medal, Kennedy kept up with the process. She plans to ship her mother the medal, along with photos and video she captured of the ceremony.

"She was a powerhouse," Kennedy says of her mother.

Both women say they are happy to receive recognition for what they did during the war, though both are modest about how their actions helped pave the way for women in the military today.

"You never at the time would think that was unusual," Heath said. "The war effort required whatever help could be given. At that time, no one would have thought anyone who was serving deserved any recognition at all. We were just doing what was necessary to serve the country."

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