

MethuenLife

So long, rotary!
Check out the new design!

Home To Advertise Submit News Photo Gallery Contact Us Meet the Staff Past Issues

VICTORY FOR WASPs!

War-time pilot Hayden brings home her Congressional medal

By Melissa Fili
MethuenLife Writer

Sara Payne Hayden remembers — with utmost clarity — the thrill of piloting U.S. military planes, the camaraderie of the women with whom she served and the hurtful way that she and fellow female pilots were relieved of duty, without even the dignity of discharge papers.

But foremost in her mind these days is the pride she feels as one of 200 Women’s Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) who received the Congressional Gold Medal — the nation’s highest civilian honor — last month in Washington, D.C., 60-plus years following their service.

“I’m surprised (to finally receive the medal) because we did not expect recognition,” says the petite, 90-year-old Methuen resident. “We had no idea we were making history.”

The 1,074 WASPs served between 1942 and 1944, ferrying aircraft between U.S. bases, testing fighter planes and towing targets for the men to practice shooting at with live ammo. They flew more than 60,000,000 miles in Army Air Corps aircraft, including the B-26 bomber. Their assignments during World War II freed up more men for combat duty.

Thirty-eight WASPs died serving their country.

Despite their service, the women had to pay for their own training. They set up collections to help bury fallen female pilots, who – because they were considered civilians – were not given military honors. As the war was ending, they were forced to pay their own bus fare home. When the program was disbanded in 1944, the women’s records were classified and sealed, denying them recognition for their service.

“In the beginning, we didn’t even have a name. We were accepted into the Women Pilot Training program,” says Hayden. “They thought we were just a bunch of volunteer women flying planes.”

The WASPs were never granted military rank or flew in combat, and were denied veterans benefits until 1977. Only 300 of these female pilots — all in their late 80s or older — survive today.

The U.S. government finally acknowledged the WASPs last



Methuen’s Sara Payne Hayden is one of 1,074 Women’s Airforce Service Pilots who served during World War II but were never recognized for their work. Last month, some of the 300 surviving WASPs received the Gold Congressional Medal in Washington. “For being so under-recognized, Sara has finally come full circle,” says her friend, Kathleen Corey Rahme. Photo by Melissa Fili.

Your ad should be here!

month, during Women’s History Month. Despite the short notice, Hayden rounded up 10 guests to accompany her to Washington including family, female aviator friends, and friend and admirer Kathleen Corey Rahme of Methuen. There were three events honoring the WASPs: The Military Aviators Tribute Tea hosted by the Women’s Memorial, the WASP Remembrance Ceremony held at the U.S. Air Force Memorial in Arlington, Va., and The Congressional Gold Medal Ceremony held at Emancipation Hall. Former “NBC Nightly News” anchor Tom Brokaw was the guest speaker at the medal event, which had such high attendance that its locale had to be changed.

“It was like a dream for her, and a dream for us to see her receive the medal,” said Rahme, the host of Methuen Community Television’s “Call to Serve” veterans program, where Hayden was one of the first guests. “This is the culmination of her and everything I know of her and her outreach.”

Hayden continues to be active with the WASPs, serving as the contact for those seeking discharge papers or information on attaining benefits. Upon returning from DC, she showed MethuenLife the latest e-mail request she received from a relative of a deceased WASP. The letter writer saw news coverage of the medal ceremony and was seeking discharge forms and a Congressional Gold Medal for his kin.

“Families were on their own until I got the job,” Hayden explains.

Hayden says she holds no grudge against the government — then or now — for their treatment of the WASPs.

“We didn’t bother about recognition,” she says. “We had a job to do.”

Hayden is Methuen’s second Congressional Gold Medal recipient in recent years. Luther McIlwain earned his medal, for his service with the Tuskegee Airmen, in 2007.

“I recently spoke to Luther,” says Hayden, “and I asked him, ‘How long did it take you to get used to the idea (of receiving this medal)?’ He told me it’ll take a while.”

She is, though, slowing warming to the fact that the beautiful shiny medal in the navy blue box is hers.

“Sometimes I walk past the table and I see the medal, and I just think, ‘WOW!’ “ she smiled.

“(The WASPs) have gotten the highest civilian medal ever presented,” says Rahme. “I do think they are finally getting the recognition they deserve. Where our country is falling short is that the (WASPs’ story) needs to be told to our students. These women are conspicuously missing from history books.”

**Call 603-898-2576
or email
Ads@MethuenLife.com**



The heads side of the WASP (above) Congressional Gold Medal depicts the portrait of a WASP with three others in the foreground in period uniforms with an airborne AT-6 in the background. Inscriptions are WOMEN AIRFORCE SERVICE PILOTS and 1942-1944.



The tails side (above) features the three aircraft that the WASPs flew during their training: the AT-6, B-26 and P-51. The WASP wings are depicted at the base of the design. Inscriptions are THE FIRST WOMEN IN HISTORY TO FLY AMERICAN MILITARY AIRCRAFT, ACT OF CONGRESS and 2009.