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Former female WWII pilot takes to the skies again

December 27, 2011 | CHRISTIANA LILLY cilly@tribune.com

Every person is filled with stories, and for Tex Meachem, the roar of a propeller is one that tells hers.

The 93-year-old woman lives in John Knox Village in Pompano [Beach](#) and her home shows hints of her past: a teddy bear dressed as a pilot, old photographs of her in a jump suit. While men were shipped overseas to fight in World War II, the women held down the fort back home. Meachem was one of a handful of women who pioneered the skies as a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASPs.



Tex Meachem, 92, is strapped into an AT-6 by Russ Loggin. She was one of approximately... (Mike Stocker, [Sun](#) Sentinel)

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Just last year, she was still able to fly a plane. However, her story begins in Central Florida. Born Tex Brown in 1918, Meachem grew up in [Winter](#) Gardens and was not the typical girl from the start.

"My mother was a [remarkable](#) woman. All my life she told me I could do anything I wanted to do if I was willing to work for it," she said.

Meachem studied physics in high school – a class reserved for boys. She attended Florida State College for Women, now Florida State University, and studied economics and accounting. One of her professors was the only female CPA in Florida and Meachem aspired to be the second. After graduation, her first job was at the Winter Gardens Citrus Exchange, where she was the only woman employee.

"Their whole attitude toward me was 'Isn't she cute.' I was miserable. I was so smart," she remembered.

After other jobs and attending summer school, Meachem worked as a secretary at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Living with three other women, they often took the bus down to Daytona Beach, a three-hour ride. One of her roommates suggested something that seemed crazy: why don't we get our civilian piloting license? On top of that, if they joined a club nearby, they could rent the planes for half the price.

"I knew absolutely nothing about planes; I'd never even been up in one. We went up and it was awe inspiring. It was wonderful," she remembered of her first [trip](#) in the air.

With their licenses in hand, the women took multiple trips to Daytona Beach by plane. Eventually, Meachem was offered a job at the Civil Air Patrol in Sarasota as a bookkeeper. She only agreed to it if she would be able to fly while she worked there. It was a deal.

For the next nine months, she flew over the Gulf of Mexico searching for German submarines, as it was a fear at the time. While she never found any, it led her to the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASPs.

"It was very hush hush at that time," she said. "The idea was for us to take the exact same course, except combat maneuvers, that the boys did. We would not be able to leave the country, but [what] we did was relieve the men to go overseas and we would take stateside duties."

Meachem began training in May 1942 in Sweetwater, Texas and graduated the next year in a class of 59 women – she later found out that 64 women passed the course, but they couldn't have a higher graduation rate than the men, so five graduates were cut. She still has a letter from her mother, who never cursed, telling her to, "Be the best damn pilot in the Air Force!"

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She was assigned to Hondo Air Base in San Antonio. When the women arrived, the men were shocked to see them on the base and didn't have a place for them to stay the first night. The next morning in the dining room, all eyes were on them. One of them was a navigational officer, who Meachem ended up marrying.

While a pilot, the women were encouraged to fix their hair and lipstick while the planes were taxiing on the tarmac. Also, they were told to return salutes but never initiate them. On her first assignment, she flew navigation students on their missions, who then got bombers and set up mock navigation stations on the ship.

"We flew and the instructors sat in the copilot seat and he would get the first student to give him flight directions for going somewhere, and then they gave them to me. I was to follow those as long as possible. I was supposed to wait for the copilot to abort if it looked dangerous, but a couple of times I [beat](#) him to it," she laughed.

She flew other missions around the country, mainly moving planes and people where they needed for the war effort. However, the military and Congress disbanded WASP in 1944 after deciding it was too costly to keep up with.

"In essence they told us to go home and stay barefoot and pregnant," Meachem said.

Although she was no longer needed as a pilot, she couldn't stay out of the skies. She had a cousin who repaired antique planes and got a chance to fly when she visited. In the time she was in a plane, she felt at ease and doing what she loved.

In 1977, the United States finally recognized the WASPs as members of the military by giving them an honorable discharge. In 2010, about 200 of the surviving female pilots were given the Congressional Gold Medal in Washington, D.C.

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