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She left her heart in the P-51

First published in print: Friday, July 17, 2009

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After her wartime service, Sweet spent five years of active duty during and after the Korean War and 30 years with the Air Force Reserve, retiring in 1979 as a lieutenant colonel. She taught generations of local men and women to fly as an instructor.

"She was a real character and a lot of fun to be with," said Ernie Tetrault, 83, the retired WRGB-Channel 6 anchor, who received a few flying lessons from Sweet and briefly dated her in the late-1950s when both were single and members of a flying club based at Siena College known as

"the Upper 15."

"She was kind of like one of the guys, but at the same time very feminine and pretty," Tetrault recalled.

Grinter's wife, June, described Sweet as "movie-star beautiful, just stunning."

"She was a spitfire," said McBride, recalling how Sweet chased new adventures throughout her life, including traipsing around Egypt alone in her 80s and driving solo across Mexico as a senior citizen.

Sweet grew up in Quaker Springs, Saratoga County, attended a one-room schoolhouse, skipped two grades, graduated early from Mechanicville High School and entered Duke University at 17. Her father died when she was 9 and her mother struggled to raise three children as a single parent. They moved into a grandfather's house near Ellis Hospital and Virginia began hanging around the Schenectady Airport. She learned to fly there at 19 in 1940 through a civilian pilot training program.

At Duke, she majored in languages and taught French, Spanish and Latin at Linton High School. She married a Pan Am pilot when she was in her 20s, but they split up in less than a year.

"She was flamboyant and a women's libber way ahead of her time," Edward Grinter said. "She said she wouldn't pick up her husband's dirty socks."

"She was very strong-willed and very opinionated," McBride said, as well as generous.

Before they entered first grade, Aunt Ginger had taught her young nieces how to play chess, how to sing Silent Night in German and how to acquire a taste for steak tartare, guava paste, smoked octopus and other exotic meals she cooked for the girls.

Sweet liked fast cars. She drove a '52 Chevy convertible, a '70s-era Thunderbird and a 1960 Cadillac, but not always well, or within the speed limit.

"I always felt safer with her in an airplane than in a car," Grinter said. She prided herself on a five-decade flying record without an accident.

Grinter recalled a thrill as a teenager when Aunt Ginger let him take the controls of a dual-control trainer plane when they were flying back from Lake George.

In her later years, Sweet battled depression and became something of a recluse in her Parkwood Boulevard home before a stroke caused her to move in January to the Baptist Health Nursing and

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Rehabilitation Center in Scotia, where she passed away.

She perked up when the center's newsletter carried a front-page story on Sweet and her WASP service.

"I did have to make several landings with no power," she told an interviewer. "But it was no big deal."

Sweet's ashes will be interred Saturday at Vale Cemetery in Schenectady. She will receive military honors.

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