

Congressional medal winner still flying high at 94

By **KEVIN HEIMBIGNER**

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SURFSIDE — “I just love to fly,” Dorothy Kocher Olsen said last week as she approached her 95th birthday and her first parade, the 51st Loyalty Day Parade in Long Beach, Sunday, May 1.

“From the time I was a little girl and jumped from the top of our barn in Woodburn, Ore., and into the hay until the time I was flying night missions as a Woman Airforce Service Pilot (WASP) over moon-lit Texas during World War II, I just loved to fly.”

Olsen, who is all of 5 feet tall and still fits her WASP uniform almost 70 years later, can’t decide which airplane is her favorite between classic fighter planes, the P-38 Lightning or the P-51 Mustang. She can rattle off all 21 types of airplanes she ferried across America as one of only 12 night-certified women pilots during the harrowing days and some of America’s darkest hours from 1942 to 1944. She flew 61 missions as part of the 6th Ferry Group, often alone, as she moved U.S. Army Air Corps planes to Newark, N.J. for duty in Europe or from her home base in Long Beach, Calif., to be deployed against Japan.

In 2009 Olsen was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award in the U.S. There were 1,078 women who earned their wings as a WASP during World War II and some felt discriminated against, but not Olsen. “Every man I met in the military treated us like little sisters. They were considerate and admired us. They wouldn’t let us fly overseas so I flew in every part of the United States and in Canada,” she says.

“The government didn’t treat us so well. A bay mate was killed in a plane crash and the rest of us had to take up a collection to get her body back home to Portland because they wouldn’t pay for it,” 1st Lt. Olsen relates. “When the war was over I was fired, just like that and we didn’t get much recognition until many years later.”

Dancing to fly

After graduation in 1934, Olsen continued giving tap dancing lessons. “I started by teaching two of the principal’s kids and it went from there. I used the money to pay to fly. You might say I flew up my money,” Olsen jokes.

“I had been inspired by the book ‘Red Night over Germany’ about Baron von Richthofen. I loved to run on top of 1x12 slats around our manure pile, so I developed balance and no fear of heights. My sister Evelyn and I used to try to push each other in.”

Olsen was one of three women to get her private flying license in the Portland area by 1939.

“I was in a flying club that consisted of me and 19 men. I passed my test in a 40-horse Taylor Craft. When war broke out I would have been grounded, but thanks to Jackie Cochran opening the door for women pilots, I was accepted into the WASPs. Three years after getting my pilot license I was flying a P-38 fighter plane with twin Allison V 1710 engines with 1,550 horsepower each. They and the P-51s were the very best airplanes America had to offer.”

She says, “Those planes cost about \$19,000 and most of them I flew were brand new from the factory with less

than a half hour on them. It was an awesome responsibility. I would have never bailed out. Every plane was different to fly.”

Moonlight over Texas

Olsen had her feisty side. “The first time I flew at night it was very dark and everything was different. Then the moonlight came over Texas and I was able to get big band music. It was the closest to heaven I have ever been. When I saw the lights of Coolidge Runway I was excited and I came in low and buzzed the base before landing. It was 11 o’clock during wartime and I guess I woke up everybody. The commander had a few words with me,” she giggles.

“We weren’t allowed to do stunts with the planes, so I can’t tell you all of the stories,” Olsen says impishly. Her daughter Julie Stranburg adds, “We do have a piece of one of the planes mom flew and the only way that could have come off was if the plane was upside down at the time.”

Olsen remembers, “Once I revved up the engines of a P-38 with the brakes on and when I peeled out that was a fun takeoff. A marine on duty said the nicest thing I’ve ever heard when he told me it was nice to see someone so vital. When I flew my last mission in a P-38 I almost cried.

“Once I was flying a P-38 with two other planes and I thought we were all going to the same place. Pretty soon I look around and I’m all by myself and I’m very lost. The gas gage was on ‘E’ and then I saw Love Field near Dallas. When I landed I saw my first flight instructor. For several years I received letters addressed to Wrong Way Kocher,” she laughs. “When I flew dive bombers though, the sailors would be amazed to see a woman get out of the plane.”

A select few

Of the 25,000 women who applied for the Army Air Force, only 1,830 were eventually accepted. After instrument and pursuit school only 1,087 were able to fly and only a dozen, including Olsen passed the tests to fly at night. WASP pilots flew more than 60 million miles from 1942 to 1944. They towed targets for air and ground gunnery practice, tested new and refurbished planes, transported personnel and cargo, led simulated strafing missions, trained navigators and bombardiers on the ground, and like Olsen ferried planes.

“After the War I decided since I couldn’t fly any more I’d get married,” Olsen says. She married Harold Olsen, a Washington State Patrol trooper and they settled at University Place near Tacoma. Besides Stranburg they had a daughter Kim.

Then disaster struck. Olsen had gone to the dentist, but during the procedure the anesthetic caused auditory nerve damage that left her totally deaf. Olsen opened an antique shop and daughter Julie did the layout and Olsen did the buying and selling. “We had a very up-scale place and did well,” she says.

At age 80 Olsen received a medical miracle. “I couldn’t hear a thing for 37 years and then I had cochlea transplants and suddenly even noise sounded wonderful. My hearing keeps getting better and better as they discover new things for me.”

Olsen drives a Rod Run prize-winning 1965 poppy orange Ford Mustang with the same model name as the P-51. “It has the racing clutch because I still like to go fast,” she smiles. “Everyone wants live to be 100 so I figure that’s a good reason for me to go until 103.”

Chances are March 10, 2016 the still very vital Dorothy Kocher Olsen will reach the Century Mark and then go flying past.