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Pioneering women pilots of WWII get a belated honor

By Nancy Bartley

Seattle Times staff reporter

They were mavericks of their day, taking to the skies when the nation was at war and most women were at home caring for families. At a ceremony this spring, 11 Washington women will join the 200-some surviving Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) in receiving Congressional Gold Medals for service during World War II.

Sixteen more medals will be given to local WASPs posthumously.

Congressional Gold Medals have been awarded nearly 150 times since the nation was born in 1776. The women join polio-vaccine inventor Dr. Jonas Salk and poet Robert Frost, as well as two other World War II groups honored since 2000: the Navajo Marine Corps Radio Operators, known as the "Code Talkers," who developed a code using their Native language to communicate military messages, and the Tuskegee Airmen.

Congress and President Obama approved the honor for the WASPs



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Dorothy Olsen, 94, tries on her old pilot's uniform from World War II as she stands with a painting of herself as one of a thousand WASPs, Women Airforce Service Pilots, in 1943 and 1944. She's being honored with a Congressional Gold Medal in March.



COURTESY OF OLSEN FAMILY
Dorothy Olsen, hanging out with the boys. But some male

last year.

WASPs ferried planes across the country, hauled targets for shooting practice and performed other stateside flying duties. They not only provided a valuable wartime service when male pilots were in demand on the front, but historians say they made it possible for women to be military pilots today.

Ever since she was 5, Maj. Nicole Malachowski, 35, an Air Force fighter pilot, was inspired by the WASPs.

"These women opened the doors to aviation," she said. After Malachowski was asked to speak at a WASP convention, she took on the project of starting the legislation so the WASPs could be honored. She enlisted the support of U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, and in June, Congress approved the bill.

For the WASPs, now in their 80s and 90s, it's a recognition that comes after what some feel was decades of rejection from the country they served. At many of the bases where they were stationed, there was intense prejudice.

Barbara London, a native of Washington who now lives in California, was awarded the Air Medal, which recognizes achievement by pilots. But WASP historian Deb Jennings says the military received protest letters from male pilots who said if the medals were given to women, they would send theirs back.

"They told us: Go home. Go back to the kitchen and keep your mouths shut," said Mary Jean Sturdevant, of Spanaway, who started working as a ground-school instructor at 21 and taught thousands of men to fly. When she joined the WASPs, she finally got the flying time she coveted.

Not only were the WASPs not paid the

colleagues resented the WASPs.



COURTESY OF OLSEN FAMILY
Olsen with a P-38 Lightning. She ferried planes all over the U.S. during World War II.



COURTESY OF MARY JEAN STURDEVANT / COURTESY OF MARY JEAN STURDEVANT
Mary Jean Sturdevant worked as

same as male pilots, say historians, but they were denied veteran status until 1977.

Some 25,000 women signed up, but only 1,074 completed the training. Thirty-eight WASPs died in service.

"Personal challenge"

Mary Call, of Mount Vernon, was in the fall of her senior year at the University of Washington majoring in sociology, and she had just earned her civilian pilot license when she joined the WASPs.

After Pearl Harbor, "every adult felt a personal challenge," she said.

Many of the WASPs were "extremely patriotic women who were there because we felt we could do something that assisted the men in combat," Call said.

She was sent to Sweetwater, Texas, where Jacqueline Cochran's WASP program, started in 1942, was based.

"Our four hours a day on the flight line were ... filled with flying. The other half of the day, we were in ground school studying map reading, meteorology, radio codes, aerodynamics, engines — all subjects totally foreign to us — so we spent the evening hours studying.

"Social life almost didn't exist. The place was called Cochran's Convent for good reason."

And there were many risks. Nancy Dunnam, from Bellevue, had to bail out of a plane when an engine caught fire. Sturdevant survived a near fatal air crash when a BT-13's engine quit on takeoff near Merced, Calif.

But for them, it was worth it.

a ground-school instructor at 21 and taught thousands of men to fly. When she joined the WASPs, she finally got the flying time she coveted.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Sturdevant in her Spanaway home, where she's lived for 40 years. She survived a near-fatal air crash.

Congressional Gold Medal

The Congressional Gold Medal — Congress' highest expression of national appreciation for distinguished achievements and contributions — honors individuals, institutions or events.

The first recipients included citizens who participated in the American Revolution, the War of 1812 and the Mexican War.

Congress later broadened the scope of the medal to include authors, entertainers, pioneers in aeronautics and space, explorers, lifesavers, notables in science and medicine, athletes, humanitarians, public servants and foreign recipients. See a complete list of honorees at seattletimes.com.

Office of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives

WASPs from Washington

These women will receive the Congressional Gold Medal:

"The most wonderful thing was the freedom of getting into the air," Sturdevant said. "Most of the time, I flew solo. I loved the sound of the engines, the smell of aviation fuel."

A dream of flying

Dorothy Olsen grew up in rural Oregon, reading books about WWI flying aces.

At the state fair in Salem during the Great Depression, she saw a biplane and spent every cent of the money she had earned picking hops to pay for a ride. The first time she soared above the mountains, it was a feeling unequal to anything she had experienced, she said.

She was a Portland dance instructor when she began taking flying lessons. Joining the WASPs was her opportunity of a lifetime. In no time, she said, she was flying fighters cross-country at night, just to see what it would be like to navigate by the moon, doing extra takeoffs and landings for the thrill of it, and waking up annoyed airfield managers at 3 a.m.

Once at Cherry Point, N.C., she decided to hold a P-51 on the runway during takeoff, pulling the nose up only when she ran out of airfield.

"I wondered what it would feel like," she said. "I pushed it hard, and then I pulled the stick back and climbed fast."

A voice from the tower came over the radio, and she feared it would be a reprimand.

"Come back soon," the control-tower dispatcher said.

Her daredevil stunts once caused damage to a plane's front-wheel cowling.

"I suppose I had been hanging upside down at the time," she said. When she landed, the 7-inch piece of metal fell off on the airfield. The ground crew handed it to her, knowing she would be reprimanded if damage to the plane was found.

She hid the evidence in her footlocker, where it's been for nearly 55 years, a small reminder of the glory days when anything was possible.

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