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She left her heart in the P-51

Virginia Sweet, a ferry pilot in World War II, dies at 88

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SCHENECTADY -- Inspired by a story she read as a young girl about Amelia Earhart's trans-Atlantic flight, Virginia Sweet became a pioneering female aviator in her own right.

She was a pilot with the Women's Airforce Service Pilots, ferrying every imaginable type of military aircraft from factories to air bases during World War II to free male pilots for combat overseas.

Sometimes Sweet was assigned to fly shot-up, barely functional aircraft in for repair. Thirty-eight of her fellow women fliers were killed during duty.

After the war, when these Rosie the Riveters of the skies no longer were needed, the nation essentially turned its back on Sweet and hundreds of WASP pilots like her.

The longtime Schenectady resident died Sunday at 88, two weeks after President Barack Obama signed a law at the White House that offered recognition and Congressional Gold Medals, the highest award Congress can give to a civilian, to the WASP fliers.

Sweet flew 52 different types of military aircraft, including the B-17 Flying Fortress and B-29 Superfortress bombers, but she left her heart in the cockpit of the P-51 Mustang.

"She was a honey to fly," she said of the long-range, single-seat fighter plane that helped beat Hitler's Germany.

At the July 1 signing ceremony, Obama acknowledged that the honor was long overdue and thanked WASP members, who were granted only civilian status during wartime and not considered members of the military. Obama praised them for "courageously answering their country's call in a time of need while blazing a trail for the brave women who have given and continue to give so much in service to this nation since."

Obama was joined by three WASP pilots representing more than 1,000 women who joined the WASP unit in 1942 and 1943. They were the first women ever to fly American military aircraft and flew almost every type of plane operated by the Army Air Forces in non-combat missions during the war, logging more than 60 million miles.

Following the end of World War II, the women were released from duty and returned home, largely forgotten. They were even required to turn in their WASP leather bomber jackets. It wasn't until 1977 that the Air Force finally granted the women veteran status.

Sweet had been in failing health after a stroke earlier this year and was only semi-conscious in recent weeks. Her niece, Betsey McBride of Niskayuna, said Aunt Ginger may not have understood what relatives told her about the hard-won honor she received on July 1.

McBride will accept Sweet's Congressional Gold Medal posthumously at a ceremony that is being planned for Washington, D.C., later this year.

"She liked to say she would have been a general if she was a man," said a nephew, Edward Grinter of

Schenectady.

Sweet wasn't shy about articulating the bitterness she felt for being treated as a second-class citizen because she was a woman in a man's realm during the war. She felt she could fly as well as any male, even if she was issued men's flight jumpsuits that never fit quite right across her sinewy 5-foot-6, 100-pound body.

She could curse like a guy, too, her relatives confirmed.

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 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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