

Air Force Officer Meets Heroes

Ann Jensis-Dale | DCMA Public Affairs

It's a rare occasion for a person to meet one of his or her heroes, and it's even rarer to be able to present an award to them. But, for Air Force Maj. Deirdre Gurry, that's exactly what happened.

Gurry, a government flight representative at Defense Contract Management Agency Aircraft Integration and Maintenance Operations – Kelly in San Antonio, recently met five of her heroes — women aviators who served in the Women Airforce Service Pilots during World War II.

“These women blazed a trail that later allowed me to climb into the cockpit of everything from a tiny T-37 Trainer to the huge C-17 Globemaster,” said Gurry. “Five of the most amazing women in U.S. military history sat across from me in their Santiago blue uniforms,” continued Gurry.

Gurry presented the Congressional Gold Medal to Mary Reineberg Burchard for her service as a test pilot for the WASPs. Burchard’s daughter, Eileen McDargh, asked her friend Kenneth Coolidge, father of Air Force Col. Michael Coolidge, DCMA Boeing Long Beach commander, to have the award presented by a military member.

“Her daughter and my father are friends, and she thought it was most appropriate to receive this award from the military instead of a local politician,” said Michael Coolidge.

An official ceremony was held in Washington, D.C., in March to present medals to the other four WASPs. Burchard was unable to attend that event due to health issues. McDargh was determined to bring the award celebration to her mother at the assisted care facility in California where she was living. Working together, Michael Coolidge and McDargh pulled off a memorable event for family, friends and her fellow WASPs, Bev Beesmyer, Delores Lamb, Mary Lamy and Vi Cowden.



Mary Burchard proudly wears her newly awarded pilot wings presented during her graduation in 1942 from Women Airforce Service Pilots training.

Air Force Maj. Deidre Gurry, Defense Contract Management Agency Aircraft Integration and Maintenance Operations – Kelly government flight representative, presents Women Airforce Service Pilot Mary Burchard with her Congressional Gold Medal. Gurry said being able to give “one of the most amazing women in U.S. military history” her Congressional Gold Medal was a moment she will never forget. (Photo by Elizabeth Brady)



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— Air Force Col. Michael Coolidge, Defense Contract Management Agency Boeing Long Beach commander



Left: Mary Burchard gets familiar with her new office, an AT-6 Texan, in the fall of 1942. Right: Mary Burchard proudly wears a replica of her original WASP flight suit at the Congressional Gold Medal ceremony after party. (Photo by Eileen McDargh, Burchard's daughter)

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“Between the two of us, we set up the program, agenda, order of presentation, etc. I acted more as the emcee for the event and had Maj. Gurry present the Congressional Gold Medal,” said Michael Coolidge.

Michael Coolidge selected Gurry to present the award because he felt her accomplishments as a pilot in the Air

Force today were made possible by the groundbreaking path paved by the WASPs.

“The room was alive with smiles, and as I walked in, I was immediately met by Bev Beesmyer. I couldn’t believe I was face-to-face with one of my idols,” said Gurry.

The women enlisted in the WASP program to serve as civilian volunteers flying domestic military missions, releasing male pilots for combat duty during WWII. Initially, the WASP’s mission was limited to testing and accepting aircraft at the factory and delivering planes to flying units in the continental U.S. and Alaska. The WASP’s role later expanded to include flying simulated strafing, night bombing and navigation missions. All five women shared their WASP stories with vivid details from more than 60 years ago.

Burchard received her WASP wings at 28 and was assigned as a test pilot for the new AT-6 Texan, an advanced training aircraft at Marana Air Base, Tucson, Ariz. Her job was to perform test flights on

aircraft, including challenging aerobatic maneuvers, to ensure they were ready for delivery to the male pilots. Burchard served until the WASPs were deactivated Dec. 20, 1944.

Fellow WASP Beesmyer served as a tow target pilot. Her mission was to fly around training grounds towing aerial targets simulating enemy aircraft. Anti-aircraft gunnery trainees fired 50-caliber bullets at her to practice hitting moving targets. Beesmyer recalls several times hearing shells hitting or whizzing by her aircraft. She said that although that “got her attention,” she still loved flying enough to keep climbing into the cockpit every day.

Cowden told Gurry how she was able to talk the U.S. Army Golden Knights into taking her parachuting at 89. Her next adventure — at 91 — was to fly a standard WWII mission with a fellow pilot in a restored WWII fighter. After completing the flight, Cowden said she was happy she didn’t have to fly those types of missions any longer.

“How did I ever do that back then?” said Cowden.

Although Burchard was the only one receiving her Congressional Gold Medal during the ceremony, the event paid tribute to all five women.

“Now, in the military, women fly as true equals [to men] because of the will and

determination of this group of true pioneers. These heroines served proudly, boldly and silently. They took risks and showed the world that they were just as capable as their brothers,” said Michael Coolidge. 

Some information and story idea provided by Air Force Maj. Deirdre Gurry, DCMA AIMO Kelly



Mary Burchard poses for a picture outside her barracks at Marana Air Base, Tucson, Ariz., before a flight in the winter of 1942.

History of Women Airforce Service Pilots

The WASP program was formed in 1942 with civilian volunteers for domestic military flying, releasing male pilots for combat duty. A total of 1,113 women came from every corner of the United States to serve their country. After years of ferrying aircraft, flying tow targets and testing aircraft, they were deactivated in 1944, and their service was deemed confidential.

Thirty-eight women died in the course of duty, but because they were not officially military, there were no benefits or military honors. It wasn't until 1976, when women were finally being accepted into Air Force pilot training, that the WASPs made their voices heard. They had long since been forgotten and, although they had worn uniforms and attended military-style training, they were never recognized as military pilots.

In 1977, Congress acknowledged their contribution to the country and granted them veteran status, which led to honorable discharges in 1979. On July 1, 2009, President Barack Obama signed the bill awarding the WASPs the Congressional Gold Medal, and on March 10, 2010, more than 200 attended the ceremony in their honor in Washington, D.C. The WASPs of WWII became the 142nd recipients of the Congressional Gold Medal, joining the Navajo Code Talkers and the Tuskegee Airmen in recognition of their pioneering military service and exemplary record.