

Women Flying Into History is Topic at Ocean Museum

By DON STINE

During World War II more than 1,000 women from around the United States stepped into aviation history by becoming the country's first female military pilots- and Bernice "Bee" Falk Haydu was one of them.

Haydu, who is 90 years old and lives in Florham Park, was among the first women to fly for the United States Army Air Force during World War II. These special and courageous women were known as the WASP: Women Airforce Services Pilots.

Haydu will give a special power-point presentation with photographs of her service with the WASP Sept. 13 for the Historical Museum of Ocean Township.

Haydu's lecture, called "Women Flying into History—the Women Airforce Service Pilots (W.A.S.P.)" will be held at the old Oakhurst Schoolhouse, Monmouth Road, at 7:15 p.m. Admission is free but donations are welcome.

"The lecture is about the WASP in general, about how we were formed, about what we did, and about our history," Haydu said.

"I am very happy be able to spread the word and talk about the WASP. It also gives me a chance to tell young people that, if you have a dream, just go after it. There may be pitfalls but struggle through," she said.

Twenty-five thousand women applied to join the WASP, but



Bernice Falk Haydu was among one of the first women to fly for the US Air Force.

fly all basic and advanced military aircraft.

"I was a trainer but there were about 22 different WASP jobs. We flew as practice targets for anti-aircraft guns and night-beam practice and we flew men who were being trained as gunners to hit moving aircraft. But we were only allowed to fly in the United States and Canada," she said.

The WASP flew more than 60 million miles in every type of military aircraft while active.

Haydu wrote home detailing her training and tours of active duty and her mother saved those letters, as well as letters from her brother, Lloyd, who was serving with the Army Air Force in

The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) and its predecessor groups the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) and the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) were pioneering organizations of civilian female pilots employed to fly military aircraft for the U.S. Air Force during World War II.

The units were combined on August 5, 1943, to create the paramilitary WASP organization.

The WASP received no gunnery training and very little formation flying and acrobatics, but went through the maneuvers necessary to be able to recover from any position. After training the WASP were stationed at 120 air bases across the U.S. assuming numerous flight-related missions.

They flew 60 million miles of operational flights from aircraft factories to ports of embarkation

their lives while serving during the war — 11 in training and 27 on active duty, all in accidents. Because they were not considered to be in the military under the existing guidelines, a fallen WASP was sent home at family expense without traditional military honors or any note of heroism. The army would not even allow the U.S. flag to be put on fallen WASP pilots' coffins.

"It was terrible. A couple of families put flags on the coffins anyway. That violated the rules but it was not a very dignified thing that was done to us. Sometimes we had to pass the hat to pay for somebody to accompany the body home," Haydu said.

On June 21, 1944, a bill in the House of Representatives to give the WASP military status was narrowly defeated after civilian male pilots, reacting to closure of some

civilian flight training schools and termination of two male pilot training commissioning programs, lobbied against the bill. The House Committee on the Civil Service

reported on June 5, 1944 that it considered the WASP was unnecessary, and unjustifiably expensive, and recommended that the recruiting and training of inexperienced women pilots be halted.

WASP members were crest-fallen when the program was disbanded in Dec. 20, 1944 but

70s but then I decided to make the skies safer for everybody else and stopped," she said.

All records of the WASP were classified and sealed for 35 years, so their contributions to the war effort were little known and inaccessible to historians.

In 1975, the WASP fought the "Battle of Congress" in Washington, D.C., to belatedly obtain recognition as veterans of World War II. Finally, in 1977, the records were unsealed.

Haydu was president of the WASP organization from 1975 to 1978

"We felt we deserved the recognition because we were military, we lived a military life, and were subject to military discipline and given military orders," she said.

The WASP were granted veteran status in 1977, and given the Congressional Gold Medal in 2009.

On July 1, 2009, President Barack Obama and the United States Congress awarded the WASP the Congressional Gold Medal. Three of the estimated 300 surviving WASPs were on hand to witness the event

And Haydu was one of those three WASPs present.

On March 10, 2010, 175 surviving WASPs and their families went to Washington, DC to accept the Congressional Gold Medal.

Former US Air Force pilot Bernice Falk Haydu will give a lecture about women pilots at the Ocean Township Historical Museum Sept. 13. Admission is free.

and military training bases, towing targets for live anti-aircraft artillery practice and simulated strafing missions, and transporting cargo. Almost every type of aircraft flown by the USAAF during World War II was also flown at some point by women in these roles. Between September

spread the word and talk about the WASP. It also gives me a chance to tell young people that, if you have a dream, just go after it. There may be pitfalls but struggle through," she said.

Twenty-five thousand women applied to join the WASP, but only 1,830 were accepted and took the oath, and out of those only 1,074 women passed training at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas to become the first women to fly American military aircraft.

Haydu said she was already flying in 1943 before she joined the WASP and began her training in 1944, when she was 23 years old.

"I heard about the WASP, about the training and about the aircraft we could fly. I also wanted to contribute more to the war effort and I felt this was a good opportunity," she said.

But it was not always an easy, or cheap, journey.

"The Army was not sure if women could handle army life and its aircraft. It was an experiment and, if successful, we were to be taken into the Army Air Corp but we were not considered military," Haydu said.

"We had to pay our own way to Texas. We also had to pay for our own room and board, and pay for our own uniforms while in training. We paid a lot out of our own pocket," she said.

Haydu, who was primary a training pilot, said she learned to

fly types of military aircraft while active.

Haydu wrote home detailing her training and tours of active duty and her mother saved those letters, as well as letters from her brother, Lloyd, who was serving with the Army Air Force in Europe.

These letters are the basis for Haydu's book "Letters Home 1944-1945," published 2004 and now in its fourth edition.

ing targets for live anti-aircraft artillery practice and simulated strafing missions, and transporting cargo. Almost every type of aircraft flown by the USAAF during World War II was also flown at some point by women in these roles. Between September 1942 and December 1944, the WASP delivered 12,650 aircraft of 78 different types.

Thirty-eight WASP fliers lost

considered the WASP was unnecessary, and unjustifiably expensive, and recommended that the recruiting and training of inexperienced women pilots be halted.

WASP members were crest-fallen when the program was disbanded in Dec. 20, 1944 but Haydu went on to continue flying and eventually married World War II flight instructor, Joe Haydu.

"I continued to fly until my late

500 surviving WASPs were on hand to witness the event

And Haydu was one of those three WASPs present.

On March 10, 2010, 175 surviving WASPs and their families went to Washington, DC to accept the Congressional Gold Medal.

"I was absolutely there for that...and it was about time. We were all very proud to receive that recognition," she said.