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NATIONAL WASP WWII MUSEUM CELEBRATES 12TH ANNUAL HOMECOMING

Eleven Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II return to Avenger Field



AVENGER FIELD, SWEETWATER, TEXAS – National WASP WWII Museum celebrated Homecoming 2017 over Memorial Day weekend, welcoming eleven Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) back to the place they trained to serve our country during World War II.

The WASP (with their class numbers) are:

Roby Anderson 44-W-4
Nell Bright 43-W-7
Edna Davis 43-W-5 (not pictured)
Barbara Heinrich 43-W-4
Mildred “Jane” Doyle 44-W-4
Kay Hilbrandt 44-W-10
Shirley Kruse 44-W-6
Dorothy Lucas 44-W-7
Florence Mascott 44-W-10T
Shutsy Reynolds 44-W-5
Millicent “Millie” Young 44-W-10

For more than a decade, the WASP have been gathering each year to remember their days at Avenger Field; the long hot days of training and study, the rare leisure time, sometimes spent at Lake Sweetwater, and those 38 fallen who gave their lives in service to our nation.

American Airlines generously assisted these WASP and their families to Texas, then the Brazos River 99s and host families at Pecan Plantation in Granbury, Texas, flew the WASP to Sweetwater. Lana Kraeszig, member of the Board of Directors of National WASP WWII Museum and a woman pilot, lives at Pecan Plantation and is passionate about giving WASP a chance to reunite with old friends. “These women gave of themselves at a time when they were not even considered a true military unit. They tested experimental military aircraft, towed targets for ammunitions practice and some gave the ultimate sacrifice. The hospitality we show is only a small way we say Thank You”, Kraeszig said.

Accompanied by military escorts carefully selected from a competitive application process, the WASP returned to The Wishing Well, where they gathered for a reunion photo and saw each other, some for the first time in years. Barbara “Bobbie” Heinrich, celebrating her 101st birthday, made her first trip to National WASP WWII Museum Homecoming. Ann Hobing, Executive Director of the Museum, said, “What an honor and privilege to lead hundreds of people in singing Happy Birthday to a living legend. This is my inaugural Homecoming and I am overjoyed to be in the presence of such amazing women.”



Homecoming 2017 also welcomed two contemporary women pilots to share their stories and give homage to the WASP who blazed the trail for those after them. Major Heather “Lucky” Penney, most recognized for her service to our nation on September 11, 2001, brought a luncheon audience of 300 to tears as she recalled the morning she scrambled into a fighter jet in Washington D.C. to protect our skies over the Pentagon. “Because of WASP who broke the mold so many decades ago, I was able to serve the idea of freedom and democracy we call America”, Penney said. She now serves as National Chair for the Commemorative Air Force’s RISE ABOVE program, educating thousands of students across the nation about the Women Airforce Service Pilots.



Dinner guest speaker, Lieutenant Colonel Jade Reidy, Inspector General of the 7th Bomb Wing at Dyess AFB, gave a tribute laced with gratitude. “We cannot thank you enough for being tough, smart, pioneering women who answered the call of duty. Gratitude to you will live on in us women who continue to fly, face challenges, serve our country and make our marks on the next generation”, said Reidy, to 500 dinner guests in Hangar No 1, the new addition to the Museum’s complex.



In addition to the fully sold out luncheon and dinner, Homecoming 2017 provided fun for the entire multi-generational family. Nearly 40 youth, some taking their first flight, were generously flown by the EAA Young Eagles. Well known author of an award-winning WASP novel, Sarah Byrn Rickman was at the Museum autographing her books for fans. And, more than a dozen warbirds landed at Avenger Field to provide entertainment and education, including The Stearman, a beloved WASP flown plane. Bill Johnson, member of the Museum Board of Directors, said, "As a pilot, I always remember that aviation is based on teamwork; it takes mechanics, navigators, engineers and technicians to make a flight safe and successful. We want to educate the next generation that they can be part of aviation in many different ways."



Homecoming 2017 reached its highest attendance in its 12 years, with nearly 2000 people at the Museum. Some flew into Avenger Field in private aircraft, and one family drove over 1200 miles from South Carolina to show gratitude to WASP. "WASP came from across the United States, to serve our nation, to defend our homeland and to protect our freedom. And so, we are here today to celebrate and remember a group of veterans so groundbreaking in their service that their footprint on women who came after is deep and permanent.", said Hobing.

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About National WASP WWII Museum

Adjacent to a Texas Historical Commission Landmark and a destination on Texas Forts Trail, National WASP WWII Museum at Avenger Field was incorporated by the State of Texas in 2003 and held its grand opening in 2005. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit relying on contributions and dedicated to honoring the legacy of Woman Airforce Service Pilots and inspiring future generations, National WASP WWII Museum hosts an annual Homecoming, welcoming WASP and their families to remember those with whom they served. Home to archives, exhibits and aircraft preserving the story of WASP and those who served at Avenger Field, National WASP WWII Museum tells the story of WASP during WWII and the years after their service in which they continued to seek the veteran status and full military honors due them.

For more information, visit www.waspmuseum.org or Facebook @waspmuseum. Photos by Rick Foutch Photography.