

Engine Fires & Engine Failures? No Problem - Margaret Ehlers Twito – Minnesota WASP pilot

Engine fire on take-off? No problem. Plane grounded for 3 days due to engine failure? No sweat. Just another day for Margaret Ehlers Twito, a Minnesota WASP who dealt with these issues and more during her WWII service. This is the second of six articles featuring Minnesota Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). Over Memorial weekend, you'll have an opportunity to lay a wreath at the resting places of these six amazing women, to honor their service and contributions to advancing women in aviation.

Margaret Elizabeth Ehlers was born in 1922 in Centerville, SD. Her dad was a Lutheran pastor and when Margaret was two years old, the family moved to Bloomington, MN where she spent her childhood. During high school she lived with her grandparents while attending Bloomington High School.

After graduation she worked as a bookkeeper. One of the men at the company took her for her first airplane ride in his Piper Cub. It was love at first sight. She was so thrilled with the experience, she decided to get her private pilot's certificate. She quickly earned the hours needed to apply to the WASP program. In September 1943, at age 21, Margaret was accepted and began WASP training in 'Class 44-2' at Avenger Field, Sweetwater, TX. She graduated with 48 other women in March 1944. She and four other ferry pilots were assigned to Long Beach Air Base, CA. She also served at Palm Springs Army Air Base, CA and later transferred to La Junta Army Air Field, CO.



Margaret Ehlers Twito

Long Beach Army Air Field

Margaret flew a wide variety of aircraft, including PT-19, UC-78, BT-13, AT-6, B-25, B-17 and even the C-47, the 'plane that won the war' according to General Eisenhower.



B-17



C-47



UC-78

In December 1944 the WASPs were deactivated and Margaret returned to Minnesota. She worked at the reservation desk of the Nicollet Hotel in Minneapolis. It was there she met her future husband, Wayne Twito. Wayne had been a Marine pilot and had not met a WASP before. While making arrangements to stay at the Nicollet, he asked Margaret out to dinner and they started dating. After they married, Wayne was hired by Northwest Airlines, where he worked until 1991. He became a 747 captain at Northwest and won several military awards for his WWII service.

Margaret did not fly after her time as a WASP but she came back to it some years later for a unique reason. She said "People would ask me after I was out of the WASP, years later, whether I was still flying. I got quite impatient with telling them all the time that I wasn't flying, so in 1976 I decided to go to Gillespie Field, east of San Diego, to get my commercial license reinstated. Fred Breise, my instructor from Sweetwater days, was again my instructor. We started on a Monday and finished on Saturday. He signed my log book and said my commercial license was valid again!" (Women Pilots of World War II, Jean Hascall Cole, University of Utah Press, 1992)

In 1991, Margaret was interviewed by WASP classmate Jean Hascall Cole for the book "Women Pilots of World War II". She shared two amazing stories:

On a trip from Washington, D.C. to La Junta, CO, (believed to be in a UC-78) Margaret stopped at Columbus, OH and was grounded for 3 days because the engine quit on final approach, forcing her to make a dead-stick landing. From Columbus she flew to St. Louis and then on to Topeka, KS. "When I tried to leave Topeka, there was a fire in the engine on takeoff. When I called the tower and said I was coming in for a landing, they asked, 'What's the problem?' I said, 'Take a look.' I came in, landed safely and stayed there because again the plane was grounded. Anne Berry (WASP) from La Junta came to pick me up so I got back ok." (Women Pilots of World War II, Jean Hascall Cole, University of Utah Press, 1992)



Margaret Ehlers Twito: Image Courtesy WASP Archive, Texas Woman's University, Denton, TX

Margaret said her best WASP experience was a flight she co-piloted with a major on a B-17 to Kearney, NE from Long Beach. "We left on Easter Sunday and got as far as Las Vegas. The next morning everyone was sitting around the pool and I asked why we weren't leaving. They said there was a snowstorm in Denver and we couldn't go in. We spent the day in Las Vegas. By the next day weather had cleared and we got to Denver and to Kearney where we delivered our planes." (Women Pilots of World War II, Jean Hascall Cole, University of Utah Press, 1992) Spending a day in Las Vegas was no doubt a welcome break for all the ferry pilots.

Margaret passed away in January 2009 at age 86 and is laid to rest at Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis.

Over Memorial weekend, you'll have an opportunity to lay a wreath at Margaret's resting place or one of the other 5 Minnesota WASP pilots who are buried in the state. It will be an honor to recognize their service and contributions to advancing women in aviation. Watch for next month's article when another Minnesota WASP will be featured.