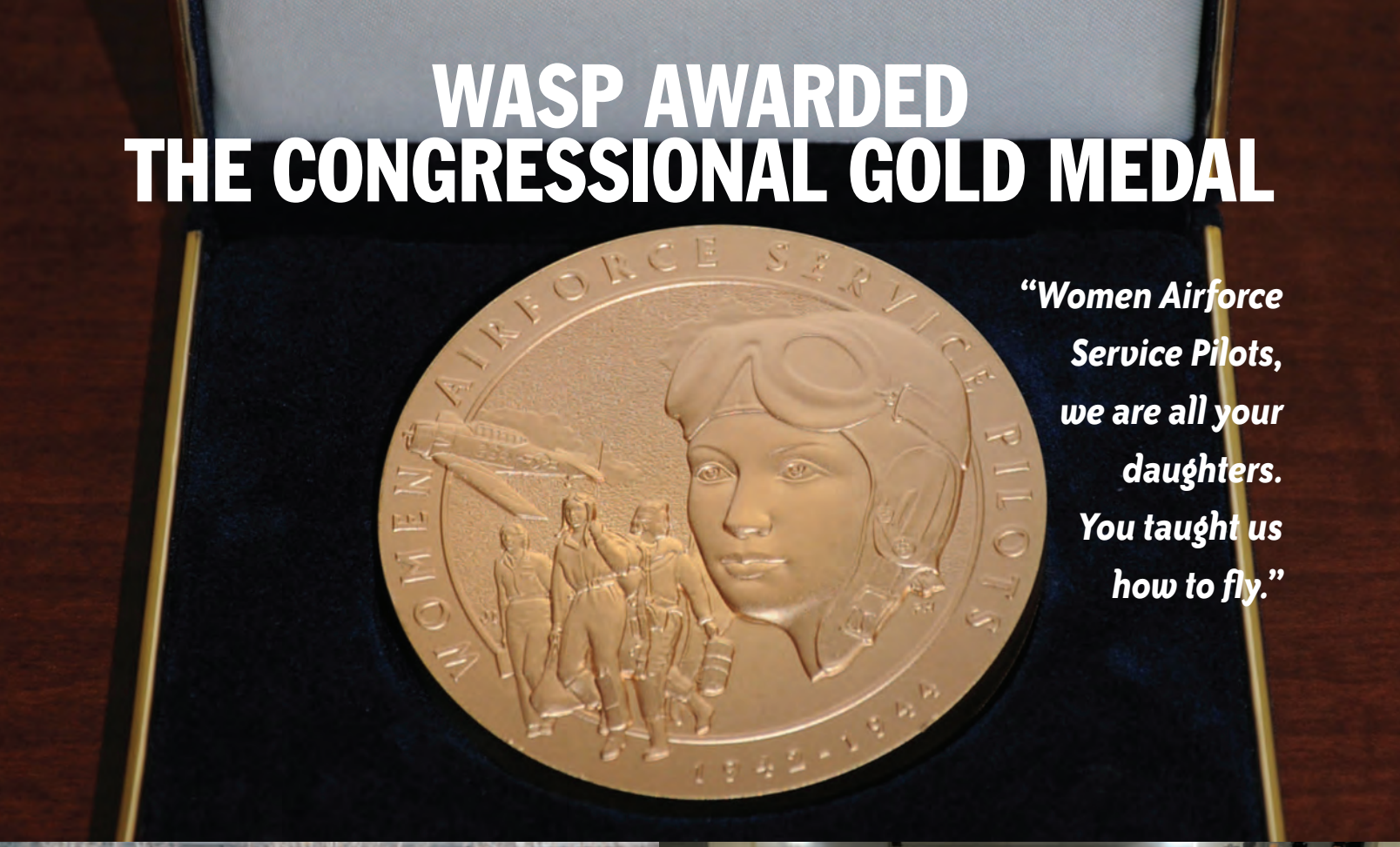
WASP AWARDED THE CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL



"Women Airforce Service Pilots, we are all your daughters. You taught us how to fly."


Dawn Seymor




Vi Cowden

Bev Beesemyer









ANNA MRACEK DIETRICH

Early on the mostly cloudy morning of March 10, 2010, a line was forming at the security check point for Emancipation Hall at the Nation's Capital. Inside, cameras were being positioned and seats were being reserved. Four generations were gathering to honor the women of the Greatest Generation who literally and figuratively taught their daughters to fly.

The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) were the first female military aviators to fly America's warbirds. Flying everything from AT-6 trainers to B-17's and B-29's Stateside, the WASP ferried planes, were flight instructors, and towed targets during WWII. More than 1,000 of them volunteered for this challenging and dangerous duty; 38 were killed in service; just over 200 were in attendance as they were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. Many of those 200 were in their original WWII Santiago Blue uniforms. Their courage and grace shone even more brightly than their polished silver wings, featuring the unique diamond in the center, undimmed by the 65 years between their casual dismissal and this recognition.

by Anna Mracek Dietrich
photography by Kristine Volk

Before the ceremony, Bernice (Bee) Falk Haydu, class 44-W-7, who was the president of the WASP during their hard fought but eventually successful fight for veteran status in the 1970s, was particularly happy about the media attention that the event was receiving: "I was excited in 1977 when we finally got our veterans' status, but this is truly… this is unbelievable. I am most happy that the world, even though we got left out of a lot of history books, is finally recognizing that women flew military aircraft under military orders in World War II. I'm delighted that the word is getting out." Deanie Parrish, class 44-W-4, who accepted the Gold Medal on behalf of the WASP, echoed a similar sentiment in her remarks, thanking the media and saying "That is all we ever asked for, that our overlooked history would someday no longer be a missing chapter in the history of WWII, the history of the Air Force, and most especially the history of America."

As more Americans, both men and women, young and not so young, learn about the grace and courage of the WASP, the legacy of the values they embodied will continue to inspire each of us. Speaking for today's military aviators, Lt. Col. Nicole Malachowski, USAF, said in her remarks that the WASP "remind us to step back and remember why we serve. We serve because we love our country. We do it because we know that freedom comes at a cost, and that it is worth defending. And we do it for one another." For all of us, military or civilian, aviators or not, the advice given before the ceremony by Maureen Rogers, class 44-W-2, rings true and makes it clear just why the WASP were able to accomplish so much: "Just stick to it! Determination! You can do it! You can do it!"

Nancy Pelosi had it right: "Women Airforce Service Pilots, we are all your daughters. You taught us how to fly. We thank you for that and for what you did with your flying to make us the home of the brave and the land of the free." A grateful nation extends its heartfelt congratulations to the WASP. ✈