

# Dorothy Olsen, a Pioneering Pilot in World War II, Dies at 103

[nytimes.com/2019/08/09/us/dorothy-olsen-dead.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/us/dorothy-olsen-dead.html)

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As a teenager envisioning the vast world beyond her family's small farm in Oregon, Dorothy Olsen was mesmerized by "The Red Knight of Germany," Floyd Gibbons's 1927 biography of Baron Manfred von Richthofen, the German World War I ace.

"Young blood, hot and daring, raced through their veins," Gibbons wrote, "even as the winged steeds they rode raced on the wind to conquest or disaster."

Dorothy dreamed of racing on the wind herself. Before she realized that dream, she accustomed herself to heights by leaping from the hayloft of the family barn onto the stacks below. She perfected her balance atop the wooden slats that flanked the manure pile. After graduating from high school, she used the money she made from teaching tap dance and ballet to take flying lessons.

When World War II began, she and 25,000 other women applied to the Army Air Forces for the only jobs open to female pilots: freeing men for combat by ferrying newly minted fighters and bombers from the factories to domestic embarkation points for service overseas.

After feasting on bananas and malted milk for a week to raise the weight on her five-foot-tall frame from 92 to the required minimum of 100, she became one of 1,879 women accepted and one of 1,074 to complete the training program to become Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASPs.

“They were the first women to fly military aircraft for the United States,” Debbie Jennings, curator of an exhibition about the pilots at the Museum of Flight in Seattle, said by email.



According to Mrs. Olsen’s daughter, this photo was taken — also probably in 1944 — when she was delivering a plane, stopped for the night and went into a bar for a bite to eat. The men in the photo are unidentified. Credit via Olsen family

Mrs. Olsen died at her home in University Place, Wash., near Tacoma, on July 23, Ms. Jennings said. She was 103 and one of only 38 WASPs still living.

“The WASPs had moxie,” Kimberly L. Johnson, director of the WASP Archive at Texas Woman’s University in Denton, Tex., said in an email. “They personify what it meant to persevere.”

Transporting and testing the latest models, towing targets and transferring captured enemy planes, the WASPs collectively flew an estimated 60 million miles from 1942 to 1944. Thirty-eight died in accidents during training or on duty.

From her base in Long Beach, Calif., Mrs. Olsen flew 61 missions for the Sixth Ferry Group in nearly two dozen models, including P-38s, P-51s and B-17s. She flew them to West Coast airfields to be deployed in the Pacific, or to Newark to be deployed in Europe.

She was said to have been one of only a dozen WASPs certified for night flying.

As Civil Service employees rather than military personnel, the WASPs had to pay for their own food and lodging. "The government didn't treat us so well," Mrs. Olsen told *The Chinook Observer*, a newspaper in Washington State, in 2011.

"A bay mate was killed in a plane crash, and the rest of us had to take up a collection to get her body back home to Portland because they wouldn't pay for it," she recalled. "When the war was over I was fired, just like that, and we didn't get much recognition until many years later."

The WASPs were finally recognized as veterans eligible for benefits in 1977 under President Jimmy Carter. In 2010 they received as a group the Congressional Gold Medal, one of the nation's two highest civilian awards.

Mrs. Olsen received military honors at her funeral, at which Ms. Jennings read "Celestial Flight," a poem written by a fellow WASP, Elizabeth MacKethan Magid:

| *She is not dead —*  
| *But only flying higher,*  
| *Higher than she's flown before,*  
| *And earthly limitations will hinder her no more.*

Dorothy Eleanor Kocher was born on July 10, 1916, in Woodburn, Ore., to Ralph and Frances (Zimmering) Kocher. Her father was a farmer.

Image

Mrs. Olsen in front of a painting of herself at her home in University Place, Wash., in 2010, shortly before she and other members of the WASPs received the Congressional Gold Medal. Credit: Ellen M. Banner/The Seattle Times

After high school, she began teaching dance to the principal's two children and eventually opened her own studio.

But she was smitten by Gibbons's book about von Richthofen and completely hooked on flying after paying to ride as a passenger on a biplane at the state fair in Salem. (She picked hops to earn the money for her fare.) She soon joined the Woodburn Flying Club.

Before World War II, she was said to have been one of only three women in the Portland area to earn a private pilot's license.

After the war she married Harold W. Olsen, a state trooper, and settled in University Place. He died in 2006. Mrs. Olsen is survived by their daughter, Julie Stranburg; their son, Kim; two grandchildren; and a great-grandson.

Mrs. Olsen never considered becoming a commercial or private pilot, and after her children were born she abandoned the cockpit altogether. Nothing, she said, could compare to the experience of piloting a winged steed like the long-range, single-seat fighter known as the P-51 Mustang.

"She said, 'Why would I want to fly a Cessna when I've flown a P-51?' " her daughter told The News Tribune of Tacoma.

Mrs. Olsen opened an antique store in Washington State instead.

For 37 years she was totally deaf, a result of nerve damage caused by an anesthetic administered during a dental procedure. Cochlear implants restored her hearing when she was 80.

While she never flew a plane again, Mrs. Olsen retained her hunger for racing on the wind. She once famously received a speeding ticket while driving her orange 1965 Ford — a Mustang, of course.