

BT-13 Wreckage Recovered from WWII Crash Site

by Ron Bartley

On July 7, 1944, Paula Loop, a Women Airforce Service Pilot (WASP), was ferrying a Vultee BT-13 to Seattle. She landed at the Medford Army Air Field for fuel. A short time later she departed northbound.

Later that afternoon, Lowell Ash, a U.S. Forest Service employee, noticed a fire in the Richter Mountain area, and promptly headed for the area with a small crew. He discovered Paula Loop's burning aircraft with the pilot deceased.

The aircraft had hit several tall trees and a wing had been sheared off, still containing fuel. Army Air Force personnel investigated, but were not able to determine the cause of the crash, but suspected down-slope winds as a possible factor.

The WASP, and the Paula Loop crash are significant examples of Oregon aviation history. The OAHS therefore obtained a permit from the U.S. Forest Service to recover the two remaining pieces of the aircraft, engine and a tubular section of the fuselage. All the rest has disappeared from the 59 year old crash.

Late in 2003, several interested individuals "volunteered" to help with the recovery project. A sled was built to help move the two pieces up a hill, through the brush, and around several trees. A variety of ropes, chains, pulleys and cable come-alongs were available. Finally a winch was used to drag the wreckage up a steep road bank.

The engine and fuselage are currently stored at the History Center. When time and funds are available, we plan to create an informational display that will honor Paula Loop and the contributions made by the members of the WASP.

Paula Loop was born in the family farm home near Manchester, Grant County, Oklahoma in 1916. The eldest of four children, she attended a rural one-room grade school and later graduated from the Oklahoma Women's College in Chickasha, Oklahoma. She was an accomplished musician and taught several subjects in the Arnett Public Schools.

In 1939, she worked as a secretary in Ponca City, Oklahoma. Paula took flying lessons there and soloed on September 2, 1940. By 1942 she was a Link Trainer instructor for British Cadets. She enrolled in the WASP program in December, 1942 and received her silver wings at Avenger Field, Texas, on May 28, 1943. During April and May of 1944 she attended the WASP training course at Orlando, Florida, and was then transferred to the 3rd Ferry Group in Kansas.

Paula Loop had approximately 1,000 hours of solo time and had flown in every state and parts of Canada. She was 27 years old when she died. WASP Jerry Hardman escorted her body to her home in Oklahoma where she was buried. Her silver wings were embedded in her granite tombstone with the words, "Into The Mosaic Of Victory, This Priceless Piece Was Set".

The WASP organization was founded in 1942 to perform non-combat duties that were being held by men who could then be released for overseas assignment. The WASP performed flight duties such as target towing, ferrying and flight testing. They flew all types of aircraft in the military inventory. To become a WASP, the women needed to hold a private pilot's license, and pass rigorous ground and flight training. More than 1,000 WASP earned their wings. Thirty-eight lost their lives while performing flight duties. The organization was disbanded in December, 1944. Unfortunately, when the women returned to civilian life they received no military status or compensatory benefits.

New Website for OAHS

editorial

With the assistance of a Lane County Tourism grant, an attractive and informative website has been developed by OAHS. Events, acquisitions and current collections information will be updated periodically to add to news about our organization. Check out this address: <http://www.oregonaviation.org> It's great!