

SF woman flew during World War II

By REBECCA CASARES
The New Mexican Staff
The day Mary Coon returned from college in 1943, her father told her the country was soon going to war and there would be a need for women flyers.
He had enrolled her in ground training school and she was to start the following day.
Mary Coon was delighted.
So began a career with the Women's Air Force Service Pilots and later the U.S. Air Force.



Mary Walters

Shortly after the 21-year-old pilot completed navigation school in Texas she was assigned ferrying duty at Newcastle Air Base in Wilmington, Del., and was soon flying all over the United States, Mexico and Canada.
Mary Coon, now Judge Mary

Walters of the Court of Appeals, was one of 1,000 women who enjoyed a temporary stint flying for their country during World War II.
The WASPs disbanded in 1944, about one year before the end of the war, when enough male pilots had been trained.
The WASPs were discharged

without veterans' benefits nor military recognition. It was not until 1971 that legislation finally made WASPs eligible for veterans' benefits.
"We were attached to Army units and were under Army orders, regulations and requirements," Judge Walters said in an interview in her downtown office. "Many former WASPs my age are now in need of medical care and benefits an honorable discharge would give them."
"Thirty-eight WASPs were killed in World War II, with no insurance and no military honors," she added.
Mrs. Walters, who flew every type of aircraft the army had during the war except fighter planes, doubts that American women will ever have combat roles in the armed forces. She, however, would willingly have

gone into combat, she said.
"Any woman who volunteered for service in World War II would gladly have gone into combat," she said, "and if there were similar circumstances again we will have no lack of volunteers."
"Women have fought in Egypt and Israel and other points of the world for years and those women do it out of patriotic conviction as well as compulsion," she added. "American women shouldn't feel any different."
Mary Coon married Asa Walters in 1953, one year after she returned to active duty in the Air Force as personnel and recruiting officer. Mr. Walters died 1974.
Though the WASPs were offered commissions in the Air Force in 1948, they were not allowed to return to the air. Women did not fly in the armed forces again until 1977.

Mrs. Walters' flying years were the source of many memorable experiences. One time she was sent to pick up an aircraft which had not been used for four years. When she landed in Atlanta, the landing gear collapsed into the wings.
There was also what she terms her most enjoyable flying experience, when she stopped in Cleveland to pick up her father and fly him to Niagara Falls. She violated regulations for that jaunt, she said, but she got more pleasure out of that trip than any other. She often had nightmares about the time she landed a twin-engine plane at Hondo with no radio or tower contact in a blinding rainstorm.
The Hondo tower was out of operation for repairs and Mrs. Walters was transporting four WASPs who had been away for six weeks training and

had boyfriends waiting at Hondo.
"The idea of not landing was shattering to all of them," she said. "I got chewed out when I reported to operations but there was no damage. It may have been a close call but we were too dumb to know it."
Mrs. Walters is unabashed about admitting she was never frightened during her flying career, and in fact thought she was the best pilot who ever stepped into a plane.
The blind landing at Hondo, she said, "was one of the idiotcies of being young and so absolutely confident of your abilities that you do stupid things."
Mrs. Walters believes professional aviation opportunities for women are excellent now. She likes to think, she added, that the WASPs had something to do with breaking ground for them.