Overlooked No More: When Hazel Ying Lee and Maggie Gee Soared the Skies; Beyond the World War II We Know

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Overlooked is a series of obituaries about remarkable people whose deaths, beginning in 1851, went unreported in The Times. This latest installment is from “Beyond the World War II We Know,” a series by The Times that documents lesser-known stories from the war.

They never met, but their early lives ran a strikingly similar course. They were both Chinese-American women who thwarted layers of prejudice and preconception to become World War II pilots. One died young, while transporting a fighter plane. The other lived to 89 and went on to become a scientist.

Their names were Hazel Ying Lee and Maggie Gee, and they were WASPs, or Women Airforce Service Pilots.

In 1942, as the Air Force faced a dearth of male pilots to sustain the war effort at home, the pilot Jacqueline Cochran persuaded the chief of the U.S. Army Air Force to recruit female pilots. More than 25,000 women applied. Only 1,830 were accepted into flight training. Of those, 1,074 completed the training.

For two years, these pilots flew nearly every type of aircraft. Their principal job was to ferry planes between bases. They also tested new planes, trained male pilots and flew damaged planes back to base for repair. They traveled in inclement weather and landed on unlighted runways at night. Thirty-eight of the women died in service.

Gee, a third-generation Chinese American, was born Gee Mei Gue on Aug. 5, 1923, in Berkeley, Calif., one of six children. Her mother was Jung An Yoke, whose parents moved to California from a village in Guangzhou, China, in the 1870s. Her grandfather, Jung Sun Choy, settled on the Monterey Peninsula south of San Francisco and became a pioneer in the abalone business.

The family moved to San Francisco’s Chinatown in 1906, then to Berkeley.

The year after Gee was born, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924, which restricted immigration from Asia. Animosity toward the Chinese was growing, and the sentiments sometimes pervaded Gee's childhood.

She found a haven in the family's Sunday outings to the Oakland airport to watch planes take off. "I loved how the vibrations echoed in my bones," she told Marissa Moss, a children's book author who wrote about Gee in "Sky High: The True Story of Maggie Gee" (2009). "Just being there, being part of it all, made me feel big and powerful."

Gee would scan the skies for Amelia Earhart, who frequently flew into Oakland. And once, Gee spotted her. "When I waved, she saw me and waved back," Gee said.

In 1941, when she was 18, Gee enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley, to study physics, but she dropped out a few months later when the United States entered World War II to work at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard, in Vallejo, Calif., near San Francisco. Her mother was a welder there, and Gee worked in the drafting department.

Aviation soon beckoned. Gee and two co-workers pooled their funds, bought a car for $25 and drove to Texas for six months of training at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, 40 miles west of Abilene.

"I learned to parachute and make emergency landings," Gee said. "We did the same intense work the male pilots had to do."

Gee was occasionally mistaken for the Japanese enemy. She knew she stood out. "I felt like an exhibit at the country fair, a two-headed cow, the amazing Chinese-American WASP," she said.

The only other Chinese-American woman in the program was Lee.

Ah Ying Lee was born on Aug. 25, 1912, in Portland, Ore. Her father, Lee Yuet, was a businessman who owned an import-export business. Her mother, Wong Sau Lan, was a homemaker.

After graduating from high school in 1929, Lee got a job as an elevator operator at H. Liebes & Company, a department store in Portland, where she also did stockroom work.

She joined the Chinese Flying Club of Portland and in 1932 graduated from aviation school with her pilot's license.

"I think that for Hazel, flying a plane symbolized not just flight but a freedom she didn't have on the ground," said Alan Rosenberg, a filmmaker who made "A Brief Flight" (2002), a documentary about Lee.

In Portland, while learning to fly, she met Louie Yen-chung, a student from China who was training as a cadet. Their romance endured for more than a decade, even with long stretches of time spent miles — sometimes continents — apart.

In 1933, in the buildup to the Second Sino-Japanese war, Lee hoped to fly for the Chinese Air Force. But the Chinese government turned her down, saying women were too "unstable" to fly, her sister Frances Tong told The Portland Oregonian in 2003. Instead, Lee flew commercial and private flights.

Lee returned to the United States in December 1938, living in New York. She graduated from the WASP training program in 1943 and was sent to Romulus, Mich.

Because WASPs were Civil Service employees and not military personnel, they had to pay for their food and lodging. There were no flight suits for women, and Lee's frame, at 5'3" and 115 pounds, was overwhelmed by even the smallest of the men's uniforms.

On Oct. 9, 1943, she married Louie, whom she called "Cliff," by then a major in the Chinese Air Force. "KNOT TIED TODAY," she wrote in a telegram to another pilot. "CAVU FOR CLIFF AND ME." CAVU, an acronym used by pilots, stands for "ceiling and visibility unlimited."

After their wedding, Louie returned to China, and Lee did not hear from her husband for six months. “She said she was sure that he was either dead or captured,” said Virginia Luttrell Krahn, another WASP, in a 1997 oral history interview.

Glimpses of the racial prism through which Lee was viewed are sprinkled through archives maintained at Texas Woman’s University in Denton, Texas. Another pilot, for instance, referred to Lee as “the little Chinese girl” in a letter she wrote to family.

Like Gee, Lee was mistaken for Japanese. In her 1997 interview, Krahn said Lee had been flying one day in Texas when her engine failed and she landed in a field. When Lee got out of the plane, “here is this farmer coming at her with a pitchfork,” Krahn recounted.

“He said, ‘The Japs have landed, the Japs have landed.’ And Hazel said, ‘No, I am an American, I am an American,’” Krahn said. “This was too much for these farmers. There was no way that they were going to believe that Hazel was a Chinese, not only a Chinese, but a woman Chinese pilot.”

In recounting the incident that night over dinner in the mess hall, Lee “had the whole line in hysterics,” Krahn added.

Lee was one of 132 pilots chosen to fly so-called “pursuit” planes, now known as fighter aircraft. Among her duties was to fly new Bell P-63 Kingcobra fighters from the manufacturing plant in Buffalo to Great Falls, Mont., for eventual delivery to the Soviet Union.

In November 1944, Lee was on one such mission with a group of pilots on Thanksgiving Day, the first clear day in a while.

Krahn, who also flew that day, recounted the chain of events.

“Shortly after we took off, Jeff moved over close to me and pointed to his earphone and raised his hand,” she said, referring to Jeff Russell, another pilot. “His radio was out.”

The crew stopped in Bismarck, N.D., hoping to have Russell’s radio fixed, but since it was a holiday, they were out of luck; the group continued on to Montana.

“By this time there were so many planes circling at Great Falls and ready to land,” Krahn said. “The air was just filled with P-63’s.”

After landing safely, Krahn saw, to her horror, that at the end of the runway two planes were too close together, one above the other.

“When the tower saw what was happening they said ‘pull up, pull up.’ And the only plane that could hear it was Hazel,” Krahn recalled. “And she pulled up right into Jeff, who heard nothing.”

Both aircraft burst into flames over the runway.

Russell survived with minor injuries. Lee was trapped in her plane and was badly burned. She died two days later, on Nov. 25, 1944. She was 32.

“She was conscious the entire time,” Krahn said. “She never complained. The doctor said they had never seen anyone so brave.”

Lee’s husband, it turned out, was still alive. He died in 1999 in Taipei, Taiwan.

Lee was the 38th — and the last — WASP to die in the line of duty.

The program was disbanded on Dec. 20, 1944, in anticipation of the end of the war, and the pilots faded into the housewifery and child rearing that defined the role of women in the 1950s.

Gee was an exception. She returned to Berkeley, earned a bachelor's degree in physics, then worked on weapons systems at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

"She was that generation of Chinese-American women who broke out of the confines of isolation in the community," said Harvey Dong, a lecturer in Asian-American and Asian diaspora studies at Berkeley.

Gee died on Feb. 1, 2013. She was 89. Warren Heckrotte, her partner of nearly 50 years, died in 2019.

In 1977, after years of fighting for recognition, WASPs were granted veteran status with full benefits. In 2010 around 200 of the surviving pilots were presented with the Congressional Gold Medal by President Barack Obama. Gee was one of them.

PHOTOS: Maggie Gee was a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II. Left, Hazel Ying Lee, on the left, and Autumn Geneva Slack at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, where Lee trained. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY WINGS ACROSS AMERICA; ALAN ROSENBERG)

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