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KERRVILLE DAILY TIMES

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# Living

Kerrville



*1940s - Rosa Lea Fullwood Meek Dickerson when she was in the Women's Airforce Service Pilots poses in front of a P61-D Mustang, one of the many types of airplanes she flew during her career.*



Above: Rosa Lea Fullwood Meek Dickerson stands in front of a P51-D Mustang in the 1940s. Below: Dickerson, at her Kerrville home on Wednesday, finds herself in her flight school graduation photo.

Story by Louise Kohl Leahy  
Times Staff Writer

Photo by Jack Parker  
Times Staff Photographer

Rosa Lea Fullwood Meek Dickerson is a soft-spoken, charming woman who looks like everyone's idea of the perfect grandmother. "My life has been an adventure since the very day I was born," she said recently.

If anything, she was understating the case.

Dickerson took her first plane ride at 3 months old, in her mother's lap. Her father, Walter "Pop" Fullwood, also was along for the ride in a WW I "Jenny," piloted by a veteran of that war.

She didn't stay in the passenger's seat for long.

She learned to fly at her father's flying school by the time she was 12; she had a private pilot's license by the time she was 16 and a commercial license at 18 — all the while wearing a dress like any other proper young lady of the time.

Dickerson pointed to a newspaper clipping with a picture of her in a plane cockpit after she received her commercial license.

"Women in the (Rio Grande) Valley weren't allowed to wear pants," she said. "When the newspaper photographer came out, he was surprised: 'Where are your jodhpurs? Where's your white scarf?'" She laughed.

Sure enough, there she is in the photograph in an attractive patterned dress.

Until she joined up as a Women's Air Force Service Pilot, Dickerson worked at her father's flying school and airfield in McAllen, which was the beginning of what is now McAllen-Miller International Airport.

"I gassed planes, did the books, ran the teletype, and

# High flyer

## Octogenarian spent six decades in the air, including a wartime stint as a WASP



whenever there weren't any students, I got in some more air time," she said.

Because of that teletype, Dickerson was the first

person in the Rio Grande Valley to hear about the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

"I was in the office at the air field, about 6 a.m. It

came over on the weather teletype," she said. "I called Bryant Smith, our leading newspaperman in McAllen, and told him the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. 'You're pulling my leg,' he said and hung up. Well, of course, I called back. He took advantage of that opportunity of being the first to get the news out in the whole valley."

Dickerson started training for the WASP at Jacqueline Cochran's Military Flight Training School, Avenger Field, Sweetwater, in February 1943. All of the women accepted for training already had pilot's licenses.

"2,000 women were accepted," she said. "The physicals were really tough. I had to eat bananas and drink milk to weigh in."

She grins.

"I think it was the commercial licenses and the 280 hours' flight time that got me in," she said.

Dickerson and most of her classmates were assigned to ferry commands in the U.S., flying planes from place to place for the military. She flew "just about every plane they had," including the C-45 and C-47, PT-19, PT-13, A-24 and UC-78, before being sent to pursuit school to learn to fly fighter planes.

"When I saw my name down for pursuit school," Dickerson said, "I went to my CO and told her I didn't want to go. I said, 'I promised my father I wouldn't go because he told me that if one of those engines quits on take-off, it goes down like a ton of bricks.' My CO, Dophine Bohne, gave me two choices. Either go to pursuit school in Harlingen or go to Hondo and tow targets."

"Towing targets" meant pulling a target behind a plane for anti-aircraft students.

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## 6C LIVING

### Flyer

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"I went to Harlingen," Dickerson said. "You see, you'd have these men lined up to shoot and a sergeant running up and down the line shouting, 'Lead the target! Lead the target!'"

She paused a moment.

"We'd already lost about 10 girls towing targets."

Eventually, Dickerson was sent to Officer Candidate School in Orlando. Before she was commissioned, the WASP was disbanded in late 1944. Dickerson didn't stop

flying, however. At one point in her long career, she was a Mooney Aircraft dealer.

"I sold Mooneys for years," Dickerson said. "I love the Mooney aircraft. I had several because I'd buy one, sell two or three, then sell mine used and buy myself another one."

#### For more INFO

■ [www.wasp-wwii.org](http://www.wasp-wwii.org) — History and current WASP news, including a fly-in and new WASP museum.

■ [www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/history/wasp/wasp1.htm](http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/history/wasp/wasp1.htm) — History of the WASP.

■ Experimental Aircraft Association — 792-2133.



Rosa Lea Fullwood Meek Dickerson in the cockpit of a plane, circa 1943.

Courtesy photo

The octogenarian didn't stop flying until six years ago, for health reasons. And she remains passionate about flying. She feels strongly that not enough women become pilots, a point she makes when asked to speak to various groups.

Just recently, she addressed the local Experimental Aircraft Association at a meeting in Comfort. EAA members include pilots and people interested in flying and building aircraft. Many members have restored and fly antique planes.

"I told my son, Carl Meek, I was going to

talk to the Experimental Aircraft group," Dickerson said. "He said he could see the headlines now: 'Antique pilot speaks to antique pilots association.'"

She laughed.

"Of course, there were obstacles," she said. "And at the time, these all seemed like ordinary things. But looking back, it was a lot of adventures."

"And I'm still having adventures."

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