MARGARET “MAGGIE” GEE

At A Glance:

Born: August 5, 1923, Berkeley, Calif.

Died: February 1, 2013, Oakland, Calif.

Maiden Name: Margaret Gee

Longtime Partner: Warren Heckrotte

Race/nationality/ethnic background: Chinese American

Primary city and county of residence and work: Minden, Douglas County and Las Vegas, Clark County, Nev., Berkeley, Calif.

Major fields of work: Pilot, physicist, political activist

Other role identities:
Women Airforce Service Pilot (WASP)

Margaret Gee
Photo from the Nevada Aerospace Hall of Fame

Nevada trained woman served as WWII military pilot

Maggie Gee fought prejudice as a Chinese American woman but persevered in serving as a WASP pilot in World War II, as a science researcher, and as a Democrat leader.

Maggie’s love of airplanes started in childhood when her family took weekend trips to the airport in Oakland, Calif., where Maggie would keep her eye out for her heroine, Amelia Earhart.

Margaret “Maggie” Gee was born in Berkeley, California, in August 1923 to second-generation Chinese American parents, Noon and Marian Jung Gee. She was the third of six children: Peter, Elizabeth, Margaret, Mildred, Florence, and William.

After graduating from high school in 1941, Maggie planned to continue her education by studying physics at the University of California, Berkeley, but World War II had begun. Maggie knew she wanted to serve her country. She left college to work at Mare Island Naval Shipyard where her mother was working as a welder. There she took a job assisting engineers in repairing U.S. naval ships. Maggie’s heart, however, did not lie with ships but rather with aircraft. She wanted to pursue her dream of flying and help the war effort. She saved enough money to move to Minden, Nevada, where she took private flying lessons. After earning her pilot’s license within six months, Maggie applied for the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) training program.

The WASP program formed when the Women Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) and Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) merged in 1943. At that time, the Army realized it needed additional pilots to fly domestically so that male pilots could be deployed overseas. While the WASP offered women a rare opportunity to serve, these women were not enlisted into the Army. Rather they were classified as civilians even though they wore the uniform, trained, and followed expectations as if they were a member of the Army Air Force. Initial WASP missions included ferrying planes from factories to the coast where they would be deployed into the theater of war. Later missions included serving as test and drone pilots, instrument and link instructors, administrative pilots, and target towers. The competition to become a WASP was fierce and only 8% of the applicants were accepted into the WASP program.

Once accepted into the WASP program, Maggie was ordered to report to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, for seven months of training. Upon her graduation in Class 44-W-9 on November 8, 1944, Gee earned her silver wings and was assigned to the Las Vegas Army Airfield. During her assignment, Maggie dealt with male pilots who doubted her competence. This stemmed both from being a woman and being of Chinese heritage. Many men felt she and the other WASPs had no place in the service. Maggie carried out her duties which included transporting planes from factories to airbases to prepare them for warfront delivery, instructing male pilots in instrument flying, evaluating pilots who were renewing their instrument ratings, and copiloting B-17 aircraft during gunnery practice using live ammunition.

Margaret Gee
WASP Archive
Texas Woman's University
Denton, Texas

Gee served in the WASP program until it was disbanded on December 20, 1944. Since WASPs were classified as civilians, they were simply released when they were no longer needed. She joined the Army in the 1950s, running service clubs in Germany for four years during the height of the Cold War. Having already succeeded in one male-dominated field, it was no surprise to see Gee enter another male-dominated field. Gee returned to the University of California, Berkeley to re-enroll in college to earn both her bachelor's and master's degrees in physics. In 1958-1988 she went to work at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. While at the lab, she researched weapon systems in both the nuclear and magnetic fusion programs. It was while working at the lab that she met her longtime partner, Warren Heckrotte, while both were in the same carpool group.

Maggie Gee was also an active community leader and member of the Democratic party, volunteering to run voter registrations and fundraisers. During her life, she served with numerous organizations including the Berkeley Community Fund, the Berkeley Democratic Club, and the Alameda County Democratic Central Committee. Margaret Gee served on the California State Democratic Party Executive Board, the Asian Pacific Islander Democratic Caucus, and the 1992 Democratic Party Platform Committee.

It was not until 1977 with the passage of Public Law 95-202 that Gee and her fellow WASPs earned military status for their wartime service. In 2010, Maggie Gee and the few fellow surviving WASPs were presented a Congressional Gold Medal from President Barack Obama.

Margaret Gee passed away at the age of 89 in 2013. She is buried in the Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland, California, with her parents.

The following year she was enshrined in the Nevada Aerospace Hall of Fame for her role as one of the first women in history to fly American military aircraft in defense of America's freedom.

Researched and written by Ret. Lt. Col. Anne Davis. Posted July 20, 2022. Updated 2025.

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