

SDI

SUSAN DAVIS
INTERNATIONAL



Overview

Betty Berkstresser, Mary Alice Vandeventer, and Gertrude LeValley had never been front-page news. That is, until, the heroic unsung Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) from World War II were finally honored with the Congressional Gold Medal. WASP, a trailblazing group of 1,102 civilian female World War II pilots, were the first women to fly military aircraft. They were not granted military status until 1977 and were not included in our country's history. Susan Davis International (SDI) collaborated with the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation (Women's Memorial) to correct this error of history.

Challenges

In implementing a combined national and grassroots media strategy surrounding the WASP Congressional Gold Medal Ceremony, SDI faced four significant challenges.

- 1. Time:** The date of the Congressional Gold Medal Ceremony was announced a mere five weeks in advance, therefore giving a minimal amount of time for the necessary research, development, and execution of worthy celebration of these overlooked WWII heroines. SDI had to move quickly to conduct research, develop a strategy, create supporting materials, plan the events, raise the necessary funds and reach out to media.
- 2. Money:** Congress provided the ceremony venue, but no funds. The Women's Memorial had no funds to allocate, aside from hosting a reception for the WASP at the Memorial on the eve of the Congressional Gold Medal Ceremony. Donors had to be found to pay for flights, local transportation, housing and ancillary events.
- 3. Historical Perspective:** Sadly, the contributions of these women to our country were poorly documented, often left out of history books. SDI worked with the individual WASP, as well as family members, neighbors, and friends to tell the WASP story and the individual stories of each woman.
- 4. Age and Health of the Living WASPs:** Many of the women were unable to attend for health reasons, and, of course, many were no longer living. We needed to assure that those unable to attend and those who were deceased were appropriately recognized as well.

Results

SDI secured more than 200 million media impressions in more than 180 markets and coverage on major television news programs (including, CNN, NBC Nightly News, ABC World News tonight), thus ensuring the WASP story was no longer an overlooked piece of American history. In addition to handling media relations and public affairs outreach for the WASP ceremonies, SDI also planned and oversaw the logistics for two receptions, a ceremony at the Air Force Memorial, the housing and transportation logistics for the WASPs, and the recruitment of sponsors to pay for their flights, local transportation, housing and the ancillary events. We also designed a recognition for those unable to attend, or for families of the deceased. We worked with Members of Congress to create a constituent ceremony in their state to provide medals to those who could not be part of the official celebration. We wanted to assure that every single WASP finally got her appropriate recognition and thanks!

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