

FLYING COLORS

**GLORIA HEATH '39
FLEW BOMBERS IN
WWII AND WENT ON
TO A DISTINGUISHED
CAREER AS A FLIGHT
SAFETY PIONEER**



The bullets came in bursts, seemingly from the clouds themselves, as Gloria Heath '39 flew her B-26 bomber screaming over the Idaho high plains. P-47 pilots aimed their .50-caliber machine guns at the target she towed, practicing for live combat in the European theater. She was 21 years old. She was the only woman in the squadron.

It was 1943, and Heath had just graduated from Smith College. The Battle of Stalingrad, the invasion of Sicily, and the collapse of Italy's fascist government had marked turning points in Allied momentum, but the fight was far from over. The war had pulled the U.S. out of the Great Depression, but most goods—shoes, gasoline, cheese, tires—were still rationed. Nearly half of the world's wartime production was taking place in America's former peacetime factories.

Heath had joined the fight as part of the U.S. Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs). But she was already a skilled pilot. At Smith, she helped create the Smith Flying Club, serving as its president. She and 14 other members chipped in \$100 each to buy the club's only airplane. They called it The Bird of Paradise (presumably after Paradise Pond on the Smith campus), and they flew it out of LaFleur Airport and up and over Northampton, Massachusetts.

The war ended in 1945. But Heath's aviation career had only just begun. She was a founding member of the Flight Safety Foundation and a proponent in the Foundation's efforts to disseminate aviation safety information worldwide. She was an expert in search and rescue operations. She developed a manual for emergency landings on water. In the 1960s, she founded her own consulting company, SAR-ASSIST, which specialized in searching for and rescuing passengers in distress on land, at sea, or in the air. In 1968, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration endorsed her recommendation for electronic locator beacons in civil aircraft, which became required in 1972. Heath chaired the International Academy for Astronautics Space Safety



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and Rescue Committee, and her work there was critical to the development of the modern worldwide satellite search-and-rescue system. Robert Ross P'98 met Heath in the late 1970s, forty years into her career. "Gloria was very strong. She was very brilliant. She was fearless. And when she took on something, she did a great job at it," he said. They remained close friends until her death in 2017. He was impressed with Heath. In fact, she told him about her time at Putney,

and as a result Ross sent his daughter, Annie '97, to Putney as well. He describes Annie as "amazingly confident and resourceful." Someone who "gets it done." Did Putney attract Gloria and Annie because of their strength of character? Or did Putney build that quality in them? Ross says: both. He believes Putney attracts resilient people, and continues to build upon the qualities already present in them. ■