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Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Florence Ebersole Smith Finch, USCGR (W)

Coast Guard SPAR decorated for combat operations during World War II

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Of the thousands of women who have served with honor in the United States Coast Guard, one stands out for her bravery and devotion to duty. Florence Smith Finch, the daughter of a U.S. Army veteran and Filipino mother, was born on the island of Luzon, north of Manila, in Santiago City. She married navy PT boat crewman Charles E. Smith while working for an army intelligence unit located in Manila. In 1942, after the Japanese invaded the Philippines, her young husband died trying to re-supply American and Filipino troops trapped by the enemy on Corregidor Island and the Bataan Peninsula.



After the Japanese occupied Manila, Finch avoided internment by claiming her Philippine citizenship. She received a note from her imprisoned army intelligence boss regarding shortages of food and medicine in the POW camps. Finch began assisting with locating and providing smuggled supplies to American POWs and helping provide fuel to Filipino guerrillas. In October 1944, the Japanese arrested Finch, beating, torturing and interrogating her during her initial confinement. Through it all, she never revealed information regarding her underground operations or fellow resisters.

When American forces liberated her prison camp in February 1945, Finch weighed only eighty pounds. She boarded a Coast Guard-manned transport returning to the United States and moved to her late father's hometown of Buffalo, New York. In July 1945, she enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard, eager to continue the struggle against an enemy that had killed her husband. Finch served through the end of the war and was among the first Pacific-Island American women to don a Coast Guard uniform.



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After the war, she met U.S. Army veteran Robert Finch. They married and moved to Ithaca, New York, where she lived the remainder of her life. Of the thousands of SPARs serving in World War II, she was the first to be honored with the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Ribbon. In November 1947, she received the U.S. Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian medal awarded to Americans who aided in the war effort. In 1995, the Coast Guard honored her service by naming a facility for her at Coast Guard Base Honolulu.

Ms. Finch crossed the bar on 8 December 2016.

Photographs:



Sea1/c Florence Ebersole Smith, USCGR (W), 1945



Florence Ebersole Smith Finch, 1995
