

## Elizabeth “Betty Wall” Strohfus



Mrs. Elizabeth Bridget “Betty Wall” Strohfus audaciously served her nation during WWII as a Women Airforce Service Pilot (W.A.S.P.). She served from 1943 until it disbanded in December 1944. Piloting eleven different aircraft including the B-17, B-26, P-39, AT11, and her favorite the AT-6, she flew anti-aircraft weapons training missions against US Army ground and bomber forces, towed aerial targets, and even instructed male cadets in the skill of instrument flight. Her critical efforts not only prepared and trained soldiers and airmen for war, but also freed the male pilots to remain in combat.

Liz was born in Faribault, Minnesota on November 15, 1919, number five of six children. Shortly after high school graduation, a member of the local Sky Club first introduced her to flight. After an exhilarating flight in a Piper Cub, she was hooked. Liz volunteered at the Club, completing odd jobs for a chance to fly with the members. When one of the 15 members of the all-male Sky Club enlisted in the Army Air Corps, she was asked to join. Borrowing \$100 from the local bank using her bicycle as collateral, she paid the dues and began flight lessons. She was the first woman to solo at the Faribault airport. When the World War started, she also joined and became active in the Civil Air Patrol.

It was at the Club that she read a notice from the military asking for women pilots interested in assuming duties to free male pilots for overseas combat. Quickly obtaining the minimum 35 flight hours, she applied. At the minimum height of 5’3”, with help of extra socks, Betty passed the physical and began her training at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas in 1943. As one of only 1,800 women accepted out of 25,000 applicants, out of whom only 1074 graduated, Betty received her wings in the first class of 1944, the ninth overall.

While most of the graduates went on to assignments ferrying aircraft, Betty volunteered to fly pursuit aircraft and was stationed at Las Vegas Army Airfield and was assigned to Gunnery Training. There she towed targets behind a B-26 for fighter target practice, dove at bombers in pursuit aircraft and at infantry in the AT-6 for gunnery and anti-aircraft target practice. She was also qualified for missions in the P-39.



Responding to a call for instrument instructors, she was accepted and sent back to Avenger Field for instruction. After receiving her instructor certification, she returned to Las Vegas and became

the first woman at Las Vegas Army Air Field (now Nellis Air Force Base) to teach instrument flight to male cadets. The men, as always, were quite shocked to find out their instructor was a woman.

Betty continued at Las Vegas until the W.A.S.P. were disbanded on December 20, 1944. After the war, she unsuccessfully applied to Northwest Airlines and worked for a time as an aircraft controller. While the WASP were considered civilian pilots while serving, they had to follow rules and orders of the military. Also, if they would have been made military they would have been Second Lieutenants.

After several other jobs, she returned to Faribault where she married and raised a family. She placed all of her memorabilia in a box, retiring the memories to a closet. In 1972, after her first husband passed away and her children left for college, she visited 2 of her children living in Boston and then traveled on to New York City where she found work with the American Cancer Society as a research consultant until 1979. While there, Liz was central in lobbying congress for the recognition of W.A.S.P. as veterans. The law was passed and signed in 1977 that allowed the Secretary of Defense to declare in 1979 that service in the W.A.S.P. was active military service and those serving were veterans and she received her DD214.

Not ready to stop inspiring, since 1991, “Betty Wall” has traveled to more than 31 states, telling her story to thousands of people, primarily schoolchildren. Also, in 1991 she became (at 71) the first woman to fly in an F16. She is a member of the Ninety Nines, a life member of the Commemorative Air Force and in 2001 was inducted into the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame. In 2009, she was invited to Maxwell Air Force Base for the Gathering of Eagles. On March 11, 2010 Elizabeth, along with over 200 other WASPS, attended a ceremony at our nation's capital to receive a Congressional Gold Medal honoring the WASPS service to their country during WWII. Families of deceased WASPS attended as well, making it the largest assemblage ever at our capital. In December of 2014 Liz received a second Congressional Gold Medal for her service as a member of the Civil Air Patrol prior to joining the WASP organization.



In 2013 she was invited to speak at Nellis Air Force Base, where she received the Diamond Back Award and met Major (now Lieutenant Colonel) Carolyn Jenson, Thunderbird Pilot Number three, that joined the Air Force after hearing Liz speak at her high school.

Her late son, Patrick Roberts, wrote a book about Liz called ‘And Still Flying’, which she sells at air shows and her talks. Elizabeth passed away on March 6, 2016 at the very young age of 96.

*SETTING: During World War II the US Army Air Force faced a dilemma. While America's military pilots were critically needed for combat missions in two theaters, aircraft were being produced by the thousands and needed to be delivered to military airfields nationwide. Jacqueline Cochran and General Hap Arnold launched an experimental program to train women to fly military aircraft in an effort to free male pilots for combat.*