

“I need \$100 - I’m going to learn how to fly” - Elizabeth ‘Liz’ Wall Strohfus – MN WASP



“What a wonderful thing to get above it all and see the beautiful world there.”

– Elizabeth ‘Liz’ Wall Strohfus

Born in 1919, the fifth of six children, Elizabeth Bridget Wall, known by nicknames Betty and Liz, described herself as an adventuresome tomboy in childhood. She loved climbing trees. After graduating from high school in 1937, Liz worked in the register of deeds office at the county courthouse. It was stifling for her. “When I was in school, I couldn’t take any classes except home economics or classes for working in an office – like shorthand, typing and that sort of stuff. We were very limited because we were women. It was kind of too bad because I wasn’t too interested in those things.” (Owatonna People’s Press, Oct. 10, 2014)

At work one day, she overheard a conversation about flying and was intrigued. A co-worker asked if she wanted to fly. Liz said, “Yes, I do. I’d love to fly.” She spent many afternoons after work volunteering at the Faribault airport, taking her first flight in a Piper Cub and learning from pilots at the Sky Flying Club. She became so adept with the Cub that when one of the pilots left for military service, Liz was asked to replace him. There was a catch; it cost \$100 to join the Sky Flying Club. She only made \$50 a month, most going to help her family.

Liz went to the local bank for a loan, using her bicycle as collateral. She asked the bank vice-president for a loan to learn how to fly. He said he’d never loaned money to a woman for flying, and besides, ‘women don’t fly’.

She replied “This one’s going to.” The bank vice-president didn’t just approve the loan; he actually co-signed it himself.



44-W-1 Classbook Photo*



Liz with her flight instructor

Liz applied to the WASP program in 1943 and trained in Sweetwater, TX. She graduated in February 1944 in Class 44-W-1, one of 49 graduates. She was assigned to Las Vegas Army Field where she served as an instrument flight instructor to male pilots, ferried planes and performed even more challenging duties. During this time Liz turned down a marriage proposal so she could remain a WASP and continue flying her favorite plane, the AT-6.



Liz's 'tomboy' persona on display as classmates wear skirts and Liz wears pants. What might the small building model be in front of them?

Las Vegas Army Air Field – L to R: Liz Strohfus, Madelon Burcham, Olive Crosby, E. Marie Mountain, Jeanette Jenkins, Ida Carter, Ruth Craig Jones, Class 44-W-1 (Photo courtesy Texas Women's University, Denton, TX)



Her more challenging duties included flying aircraft in mock air combat with U.S. bombers to simulate enemy fights. Liz was sent to a U.S. Army air gunnery school in Las Vegas to help train men for in-flight combat. Her job was to dive an AT-6 Avenger fighter-trainer onto formations of B-17 bombers to give gunners target practice, using special cameras in place of guns.

She towed cloth sleeves behind her plane so the bombers' gunners could practice with live ammunition. A couple of her fellow WASP died that way; they were among the 38 WASP who died during the war in crashes and other accidents.

Liz flew a variety of aircraft, including: PT-19, BT-13, AT-6, AT-10, B-17, B-26, P-39 and PT-17.



Elizabeth "Betty" Wall in her leather flight jacket in the 1940s.



Elizabeth Wall Strohfus, circa 1943, at Avenger Field. (Photo from family archives.)

Liz dealt with different challenges as an instrument flight instructor to male pilots. A few men thought women couldn't handle airplanes. She recalled "It was just something you had to put up with. But what I loved was that the planes I flew never asked if you were a man or a woman; they flew just as well for me as anyone else."

After the WASP program was deactivated in December 1944, Liz applied with Northwest Airlines to work as a pilot. She was told women did not fly commercially and was offered a job in their front office. Liz said, "I told them what they could do with their front office."

She then went to air traffic control school in Kansas City and worked for a time at ATC weather stations in Grand Island and North Platte, Nebraska. Then Liz went on to Rawlins, Wyoming to work at the Sinclair Radio Station. She worked the night shift taking hourly readings – ceilings, temps, visibility, wind velocity and barometric pressure. It was a lonely job; she decided to quit and return to Faribault.

Soon after, her old boyfriend Arthur Roberts asked her out and they were married in December 1947. Together they raised a family of 5 children. While raising her family, Liz worked at the courthouse, volunteered with the American Cancer Society, participated in American Legion Auxiliary activities, and later served in the Civil Air Patrol.

Liz's husband Arthur died in 1969. She later married Francis Langeslag and Martin Strohfus, both of whom died before her.

In 1976, TV and newspapers reported 'women for the first time in history were flying military planes' (in Panama). The WASP knew *they* had been the first women to fly military aircraft. Many sent letters to Washington, DC, to speak out. Liz lobbied Congress to give the WASP veteran status and she won. In March 1979, WASP were granted veteran status.

Starting in the 1980s, Liz travelled around the country to share her story and inspire others. She presented at schools, clubs, museums and aviation events. She influenced women and men to pursue aviation both as a career and for personal enjoyment. She was an amazing inspiration to everyone she met.

In 1991, Liz became one of the first women to pilot an F-16, at 71-years old. In 2001 she was inducted into the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame and in 2015 received two Congressional Gold Medals, for her WASP service and the second for her service in the Civil Air Patrol. In 2016, Liz passed away at age 96 and is laid to rest at Annunciation Cemetery, Hazelwood, (Northfield) MN.

Several Minnesota chapter members were fortunate to have met and known Liz Strohfus personally. To those who knew her, she is remembered for her kind, down-to-earth and happy nature, her positive spirit, can-do attitude, quick wit and sense of humor. During Memorial weekend, we will honor Liz's memory by laying flowers at her grave, along with the other 5 MN WASP who served our country and inspired many others to love and pursue their aviation dreams. The fine legacy of these women lives on as we honor and remember them this Memorial weekend, and always.



Betty Wall Strohfus holds a picture of herself when she was a WASP pilot (2012)
U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Christopher Hernandez



Liz & Melissa Aho-2010



Liz's birthday party Nov. 2, 2014

Liz - 2012

Watch a great 30-minute interview with Liz Strohfus conducted by Richard Bong Veterans Historical Center:

<https://youtu.be/Lr7UlfMqiJE>

[Read about her interesting encounter with a bank officer](#) to obtain a loan for flying lessons.

<https://stories.wf.com/story-one-americas-first-female-military-pilots/>

Special thanks:

*Texas Woman's University, Denton, TX, for their permission to use selected WASP Class 44-W-1 photos in this article.

*Melissa Aho for permission to use her 2010 photo of Liz and herself.

*Minneapolis Star-Tribune Obituary: March 19, 2016