

Betty Wall Strohfus Flight Suit

THIS FLIGHT SUIT was worn by Elizabeth “Betty” Wall Strohfus (1919–2016), who served during World War II in the short-lived Women Airforce Service Pilot (WASP) program. Strohfus was born in 1919 in Faribault, Minnesota. After graduating from high school in 1937, she worked at the Rice County Courthouse, where a member of the local Sky Club introduced her to flying; she immediately fell in love. When the WASP program was created in August 1943 to alleviate a shortage of male pilots, Strohfus completed the required 35 hours of flight time and headed to Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, where she trained until February 1944.

There the WASPs received their flight suits, which were often hand-me-downs from male pilots. The women used their creativity to alter the fit of the suits, such as using suspenders to hold them up. Appearance, however, wasn’t a priority. All that mattered was being able to fly the airplanes. Many doubted the female pilots’ abilities, but the WASPs set out to prove them wrong. From Sweetwater, Strohfus went to the Las Vegas Army Airfield to help train men for in-flight combat. There she provided target practice for gunners-in-training who flew in B-17 bombers. Strohfus would dive an AT-6 Avenger aircraft toward the bombers, while the gunners used cameras in place of firearms. Eventually, she got a job as an instrument instructor teaching male combat pilots. The WASPs were officially disbanded on December 20, 1944.

Despite not being allowed to pursue a civilian career as a pilot, Strohfus never lost her love of flying. Later in life, she traveled across the country telling her inspirational story. During the 1970s, she also advocated to get WASPs recognized as veterans. The flight suit used by Strohfus in Sweetwater and Las Vegas is now part of MNHS’s collections, thanks to a donation from Art Roberts, one of Strohfus’s five children. The long-sleeved denim jumpsuit is a testament to the bravery of women like Betty Wall Strohfus, who refused to believe that women couldn’t be pilots.

—Bethany Nelson, interpreter, James J. Hill House, and curatorial assistant intern, summer 2017



Denim jumpsuit worn by Betty Wall Strohfus while training men for in-flight combat during World War II. (MNHS COLLECTIONS/JASON ONERHEIM)

Read more about Elizabeth “Betty” Wall Strohfus on MNopedia, www.mnopedia.org/.



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