Interviewee: Elizabeth "Betty" Wall Strohfus
Interviewer: Thomas Saylor
Date of interview: 27 September 2001
Location of interview: dining room of the Strohfus home, Faribault, MN
Transcribed by: Kimberly Johnson, July 2002
Edited by: Thomas Saylor, August 2002

Betty Wall Strohfus was born on 15 November 1919 in Faribault, Minnesota, and attended school there, graduating from high school in 1938. Betty then worked at the Faribault courthouse for several years; her first flight in an airplane came in 1942, and she then joined the local Civil Air Patrol. In early 1943 Betty volunteered for the newly formed Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), which performed wartime duties in the US, relieving male pilots for overseas combat assignments. Of the original 1800 women accepted for the new program, just 1074 finished the rigorous training at Avenger Field, Texas, and graduated in early 1944; Betty was one of them.

After receiving her wings, Betty was stationed at Las Vegas Army Airfield, Nevada, where she regularly flew several different types of aircraft, including AT-6 trainers and P-39 Aerocobras, and co-piloted larger, multi-engine planes such as B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-26 Marauders. Betty did gunnery training, towing targets over gunnery ranges, and also performed in-flight instrument training for male pilots. Betty Strohfus' military career ended on 20 December 1944, with the military's decision to de-activate the WASP program. She briefly returned to Faribault before moving to Kansas City to complete a Federal Aviation Administration course qualifying her as an aircraft communicator.

Betty worked at this job in several locations until 1947, when she returned to Faribault, married, and raised five children. She worked a number of part-time jobs from the 1960s to the 1980s; beginning in the mid-1990s Betty devoted much energy to sharing her story at hundreds of organizations around the United States. Activities included a multitude of veterans and aviation organizations, the co-authoring of several books about her experiences, including *Love at First Flight* (1994) and *Wingtip to Wingtip* (2000), and her election in 2000 to the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame. At the time of this interview (September 2001) she lived in Faribault, Minnesota.

Betty passed away on 6 March 2016, aged 96.

Interview key:
S = Thomas Saylor
WS = Betty Wall Strohfus
[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation
(***) = words or phrase unclear
NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A.

S: This is 27 September 2001, and this is side A of the interview with Betty Wall Strohfus. Betty, first let me thank you for taking time to sit and talk with me about your experiences. I appreciate that very much. Let me begin by asking where you were born and raised?

WS: I was born in Faribault, Minnesota, on November the 15th, 1919.

S: Did you attend school here too?

WS: I attended the Immaculate Conception School from first to eight grade, and then I went to Faribault High School, and graduated in May 1937.

S: Is that high school building still in the same place today?

WS: No, sir. It's long gone.

S: It's been torn down.

WS: Yes.

S: Is the new one in about the same place?

WS: No. There is now a social service building, I'm sorry to say. The schools are completely different than when I went to school.

S: Where is the new high school?

WS: It's out on Ninth Avenue and about Tenth Street here in Faribault.

S: So a little bit further outside of town?

WS: Yes.

S: When you finished high school in 1937, what did you do with yourself right after high school? What kind of jobs did you have?

WS: Well, after high school, at that time, my father was elderly. In fact, he married my mother… I was 55 years old when my father died. I mean, when I was born, my father was

55 years old. He had been a retired farmer. A retired farmer, in those years, they tilled the land. They had to take the rocks from the land, and they really worked hard. All they had was a horse and a plow. My dad worked behind that house, and he worked really hard. His hands were all gnarled. And then he had a stroke before he married my mother. I was the fifth in the family of six children; we had one boy and five girls. Daddy was no longer able to work. He used to work, to help with the farmers once in a while during the busy season, but he didn't have a job. And so when we got out of high school, we couldn't even <u>consider</u> going to college because we had to go and get a job and bring the money home to our parents. But we did own our own home, and in those days that was really something, to own your own home. Daddy had sold two farms, came to town, married mother, and then he had his money in the bank, and the bank went broke [during the Depression]. So he had a lot of children to take care of, and very little money. He never trusted the bank again, and it's understandable.

S: That's a story I've heard more than once about people of that generation, that they have an experience with banks and then never trusted them thereafter. What kind of jobs did you have yourself after high school?

WS: After high school, I was fortunate. My sister, Mary, who was the oldest in our family, had worked with Lucius Smith. He was a prominent attorney here [in Faribault]. In fact, Lucius Smith was the longest, most prominent attorney in the state of Minnesota. His son, Bruce Smith, was the only Heisman Award winner [college football award] in the state of Minnesota. He was a very prominent attorney. My sister would go to the court house a lot of times to bring recordings, to be filed. And in her processing and going to the court house, she found out that Al Heine, who was a (***), needed a secretary. Being as I had just got out of school in June, I went to see Mr Heine, and I was hired as a clerk there in the Register and Deeds office.

S: That's quite fortunate for the late 1930s, isn't it, to find a job so quickly?

WS: I was very, very fortunate.

S: Was it about this time that you first got exposed to flying?

WS: No, it wasn't. I worked for the court house, for Mr Heine, from '37. In '42 is when this young man would come up, and he would speak about flying a lot. I was 23 years old when he came. He just kept talking about flying. As a youngster, I could never reach high enough, so I would be sitting on roofs, climbing trees and whatever. So when he spoke about flying, it really excited me, because I thought, well, that is something to get up high in the air without any visible support. So when he asked if I'd like to take a flight, I said, of course I would. So he brought me out to the local airport.

At that time, I did have a bicycle for my transportation. We had no telephone, no radio, no car. I had a bicycle, and that was the way I would go back and forth to work. It was a simple life, but at the time I lived it, I felt it was a great life. I had the great love of my family, and I had three older sisters, so I didn't have any problem having clothes to wear. I lived at home, and ate at home. I made 50 bucks a month at the local court house. I

brought the money home to mother, and she'd give me a few bucks for spending. Otherwise, I got along fine. And then when this fellow brought me out to the local airport, well… This person hadn't had a license too long, and he loved to give people thrills. We got in his little Piper 65 horsepower Cub, and when up about 3500 feet, into a stall and into a spin. He turned around and looked at me, and I said, "One more time!" After ten more times he didn't look around anymore. He landed that airplane, and he was a little green. He excused himself and came back, and he said, "You know, whatever you do in this life, you've got to learn how to fly. I've made everyone else sick. You are the only one that has made me sick!" *(laughs)*

I knew at that time that I had to learn how to fly, because for me, it was an experience. I had to learn.

S: It really got under your skin right away then?

WS: Right away.

S: That was 1942, you said, so the United States was already at war. Do you remember where you were when you heard the news about Pearl Harbor?

WS: Yes, I do. I was going with my boyfriend at the time, and we were out walking. We came home, now this was 1941, so at this time we had a radio. My sister and her husband were there from St. Paul, and they were all huddled around the radio. They said, "You won't believe it. We're at war!" We listened, and it was like you heard a story. It was like [the attacks in New York and Washington on] September 11th [2001], to hear what really happened. It was like, this can not be happening in our country, we are not at war. We finally realized that what President Roosevelt was saying, that this was a day of infamy, and a day we will never forget. This is true.

S: How did your folks react to that news? Do you remember?

(A, 135)

WS: My father, by this time, was dead. My father died in 1940. My brother was married and had three children at the time, so we knew that he would not being going into the service. But the boy I was going with, Arthur Roberts, went right down and enlisted immediately. He knew that if war was going to be on, he was going to do his part. We had patriotism. I've seen a little bit of that patriotism today, with what has been happening since the [attacks of] 11th of September. But the patriotism, you wouldn't believe. Our young men went into the service almost immediately, because they knew that if someone would attack our country, then we knew we had to do something for our country.

S: It's interesting that you mentioned how the young men reacted. How did you as a young woman react?

WS: At the time, I never realized that there was anything I would be able to do, or that I could go into. In 1941, I was working at the court house, bringing my money home for

mother. We knew that the money was needed to keep the house going. Even though it was [owned] free and clear, we had to keep up the bills. My brother had decided to marry, and so had my sister, so there were only the four of us left to bring the money home for momma. So I thought that was what I supposed to do, stay home and bring money home for mother.

S: Once you got the first taste of flying, how soon was it that you began to think that maybe there was a way that I could turn this into a participation in the war effort?

WS: I never even <u>thought</u> about it until 1943. I had been flying now for… You see, it was pretty expensive to fly, at that time it was expensive. I guess I started flying in '42, but it wasn't until the later part of '42, we had a sky club [at the local airport]. There were fifteen members. That's all that they could have, and they were all men. One of the fellows went off to the Air Force. I would go out the airport and, heck, I'd sweep the floors, I'd do anything to get a ride in one of the airplanes. I was always there to be ballast for anybody that needed someone to fly with them.

In the latter part of '42, when this fellow Hildebrand went to the Air Force, then the fellows approached me and said, "Now you can join our club, because we need another person." They were great. I didn't know men didn't want women to fly, because they were all so great to me. So I said, "Well, what does it take?" They said, "It costs $100." Wow, $100—I never saw a $100 bill in my life! It was almost more than I thought I could do. But I heard the banks loaned money, so I went down to the local bank and said that I wanted to borrow $100." They asked me, "What do you need $100 for, Miss Wall?" I said, "I want to learn how to fly." He said, "Women don't fly." I said, "This one's going to." So he said, "What do you have for collateral?" What did I know about collateral? I told him I had a bicycle. That man said, "Well, I lent money to women for furs and cars and cruises and houses, but I <u>never</u> lent money for a woman to fly." And do you know, he went and got the papers, and he had me sign. He co-signed my note, and I didn't know that wasn't what they were supposed to do! The president of the bank did it, and I got my $100. He knew we were a poor family, but he also knew we were an honest family. So I paid $5 a month for my $100 until I had it paid.

S: That got you into this sky club. That opened the door to more flying time, or a pilot's license?

WS: It opened the door to more flying time. I didn't get really too much flying time in '42, but in '43 I started flying more. Then we got a notice from the government that they needed women to take over men's jobs in flying, because they needed the men to go to war. They needed women that knew how to fly. So they needed us to do the clearing and the training done in our country during those years. We needed either 35 hours of flying time or a private license. I never got around to getting a private license, I just got my 35 hours of flying time, and went to Texas. By this time, I had also talked to my sister, Mary, who liked to fly. But she only liked to fly straight and level. And my friend, Kay Murphy. The three of us headed down to Texas.

(A, 210)

S: Did you have join the WASP [Women Air Force Service Pilots] to go down there?

WS: To become a part of that organization, we first had to have an interview with one of the establishment officers. You see, this was a very unique group, and they had to be sure of what kind of people we were, and to know that we were steadfast and stable. Then we had to take a flight physical to be sure we were physically able to handle the aircraft.

S: Did they set prerequisites to even joining the group at all? Or was this after you had signed on, like a part of the Basic Training?

WS: What do you mean?

S: Well, the interviews and the physical, were these things that if you didn't pass those, you wouldn't be in?

WS: Absolutely. You had to have a flight physical; they had to make sure we were physically fit. Then we had our oral examination to be sure that we were competent enough to handle this type of schooling. It was an organization that… Well, the fellows in Washington were not sure that our girls could handle military aircraft. That was their situation. So they didn't, this organization wasn't talked about too much. It was almost undercover because, if we were to fail, the public was not supposed to know about it.

S: I see. So you found out about it because you were in the sky club?

WS: Right.

S: So that kind of gave you the information, and you got a couple of other people, and then you decided to go to Texas?

WS: Yes.

S: Now, Texas is pretty far away from here.

WS: First time I ever went that far. I'd gone to Milbank, South Dakota, for a trip with my sister Mary for a woman that needed to get over there to see her boyfriend. But that was the furthest away from home I had ever been. And I had only been to the cities [Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis] about twice, because in those days, when my brother had this Model A—Mary had a Model A, George had a Model T. Then my brother went to CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps, a 1930s New Deal program], because that was a camp that paid momma and daddy money. He went up north and cut trees and that sort of thing for the CCC camp.

S: So you went to Texas, and you got there in early 1943?

WS: It was in August of '43.

S: August of ’43. The United States had been at war for about a year and half now. Well, what about this training? Was it all women at this camp you were at?

WS: This camp was the only, and will be the only, all girl airfield in the world. They had women flying in Europe [for example in the armed forces of the Soviet Union], but they flew off the same field the men did. And as I said, when men went into the service, they went into one field for primary training, another field for Basic Training, and then another field for advanced flying. But because they were not sure we could handle the military aircraft, we did all of our training in one field. So therefore, we had to have a couple auxiliary fields, because there was a lot of flying done during the day. In our class, 44W1, we had two flights [groups of trainees]. From A - M was one flight, and N - Z was another flight. The one flight would go flying half a day, and the other flight would go to ground school. Then the next week we would change.

S: I see. How many women were a part of this program, Betty?

WS: Well, they had 25,000 that tried to get into this organization; 1800 of us were accepted, and only 1074 received our silver wings.

S: So, 25,000 interested, but after all the cuts were made, only a little over 1000 actually got your wings. How long did the training last?

WS: It lasted… it was a six-month period. You see, we had a more rapid training, because we had to have that little bit of flying before we were accepted. They knew that we could handle an aircraft by that time. *(speaks briefly with son Patrick, in next room)*

S: Can you describe a typical day of the training experience?

WS: Sure. I’ll tell you what had happened. When we went into the service, we were given the oath of the military, and we thought we would be a part of the Army Air Force. We took the oath of the military. We lived in their barracks. We got up at six o’clock in the morning and went out for the P.T. [physical training], hup-two-three-four. Then half of us would go to ground school, the other half would go to the flight line. Now the ground school, for me it was very difficult, because like I said, I never got a pilot license. When I went to high school, I had to take a business course, because that’s what women do. I had to take shorthand, typing, and bookkeeping, because that’s what I had to do. So when I got into engines and meteorology and physics, I felt such a bad stomachache. It was really difficult. But I knew that if I were to continue, I had to. I had no problem with flying. I really was a born flyer.

S: The actual flying was no problem.

WS: No problem.

S: You found a little more trouble with the actual classes you had to have, the book knowledge, in a sense.

WS: That is true. But I knew if I wanted to fly airplanes, I had to do that also. I cried a lot of nights, but I got my ground school ed, and I passed it. But I like to tell children—because I go to a lot of schools, and I want to impress on them the importance of doing the best you can in school—it's so important for later on, when you want to do something special, to at least have a background in something you can use.

S: It's a good lesson for them. Your teachers here, men or women?

WS: In the service? They were all men in the ground school. They were also all men for our flying. For our ground school and our flying, we had civilian instructors. If you had a couple bad flights, we got a pink slip, and then you had to go fly with an officer, one of the pilots, a lieutenant or major or whatever. Then they would decide if you would stay.

S: Did that bother you that the students were all women and all the instructors were men?

WS: Nope. Didn't bother me at all.

S: How about being in Texas? That is a far cry from Minnesota.

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WS: The people there were absolutely wonderful to us. I really liked the people there.

S: What part of Texas were you in?

WS: Sweetwater, Texas. That's west Texas, near Abilene.

S: Did you like it down there?

WS: Oh, I loved it. They let me fly airplanes, and the weather was really conducive to flying. It was great.

S: What makes weather conducive to flying?

WS: Sunny days, and warm. Of course we did have a period there in the latter part of December [1943] where it snowed, and we had ice. The only thing, you see, we had no de-icing, to take the ice of the wings, so we had to wait till the sun came out. And the ice was on the runways, and they had no equipment to take care of the ice.

S: That must have been ferocious, taking off and landing on icy runways. That will make a believer out of you, won't it?

(both W and S laugh)

S: The time you were in the WASP, was the WASP all white, or was it desegregated?

WS: We had two Chinese gals, but outside of that… There was a black girl that tried to get in, but it was still segregated a lot at that time in our country, which is sad. This black girl really wanted to get in, but Jacqueline Cochrane [head of the WASP organization] took her aside and she said that she knew she was capable of doing this, but our organization was scrutinized so badly, so harshly, by the government, and she [Cochrane] was afraid that they would have to keep it as such [thus segregated]. There were two Chinese girls that got in, but outside of that, there were no black girls, and I thought it was a shame. I really did.

S: Did you know about, the story that you just told, did you know about that black woman back then, or only after the fact?

WS: Only after the fact. I didn't know until many, many years later, when Jacqueline Cochrane told us at one of our group meetings. I had no idea. This wasn't until the 1970s that I found this out.

S: You must have flown to a lot of different places as a WASP pilot. Did you ever encounter blacks or other minorities in that capacity?

WS: No. I never even knew about the black men, the Tuskegee Airmen [all-black fighter squadron]. I didn't even know about them until I giving [public lectures and] programs ten years ago. I had no idea. That was another pretty well kept secret.

S: It was, wasn't it? How about among ground crews and people in different airports? Did you encounter blacks or other minorities there?

WS: Never did. I never did.

S: So it seemed to be very much a segregated world that you operated in.

WS: It really was, and I didn't even know. I didn't even think about it at the time. You see, I came from the north. In Minnesota, we had no blacks in our area. I had no idea.

S: Your training lasted until December [1943], did you say?

WS: We were supposed to graduate in December, but we had a snowstorm, so we didn't finish our flying until January [1944]. So we didn't graduate until February 12, 1944.

S: There were 1074 of you, if I remember correctly, who actually finished and got your wings.

WS: That is correct.

S: Was there a big ceremony or something at the end, at the graduation?

WS: When we graduated, yes. Jacqueline Cochrane was there. Hap Arnold [commander of the Air Force] couldn't make it. We were sorry about that, because he had been to a lot of the other graduations. But at the time he was busy doing something else.

S: Was he a supporter of the WASP?

WS: He was a great supporter of our women pilots! He had really supported us, as did Jacqueline Cochrane. Eleanor Roosevelt was also a great supporter of our organization, because she knew there was a shortage of pilots. During our time the women pilots were flying, we did 89% of all the aviation ferrying done in our country, and we did 85% of all the aviation training done in our country. I was sent to Las Vegas Army Airfield; I trained gunners. I scared the hell out of them.

S: What do you think of Jacqueline Cochrane?

WS: You asked me earlier whom I thought was a special person in my life. I felt Jacqueline Cochrane did more for women in aviation than any other person living. She saw that 1074 of us received our silver wings, and she really stood behind us and was with us at all the tragic things that happened, and all the guff that we got from the government. She always stood between us and the problems they had in Washington about our flying. They never did really care for our women pilots to fly their military aircraft, because they were all men at the time. There were 77 different types of military aircraft, and we flew all of them up to and including the B-29 [Superfortress four-engine heavy bomber]. I didn't personally, but my group did. I only flew eight different types of planes!

S: How much was it Jacqueline Cochrane's personality that made this program actually come to fruition?

WS: Absolutely. She was very brash, she was very tough. But if she weren't, we would never have gotten the recognition we did. We never would have gotten to do what we did if we didn't have her as a personality.

S: So she made an impact on you.

WS: She really did, and I really admired her. I can't say I was a good friend of her, but I knew her personally and I corresponded with her. I was very, very impressed with Jacqueline Cochrane.

S: Has she passed away?

WS: Oh, yes. She passed away in about the first part of 1980.

S: Was she older than the rest of the women who were a part of the program?

WS: Yes, she was, she was older.

S: Betty, after training, where were you posted to?

WS: Las Vegas Army Airfield. It's now known as Nellis Air Force Base.

S: What did you do at Las Vegas Army Airfield?

WS: I trained gunners.

S: How do you train a gunner?

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WS: I would either fly pursuit curves around B-17s [Flying Fortress, a four-engine heavy bomber], or I'd be a co-pilot on a B-17. When I flew co-pilot B-17, the fellows would be at their stations, at their gunning stations. There was the tail, the two side doors, and also the ball turret [underneath the aircraft]. They would shoot at us with camera guns, at that time. Then they would show the film on the great big, they called it a Waller trainer; it was a great big, like a three-story building with no corners in it, all rounded. They'd shoot this film on it to show where they would have hit, if we'd been enemy aircraft.

S: Were you flying the B-17 here, or were you flying the other aircraft?

WS: I'd co-pilot B-17, I did that. You see, the fellows, because they… If they were bomber pilots, they would stay in bombers. If they were pursuit aircraft, they would stay in the pursuit aircraft. But because they were sure we couldn't do anything, we flew everything they had in the field, which was fortunate. That was why I was in the co-pilot [seat of the] B-17.

I was also a co-pilot of a B-26 [Marauder, a two-engine medium bomber]. Now in a B-26, we had a big towrope behind our B-26. We had a sleeve behind that, and it was 15 feet long. The pursuit aircraft would put in bullets of different colors. Now I never did shoot live ammunition, but the fighter pilots would have their bullets dyed in different colors, reds and yellows and greens, and then they would know what color they had. Afterwards, they'd bring the sleeve back to the ground. We'd drop it when we came into land. Then they could see who had hit the best that day, because of the colored bullets. It would leave a hole showing what color it was.

Mostly, I flew the AT-6 [training aircraft] as a pursuit curve. I'll never forget the first day on this. The doctor said, "Come on, Wall. I'll check you out." Pursuit curve is what they called it. The planes would be flying maybe 4000 feet. We'd get 2000 feet above them, and we'd see them come in formation. We'd dive in at them! We had our [cockpit] canopy open, and we flew up there and dove into the B-17s. He said, "Okay, you're checked out." We got out into the field, jumped out of the airplane, and waited for the next formation. So, nothing to this, I thought. I went up there, saw the next formation, and *pshoooo* I dove at them too steep, and I blacked out like this. *(snaps fingers)*

S: Did you?

WS: That's right. I lost my head, my cap. Thank God I was attached. Anyway, I went back up, and then I thought, I've got to dive. You know, if he [supervisor] had let me do a dive or two while I was in the back seat [of the aircraft], I would have <u>known</u> what I was doing. But it was a different angle when you're in the back as when you're in the front. It's alright, but then I went up and I found out how I should dive so that I wouldn't black out.

S: You mentioned a male pilot there. You interacted with lots of men—pilots, ground crew. What level of respect do you think you had as a women in uniform?

WS: I had respect. I was always treated as a lady.

S: Did you have an official rank?

WS: Never another rank than WASP, W-A-S-P, Women's Air Force Service Pilots. That was our only rank.

S: All the Women's Air Force Service Pilots had the same rank, so to speak?

WS: Yep. We all had the same rank.

S: So none of you outranked the others, so to speak?

WS: No.

S: Men who were officers or enlisted men, when they encountered you, how did they deal with you?

WS: They were very cautious when we first came to Las Vegas. We were checked out in everything we were to fly, because they did not <u>believe</u> that we could fly the airplanes. But once they checked us out and saw that, yes, we could handle these aircraft just as well as, if not better than, them… You see, if we weren't better than the men, we couldn't fly the airplanes. We <u>had</u> to be better, and we knew that. We did do a really good job. If they didn't like us there, they could send us home, and then we couldn't fly airplanes anymore. As of yet [at that time], we are not in the service, so if they told us we had to go home, we'd have to go home, because we were not going to be taken into another service like the WAC [Army] or the WAVES [Navy] or anything, because we were not as yet a part of the military. So we knew that if we didn't do a good job, we'd get sent home. We did a good job.

S: So you earned respect through your performance on the job, so to speak. Once the pilots saw that you could fly the planes, they were willing to accept you as an equal?

WS: As an equal, that is correct. Some of the girls have stories to tell, but I never had any problems being treated as a lady.

S: How many of the women were posted to Las Vegas Army Airfield?

WS: At the beginning, there were eight of us. Then later on, when the classes were coming through, we had maybe *(pauses three seconds)* eight or ten more. Some of our girls, one of our gals went on, she was taller, so she became a first pilot on a B-17, so she went to a B-17 field. Other girls went on to something else. A couple of them left. But at the end, I would there were maybe ten or eleven of us left at Las Vegas Army Airfield when we were deactivated.

S: Were you at Las Vegas Army Airfield the whole time?

WS: I was. I was sent down to Orlando, Florida. We were supposed to be a part of the Air Force, and we were down there for officers training. We were there for two weeks. Loved that! First we had no air conditioning, and it was hotter than anything! We wore our swimming suits under our uniforms. At noon, instead of eating, we'd run and jump in the water to cool off! *(laughs)*

S: There was a discussion in the Air Force, then, about what to do with the whole WASP program?

WS: Yes.

S: Whether to integrate it into the Air Force, or really what to do with it?

WS: Deactivate us.

S: That was the discussion then, either to integrate or deactivate?

WS: Right. You see, what had happened was, there were enough men that came home from overseas [beginning in 1944] that needed this flying time, or their flight pay.

S: I see. So the shortage of pilots didn't last forever.

WS: No. They had enough men come home from overseas. So, therefore, they had to deactivate us.

S: What other services did you perform while you were at Las Vegas Army Airfield? You said that you trained gunners—did you do other things?

WS: Yes I did. They needed instructor pilots, so I went back to Sweetwater, Texas, for a very intensive instruction course. You see, I had my instrument card just for me, but I had to have an instructor's rating. So I went back, and in two weeks I got an instructor's rating. Then I went back to Las Vegas Army Airfield and taught instrument flying.

S: Was this like a classroom setting where you were teaching instrument training?

WS: Oh no, flying. I didn't teach anything in the classroom. I was just the pilot.

S: You were then training men pilots.

WS: Right.

S: How did that situation work, where you were the person in charge? You were the teacher, and they were the student.

WS: Well, to begin with I had a little trouble. (***) is a friend of mine, a big tall guy, about 6' 2". I'm going down with my two cushions and my parachute on my back, and he's really dragging with his parachute. I said, "You don't want to fly with me, Jimmy?" He said, "No." I said, "You're afraid of flying?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, let's take off, because I know you can fly."

S: What kind of plane is this?

WS: This is an AT-6 at that time. But it was equipped with the hood [dark cover over the cockpit] to go over it, to teach instrument flying. We got in; I didn't put the hood on. I said, "We'll take it up to 3500 feet, and when I wiggle the stick, I want control." So I did a lot of maneuvers, and scared the hell out of him. I wanted him to know that regardless of the position he put our plane in, I could pull it out. That was his worry. When he's under the hood, he can't see outside. When you're under the hood, you could be going straight down, and think you're flying straight and level.

S: Because you have no sense of balance or direction.

WS: None at all. So you have to trust your pilot, your instructor. I did that a few times. I never had more problems with the fellows.

S: Do you think he wasn't sure because of your <u>gender</u>, or because of your <u>skills</u>?

WS: Because of my gender. Once he found out I had the skill, I had no problem.

S: Any other instances you can recall where you thought it was because you were a women that you were being called into question?

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WS: Another time, they needed a pilot. I was only supposed to fly four hours a day, men and women, because of what we did; it was strenuous. I had my four hours, and we needed a pilot to go over to Indian Springs [Nevada]. Indian Springs is a place where the gunners would go just before they were sent overseas. It's now a great big training base, a gunnery base. I was out there not too long ago, and I got up there and told those guys, "You know, I was the first women to train gunners at that base."

I had to sign a statement saying I wouldn't go below 500 feet. But I pretended it was 50 feet. I got over there, and this big building was facing the north, and I came from the

south. I did miss the roof, but when I got over the roof, I changed the prop pitch on a AT-6, and that causes a real roar. So the fellows all hit the deck. Then I went around as I was supposed to do. I was a little low on fuel, so I landed. The instructor for the fellows of that day was coming down the ramp, madder than heck. He was a little upset with me; his face was big and red. Before I got out of the airplane, I take the comb out and take that hat off and I brush out my long hair, and I put my lipstick on. I jump on the wing. Now this fellow is looking in the cockpit to see who else is in the airplane, because he had never seen a woman pilot over there. But there was nobody there but me. I jumped out, and he said, "Where's that pilot that flew that last mission?" I said, "I'm your pilot." I don't think he said what he was going to say when he found out it was me, but anyway. He said, "I'm going to report you." I said, "What did I do?" "You scared the heck out of my boys!" And I said, "Well, where are your boys going from here?" He said, "They're going to combat, and I want them to live to get there." He said he was still going to report me. But later on, we became friends.

S: So his initial reaction was, when you got out, something like, "You're a women, you couldn't have done that."

WS: It scared the hell out of him!

S: Well, if they're going to combat, don't they need to be ready?

WS: That's what I said. I said, "Is the enemy going to come around and say, 'Here I am boys, see if you can shoot me down?'" He did say that his boys had the best score they had that day.

S: The facilities at Las Vegas Army Airfield—were they set up in such a way to accommodate women?

WS: We lived in the same barracks as the nurses and the WACs did. We had WACs as nurses and as clerical help, and we lived with them. Of course, they didn't like us much, because if you only had to fly four hours a day, and many of my girls did fly only four hours a day, and then they went over to the golf course or the pool to relax. They [WACs] didn't like that, and I can understand. That's why we had to take a B-17 transition *(unclear reference)*. That's how I got be a B-17 co-pilot.

S: These other women were working office hours.

WS: They would work eight hours a day. I can understand their concern.

S: Of course they couldn't understand the stressful nature of what you were doing.

WS: Absolutely not. They had no idea what we were doing. They thought we were just partying all the time, which some of them were.

S: What about relations with, interaction with men on base? There must have been a lot more men on this base there were women.

WS: There sure were!

S: How smooth did that go?

WS: Well, I had quite a few boyfriends. I had a lot of dates, a lot of dances. But as soon as they'd get serious, I'd lose interest.

S: Was it fairly comfortable for the men and women to co-exist on the same base?

WS: Oh, sure. We'd meet at the officers' club there, and we had a lot of times together. Some of our girls, in fact four of our girls, afterwards married fellows from the field. So they became interested, and that's what happened.

S: You said you went to the officers' club. So you were officially an officer?

WS: We were <u>treated</u> as officers; we had to salute and be saluted.

S: Saluted by enlisted men?

WS: By enlisted men.

S: What about officers?

WS: I don't know, I suppose we were. I don't remember that.

S: Was there ever a time when you found that guys were finding that difficult, or were unwilling to do that?

WS: As I said, I really had no trouble in Las Vegas. I really was always treated with respect.

S: As far as your job duties, did you do ferrying planes from one base to another?

WS: I only did one ferrying job; I ferried Stirlings [medium bomber]. We went over to Ponca City, Oklahoma. They needed these planes because they had RAF [British Royal Air Force] trainees there, and they needed these for trainees. I took one back that needed a little work. One magneto didn't work, but as long as I had one going, I came back.

S: What does the magneto do?

WS: It sparks the engine. As long as I had one going, it's okay. But that really bothered me, because the RAF fellows would get up. I had to fly straight and level because if that one magneto went out I was in trouble. These fellows would come and do rolls around me, and here I am flying straight and level. That was one of the hardest things for me, because I

wanted to show them that I could that, too, but I couldn't. I had to fly level to get over to where I was supposed to go. *(laughs)*

S: Some other women were doing a lot of that ferrying of airplanes, weren't they?

WS: Yes, well we did 89% of the ferrying done in our country, and our women flew every type of aircraft they had.

S: You said even up to, and including, the B-29s.

WS: That's right, the B-29.

S: Do you know much about that experience? Or can you say what that job entailed?

WS: Well, you know, after we got together afterward, we found out what our women did. I had no idea what other women were doing. We were so busy on our field doing our work, that I didn't know what other women did. Then [after the war] we had reunions, and now we have books out telling about what the other women did. That's all I know, is what I read or what I saw, and what I hear my girls tell me.

S: So you had contact with the other pilots at Las Vegas Army Airfield. As far as contact with women at other places, though, it sounds like there wasn't much at all.

WS: No, we didn't, because we were busy doing our own thing at our own field. We didn't have contact.

S: Betty, how many days a week did you work?

WS: Five days a week, and then on Saturdays I would take the B-17 pilots out in the AT-6 because they liked to fly that little aircraft and do acrobatics in that. Then on Sundays, we used to take the trip with the B-17, so I had a full seven day week. I wasn't supposed to, but I did anyway.

S: Can you describe the experience of flying a B-17? Is it an easy to fly plane, or is it difficult?

WS: I thought it was an easy aircraft to fly. It was a heavy aircraft, but it just really… I saw that B-17 taking off at that air field the other day [at a local Twin Cities air show]… The motion of it, it was like melody in motion, I mean, to me. The other aircraft would go whizzing on by, but that B-17, it was a little cumbersome, but I thought it was just a beautiful thing to see in flight. *(train whistle heard in background)*

S: How many different things were you monitoring as a pilot or a co-pilot in a plane like that?

WS: Well, you have four engines you have to work with. You have to synchronize those

engines. *(pauses three seconds)* How did I do that? I don't know. You've seen a B-17, haven't you?

S: Yes, inside and out.

WS: It was a wonderful experience. Personally, I had to work hard when I flew a B-17, because I had to keep that plane straight and level. There was a, a *(pauses three seconds)* what do you push… *(pauses three seconds)* There's an automatic pilot on it, but I never used it because, when I was flying, I felt I was under scrutiny. I had to do the best I could. So I never used automatic pilot. I did all the work myself because I felt I really should.

S: Was there was another plane that you flew that was a little more difficult to handle, as a pilot?

WS: Well, a P-39. I flew the P-39, that's a Bell Airacobra [single-seat fighter aircraft]. That was a little more difficult to fly, because it had a tricycle landing gear [with three wheels as opposed to two]. My other planes were all tail-draggers, so that was a little harder.

S: So, it makes the landing and takeoff a little different?

WS: Yes, it does. The takeoff wasn't bad at all; it's the landing that created a little problem. But once I had gotten used to it, I could fly it. I could fly anything.

S: What was your favorite plane to fly?

WS: Usually it was the plane I was flying at the time, but I have to say that I <u>did</u> enjoy the AT-6.

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.

S: This is side B of the interview with Betty Wall Strohfus. Betty, you say you liked the AT-6.

WS: Yes, I did.

S: What made that a good plane for a pilot?

WS: Well, I liked because I really felt in control of that. The P-39, I enjoyed flying that, but I did not feel as completely in control as I did the AT-6. I liked night flying, that was great. I did some night flying.

S: Why did you like that so much?

WS: Being up there in that beautiful sky. God's green acres, I'll tell you. It was special.

S: Did you ever have a scary experience behind the wheel of a plane?

WS: I had a few, a few big experiences. But you know, I never really was afraid in an airplane. I had no forced landings. I always felt in control of my airplane.

S: Difficult weather anytime?

WS: Oh yeah, I had a couple of times when we had terrible winds come up, and we had a thunderstorm come in, but I always flew around them. I never wanted to overstress my aircraft. I felt that I had to get that aircraft back where it was on the ground.

S: When you were flying a B-17, what kind of crew did you carry on training missions? Was it a full crew?

WS: In combat they have a crew of ten, including the pilot. On training missions we didn't always have a full crew. Especially if we were going out on a trip on Sunday we would take maybe eight of us, six of us if (***). We weren't fighting, so we didn't have to have gunners aboard. We just had our crew along to have a little fun, maybe an operator, navigator.

S: Was it a comfortable ride in a plane like that?

WS: Oh sure, I enjoyed it.

S: When was the last time you flew a B-17?

WS: August 3rd, 2001. I flew first pilot. It was called *Texas Rangers*, and they were from Del Rio, Texas. The plane belongs to the Commemorative Air Force, and I had been over at Owatonna [Minnesota] the day before, and I was talking to the public, and telling about the B-17. And when they heard that I had been a co-pilot during the war, they let me fly. Of course, I did not take off and land, but as soon as we got in the air, I flew from Owatonna to St. Paul, and that was a wonderful trip. Wow.

S: Did it all come back to you, Betty?

WS: Yeah! *(enthusiastically)* I got in that seat, and I'm right at home! This airplane had been restored to beautiful condition. They flew up from Texas, of course. Owned by the Commemorative Air Force. I think they own three or four, but the rest are owned by [other groups or individuals]. They're all beautiful aircraft. There's six or seven of them. They tour, and they come to air shows. It costs about $2600 an hour to fly these aircraft, for fuel expenses and the upkeep. When they come to places like an air show, during the day they have people come in and go through the aircraft. They charge seven or eight bucks a piece to go in, to walk through the airplane. And then in the morning and in the evening they have flights. They charge $350 a person. Fellows who used to fly the B-17s love to get back in there and take a trip on that B-17.

S: When they take people on these trips, if you're a passenger, do they just strap into the seat?

WS: Oh yes, and they probably take turns letting you sit in the co-pilot seat, so you can get that feeling. It's for a good cause, and also our pilots of World War II love to get in there.

S: Oh, I bet! When I asked you about it just now, we can't see this on the tape, but she is smiling, okay? *(laughs)*

WS: Oh, I'm beaming!

S: Back to your experiences. Texas, Nevada—both far from Minnesota. How did you stay in touch with family and loved ones once you left home?

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WS: Oh, I called my family often. I wrote to my mother at least every other day. I loved my family, and I really missed them.

S: Did you get letters in return?

WS: Absolutely!

S: How important was getting mail to you?

WS: It was very, very important. I was working so hard, trying to make it, especially in training. Once I got out of training, it wasn't as hard, and maybe I wasn't as lonesome as, but when I was down in the dumps, I had to call my family up just to hear their voices. As I said, we weren't a very mobile family, we were always home. I always had my siblings with me.

S: It's so far away. It's not like you went to Iowa or Wisconsin. You went to Texas and Nevada. You were gone for a couple of years altogether, right?

WS: That's right.

S: Did you read *Stars and Stripes* [the official military newspaper] or get news on a regular basis?

WS: Oh yes, we had *Stars and Stripes* at the field. Also, on the field, we had a paper called *The Horned Toad*.

S: Did you and the other pilots follow news from the fronts and what was going on?

WS: Absolutely I did. I still would hear from my boyfriend's mother, and she not only had her son, Arthur, in, she had her two other sons, John and Paul Roberts in, she also had her husband, who went into the Navy.

S: Did they all come back okay?

WS: Thank God, they all came back.

S: Did you make any good friends while you were in the service?

WS: Oh yes. I had some male friends, but I didn't keep in touch with them too long. One of them I did, but I'll tell you that. My girls, we meet every two years. In between times, we also get together. I was down in Columbia with my friends in May, over Memorial Day. I keep in contact with a lot of them.

S: Have you kept in contact ever since 1945?

WS: Yes.

S: Or are there others that you have just picked up contact with later in life?

WS: That's true. A lot of them I picked up later, because I didn't even know about them. I didn't know about them until we had reunions. And then I was invited to visit my friend down in Shreveport, Louisiana. That's who sent me this book, The Flying Witch, that I just got yesterday. Charlene I see, Pat Young, who was in Missouri. You see, I've given programs in Kansas and Missouri, and when I do, I call my girls in that area. When I worked out of New York, I used to call the girls. When I lived in New York, my friend was in New Jersey. My friends in Washington, D.C., she was in my class. When I went to the Women's Memorial, I met a lot of my friends there, over in Washington D.C. So as I go around, I not only see them, another girl, Dee Dee Parrish, she's from Texas. She was here not too long ago. She took an hour's television video about my program, about what I do, and that's going to be in a book that she's also putting out about the WASP organization.

S: You have a number of contacts.

WS: Lots.

S: How important are these group reunions to you?

WS: Very important! *(emphatically)*

S: What do the reunions mean for you?

WS: Well, it's a great chance for us because, as you say, I have so many friends from all over the country. In fact, last October [2000], we had a reunion, and we spent two days in Denton, Texas. That's the Texas Women's University. Our women were recognized, and all the women who passed away in all our classes were recognized. Then we went to Sweetwater, Texas, for two days; that's where we trained. We were treated royally there. We had parties and all kinds of wonderful times together, renewing our association. We also have a walk of honor, at Sweetwater, where Avenger Field is. It is now a technical

college, but we have a large fountain. We have the statue of a WASP in the center of that, done by one of our WASPs, Dottie Swain. The walk of honor is a small Vietnam Wall, to show our 1074 gals and the classes we were in. And also the trainees, the people who trained and who didn't make it. We have all of those girls there. It's all done in beautiful granite. So we were there for two days. We also had a memorial to one of the gals, the first to be killed in the service of our WASP on a training mission. After two days we went over to Midland, Texas, for their air show. We were again treated like VIPs and we had a marvelous time. I left the women pilots then, because I was with my Commemorative Air Force boys, and I had some friends from England and from Virginia and from all over the country. Then I spent the rest of my time with my Commemorative Air Force boys. *(laughs)*

S: You like getting together with these folks, don't you?

WS: Yeah.

S: The WASP organization was dissolved in December 1944. Was this a surprise for you, a shock, or were you kind of expecting it?

WS: Oh no, I really wasn't expecting it. You see, we were so busy doing what we were doing. We thought, "How could they get along without us?" We were doing all this training, and all this ferrying. It was a shock but, also, we knew that we went in to relieve the men for combat duty. They needed the men to do the flying now, to get their flight time.

S: Talk about your feelings when you heard the WASPs were being dissolved.

WS: It was really hard. I would have flown for nothing; I loved to fly those airplanes. And flying military aircraft was completely different than flying civilian aircraft. The power of those beautiful airplanes we were flying! It was really great. But then, as I said, we knew this time would come, and so we had to go home.

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S: How did other women react when they heard the unit was to be dissolved?

WS: You know, I really wasn't in contact with too many of them at the time, because all I had contact with at that time were the girls from Vegas. That was not more than 11 or 12 at that time. So all I had was that. Well then when I came home, I did… Frankly, you see, we all had to get our own way home. Unless there was a plane coming in your direction, you had to get your own ride.

S: You were discharged at Las Vegas Army Airfield?

WS: Yes.

S: So it was a sudden discharge?

WS: There wasn't too much time. Even up until maybe two weeks before, there was this conversation going on between Jacqueline Cochrane and the heads of our government, saying, you know, our girls were supposed to be recognized as officers, and they never got that recognition. Then they wanted to take us into the WACs, and Jacqueline Cochrane says, "No way. My women went in to fly. And if you won't give us flying status, then we're done." So that's what happened.

S: What did the WACs do?

WS: The WACs, they were mostly clerks.

S: So that would have been a big step down.

WS: That was tough. We had the opportunity. Maybe two years later, when I was married and having my first child, I got notice saying that, because of my service as a WASP, I was eligible to go into any part of any other service as an officer. But my husband said no way, and that's understandable.

S: Two years later, your life had started to go in a different direction.

WS: Right. No way could I leave my husband and my child. Had they asked me right away in 1945, I would have gone!

S: Would you?

WS: Yes, right away, I would have gone.

S: You were out of the military, then, and living back home while the United States was still at war. Did you come back to Faribault first after you left Las Vegas Army Airfield?

WS: I first came back to Faribault. Then I went to Northwest Airlines, and showed them my credentials. They would have liked very much to have me aboard, but no way could I go back to an office at that time. I couldn't. Then my friend and I heard about aircraft communications, so we went down to Kansas City and went to aircraft communications school.

S: Was that run by the government or private?

WS: FAA [Federal Aviation Administration].

S: Where were you, then, when President Roosevelt died in April 1945? Were you here in Faribault?

WS: Yes, I was here in Faribault. That was traumatic. I really thought a lot of Franklin Roosevelt. At that time, I was a Democrat. Now I'm a Republican.

S: How did you or your family react when you heard the news that the President had died?

WS: Well, we were all very sad. I really felt he did an awful lot for our country at that time. He started Social Security which, thank God, I have and I am on and I appreciate that. Because my first husband died in October 1969, and that was really tough, because I had five children at that time. It was a hard time, but with my faith and family, I got through it.

S: Not long after that, on the 8th of May 1945, was V-E Day [the surrender of Germany]. Were you still in Faribault then?

WS: No, I wasn't. I was going to school in Kansas City at that time, aircraft communications.

S: What do you remember about V-E Day?

WS: I remember we had a big party at that time. Excuse me, that was in May.

S: Was it V-J Day in August 1945?

WS: Yeah, V-J Day in August. By August, I was in Grand Island, Nebraska, with two of my trainees.

S: So in May, you were in FAA school.

WS: Yes, in Kansas City.

S: Let's stay on that one for a while. Do you remember, was there a celebration in Kansas City at that time?

WS: Not at that time. No, there wasn't any celebration [in May]. We had our celebration in August, when we had V-J Day.

S: What do you remember about the celebration then, in August?

WS: Well, I was at aircraft communication school, in Nebraska. I had a boyfriend then. We had a big celebration, a big cookout. We really were happy that that had happened.

S: How many people did you have at this celebration?

WS: There must have been about twenty of us. Aircraft communication, and we had fellows from the local airport come. We had a great party.

S: How would you describe your emotions?

WS: Well, I thanked God that [the Japanese] finally surrendered. I had no knowledge about the bomb. I knew that the bomb had been dropped, and that worried me. But afterwards, I

became a pretty good friend of Paul Tibbets [the pilot of *Enola Gay*, the B-29 that dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan]. I've been in a lot of programs with him. When he tells what happened and why, when I see men come up crying and saying, "Thank you, Paul. If you hadn't done what you had done, I would not be here." They were the next in line to go over there [for the planned invasion of Japan, in late 1945]. It would have been disaster. When I hear that, I realize it was the best thing that could have happened.

S: The dropping of the atomic bomb?

WS: Yeah. When you hear first hand from the people who were involved, and know why it was done, it makes a big difference. *(train whistle audible in background)*

S: How have your feelings changed on the use the atomic bomb over the years?

WS: Well, I felt terrible when I first heard it, because I heard of the devastation that it did. But when I hear the <u>other</u> side, the veterans that have come back and said that they knew they had lived because of it… I tell you, our Japanese friends, they would have fought to the death, because that's what they believed. They believe that if they give up, that they lose their honor. They would rather die then give up. After what had happened on Okinawa and Iwo Jima [island invasions of 1945], it would only have been worse. I really believe that.

S: You left Faribault in 1943, and you came back to Faribault in 1945. So you were gone for a couple of years. You were two years older, the community was two years older. How do you think life in this community changed as a result of the war?

WS: Of course I feel people became more transient after the war. A lot of the girls that I knew in the service never came home again. I still didn't feel that the girls really had the opportunities that I felt they should have had, or were given the kind of pay that they should have. I really felt that that was to be worked on, and <u>had</u> to be worked on. And it was.

S: Did the war bring this community together, Faribault specifically?

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WS: Well, you know, during those years, when I came back and I got married, and I had a child in nine months and four weeks, I really wasn't out among them, out into the workplace as I was before I was married. So I really didn't see too much of that, because of being home with the children. But I <u>do</u> feel that women had more respect after that.

S: You personally as well?

WS: Well, yes. I tell you, we were not given recognition. I thought no one cared about what we did during the war. I had put all my things in the closet and my boxes, because I didn't see any reason to tell my story. Not until ten years ago did I really believe that people were

interested in my story. I sat on my story… My kids said, “Momma flew the planes during the war, and daddy fixed them.” That was their feeling, you know. “Sure my mom flew, but didn’t a lot of the women?” They had no knowledge of what I really did during the war. When I gave my program at schools, my kids said, “Gee, mom, I never knew you did that.” I said, “Well, you never asked.”

S: That’s a good point. Do you feel after being in the service and having achieved a fairly important position as one of the first women pilots, that you demanded more respect from people after that experience?

WS: I kind of went back in the woodwork, I think. I just went home, and did my job as a mother and a wife. When the kids got older, I took part-time jobs to help with the income, because we sent our kids to Catholic schools and that was expensive. I kind of put it in the back of my mind because, even at that time, I was not even an official veteran. I was not considered a veteran.

S: So even though you had been uniform, you weren’t a veteran?

WS: No. We didn’t get recognized as veterans until we got the resolution passed in 1978, but it was not official until September 1979.

S: Up until that time, had you just been civilian employees in uniform?

WS: Yes. I called myself a peculiar veteran. And I only gave two programs during those years, one at a school that I spoke at, and one at a deaf school that I spoke at for the (***). But they never asked me, because they never felt I was a veteran.

S: It’s almost like a gray area because, if we see you in uniform, if you’re flying B-17s, that says to me that this is a veteran here. She’s in uniform, she went to flight training, she went through Basic Training, she’s flying planes—she’s a veteran. But for the military, it was a gender issue, wasn’t it?

WS: Yes. It was a gender issue, but also the fellows just didn’t believe that women should fly military aircraft. They really didn’t. What really happened was in the 1970s, when women started down in Cuba, protecting our borders, big headlines came out, “First women to fly military aircraft.” Well, that didn’t set too well with us…

My husband died in 1969. I ran for public office the next year, and the best thing that ever happened was that I lost the election. In 1972 I went working for the American Cancer Society out in New York City. The best thing that ever happened to me.

S: So in the early 1970s you packed up and moved to New York?

WS: Yes.

S: How long did you live there?

WS: The best thing about it is that I was hired out of Minnesota. I had a home here in Minnesota. My last [daughter], she was my youngest, she was in college at the time, so I didn't have that full responsibility. That was why I took the job out of New York. I had been a volunteer for 15 years, because my mother and [my sister] Mary both had cancer; they had 15 years of cancer. So I felt my time should be devoted to that organization. So I did. I went to the American Cancer Society as a volunteer. *(explains in some detail how she took the position in New York with the American Cancer Society)*

S: How long did you stay in New York?

WS: I didn't move there. I worked out of Faribault, but I got to come home every other weekend. That was A-okay! I met this epidemiologist, and he was interested that I worked as a volunteer for 15 years. But when my friend told him that I was a pilot in World War II, he told his assistant he wanted me on his staff, and he didn't care what it cost. Of course I didn't find that out until two years later. I didn't get very much money, but I was on staff in New York. I had a card and could go anywhere I was needed. They paid my way. They paid everything for me. It was an okay set up.

S: You got to keep your house here and visit every other weekend.

WS: Right.

S: Betty, what was the hardest thing for you to readjust to being out of the military and back in Faribault again?

WS: That was tough. That was really tough. In fact, when I did get married and I worked part-time in an office, this was hard. But I did it, because I wanted to send my kids to Catholic schools.

S: How would you identify the toughest thing about being out of uniform and being back here?

WS: *(pauses three seconds)* I figured that what was to be, was to be. I didn't resent anything or anybody. I was sorry that I wasn't able to continue flying. I flew a small plane for a while, but I wasn't able to continue. But I did join the 99 organization, an international group of women pilots, and I did keep that association over the years, even when I was married and raising children. I really didn't have much association with my women pilots from the service until later, until we started having reunions. We were all home having children and taking care of living. We didn't have much of an opportunity. We had reunions, but they weren't as often. Now, we have them every two years.

S: Different locations around the country?

WS: Yes. We have them in Seattle, Oregon, New York, we've had them all over the country. And I've been able to make most of them.

S: Do a lot of the women attend?

WS: Oh yes. In fact this last time, we had over 300 of us. That's very good. There's just under 500 of us still living. If we're still living, we're still up and about.

S: That means that 60% of you were at that reunion. That's darned good!

When you were in uniform, flying planes and training pilots, what did the war or the war effort mean for you personally? How did you perceive what you were doing?

WS: I really felt very fortunate to be able to do what I loved best in the whole world, and feel that I was helping my country. Most of our girls, we were very patriotic. We thought flying the airplanes, and doing what we were doing, was helping the war effort. That, in my opinion, was important, and that was our main purpose for doing what we were doing.

S: Is that what caused you to join in the first place?

WS: Absolutely. *(emphatically)*

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S: When you reflect back on your war experience and the war effort now, how has your way of understanding that changed?

WS: I wouldn't say my feeling has changed. I feel we did what we could do for our country at the time. I'd do it all over again if I were able. I think that most of our girls felt that what we were doing was helping our country at the time. As I said, if you do 89% of all the ferrying done in our country, and 85% of all the aviation training, we do feel that we did help.

S: With those kinds of numbers, if you take that away, the military would have been hard pressed to find replacements.

WS: I really believe that.

S: A program that was on television recently about the WASP pilots showed how much the ferrying of aircraft they did. Literally, like you said, it was almost entirely in women's hands for a while there.

WS: Yes it was.

S: Do you have a favorite personal memory or a good story that you could share as we conclude here?

WS: I have so many stories.

S: Want to add one for this tape?

WS: While I was in the service, we were only supposed to fly four hours a day because of the strain on a person's body. I would go out and take everybody's turn I could. I'd tell the fellows to sign their name as if they were in the airplane, and then I would take their job. It didn't matter what plane they flew, I could handle any of them. I did this for about two, maybe two and a half months. And one day, I couldn't get out of bed.

S: What happened?

WS: That's what I didn't know. I just couldn't get out of bed. My friends thought, geez, she's sick; she doesn't get up to fly, she's sick. So they brought me over to the flight surgeon, and he gave me a physical examination, but there wasn't one thing wrong with me. He said, "Physically, there is not a thing wrong with you." I really was in good shape. Anyway, he said, "You must be pregnant." I said, "No, I'm not married." He said, "You don't have to be married to be pregnant." I said, "Oh, yes you do!" He said, "You're not pregnant." That's the story.

S: Were you just physically exhausted?

WS: Physically exhausted. I found out that we're not supposed to fly more than four hours a day! *(laughs)*

S: You were flying well more than fours a day.

WS: I was flying eight hours a day, as much as I could! Saturday, Sunday, as much as I could, so I was flying seven days a week. I couldn't believe what they told me, but I didn't believe them. They only would let me fly four hours a day after that.

S: After that, they're going to watch you more closely!

WS: Yes.

S: Betty, let me, on tape, thank you very much for the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW