

[Subscriber Services](#) [E-Edition](#) [Place an Ad](#) [More](#)

[Join the conversation](#) [Log In](#) [Register](#) [Subscribe](#)



73°
Clear

Weeklv
Forecast



[Advanced Search](#) | [Privacy](#) | [About Our Ads](#)

News

Web Search powered by [YAHOO!](#)
SEARCH

[News](#) [Sports](#) [Opinion](#) [Obituaries](#) [Celebrations](#) [Entertainment](#) [Calendar](#) [Get It!](#) [Homes](#) [Jobs](#) [Cars](#)

[Home](#) / [News](#) / [Opinion](#)

COMMENTARY

Frederick Beseler: La Crosse native was one of the last WASPs

Recommend { 1

Tweet { 1

0

2

Print

Email

21 hours ago • [By Frederick Beseler | La Crosse](#)

[\(1\) Comments](#)

La Crosse native Mary Belle Ahlstrom Smith was one of America's first female military pilots. During World War II, she was one of 1,074 women who earned silver wings as a Women Airforce Service Pilot (WASP). Mary Belle passed away June 15, 2012, in Austin, Texas.

During World War II, WASPs flew more than 60 million miles in nearly every type of U.S. military aircraft. Not until 1977 were they granted veteran's benefits. In 2010, the WASPs were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. Nineteen Wisconsin women served as WASPs. One, Margaret Seip of Milwaukee, died in service.

The service of the WASPs was certainly under-appreciated for many years. These women flew every type of WW II aircraft that the men flew and did it very well.

They flew everything from light training biplanes to 400-mph fighters and large multi-engine transports and bombers, including the B-29 Superfortress. Their service allowed male pilots to serve in the overseas combat zones.

Thirty-eight WASPs died while in service, but since they were considered civilian employees, they were not accorded military honors or a flag for their casket.

The daughter of Judge Roy and Margaret Ahlstrom, Mary Belle enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. When a Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPT) was formed at La Crosse State Teacher's College — one female trainee for every 10 male students — Mary Belle called home and asked her mother to get her enrolled.

Mary Belle's mother was opposed because she didn't like flying, but Mary Belle got herself enrolled. She also had her father's support. Judge Ahlstrom not only got his pilot's license, he bought a Piper Cub that Mary Belle later used to commute between La Crosse and Madison. She

2012 County Amateur Golf Championship [CLICK HERE](#)



Hot Jobs

Production Order Assistant
Rockland Flooring
Morning Editor / Operator
WXOW TV

Customer Care Representative
River Valley Newspaper Group
Accounting, Sales, Data Entry, Welders, HVAC, Automotive, Packaging, Production, Machine Operators
Express Employment Professionals
[More](#)

Popular

[Articles](#) [Comments](#) [Facebook](#)

- 1 [Chaseburg teen dies in Sunday crash](#)
- 2 [Sheriff: Escapees "are gone"](#)
- 3 [Area woman killed in fiery one-car crash](#)

graduated from Madison with a degree in chemistry and started post-graduate studies.

With U.S. entry into WW II and the need for more pilots, Mary Belle received a letter from famed American aviatrix Jackie Cochran, inviting her to apply for WASP training.

She completed her training in 1943 and went to Romulus Army Air Base near Detroit. She was one of six WASPs assigned to Officer Training School along with about 45 men. Upon graduation the men got commissions in the Army Air Force. A WASP got a certificate of completion.

During instrument flight training at St. Joseph, Mo., she met her future husband, Leonard Smith, in the cockpit of a B-25 Mitchell medium bomber. Smith was an instructor pilot whom Mary Belle described as tough but fair.

In late 1944, with victory in Europe near, the WASP program was terminated. Mary Belle took a ground job at Napier Army Airfield, Ala., teaching male cadets instrument flying using the pioneering LINK flight simulator.

Mary Belle and Leonard married in 1946 after he returned from overseas service. She was a stay-at-home mom for their three boys until they reached school age. She then continued her education and became a medical technologist and certified cytologist.

She taught and worked at the Texas State Hospital in Austin. After retiring in 1981, Mary Belle and Leonard volunteered at Seton Medical Center.

Today, fewer than 300 WASPs survive. Mary Belle was the last WASP from this area. Ailsa (Robinson) Simonson from Trempealeau was a member of the final WASP training class in 1944. She died in 1994.

As the World War II generation passes from the scene, we must remember all of their incredible sacrifices — and the pioneering service of the WASPs as America’s first female military pilots.

They loved to fly, and they were thrilled to be able to serve our country. I’d fly with any of the WASPs yet today — any time, any place.

Frederick Beseler of La Crosse is a member of the board of directors of the Wisconsin Aviation Hall of Fame.

(1) Comments



David Lee - 14 hours ago

Part of the real heros of WW2. Nice article.

Report Abuse

ADD COMMENT

You must [Login](#) to comment.

[Click here to get an account](#) it's free and quick

More Opinion Stories

[Andrea](#)

[Terry](#)

[Kelly Bahr:](#)

[Michael Tellier:](#)

4 [Area woman killed in fiery crash](#)

5 [Teen ejected without knowledge of driver](#)

Featured Businesses

TRAVEL LEADERS [Travel Leaders](#)

Labus Christmas Tree Farms

 [Floor Coverings Of Winona](#)

 [Winona Mall](#)

Find a local business

I'm looking for:

Located near:

Hint: Enter a keyword that you are looking for like tires, pizza or doctors or browse the full business directory, powered by Local.com

Latest Local Offers

 [\\$4.00 off Feather Extension](#)

\$4.00 off a Feather Hair Extension

 [Sale](#)

25% off store wide at both locations now through the end of July

 [Squeaky Brakes?](#)

Dee's Does That!

 [Now offering Mobile banking](#)

Contact your bank location for more information today!

JOB BOARD