

'Mercury 13' member, UWO honorary doctorate recipient dies

by News Bureau - Wednesday, November 20, 2013

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/30455/mercury-13-member-uwo-honorary-doctorate-recipient-dies/>

Jerri Truhill, a famed female test pilot who *almost* became a U.S. astronaut, passed away Nov. 18 in Irving, Texas. Truhill's death was [reported by the Dallas Observer](#) on Nov. 19.

Truhill was a member of the "Mercury 13," as they came to be called -- a courageous, pioneering corps of women whom the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh honored in 2007 during spring commencement ceremonies. Each received an honorary doctorate degree from the institution as a tribute to and acknowledgement of their dedication and sacrifices as participants in a little-known, astronaut-development program in the 1960s. (Truhill's recognition can be seen [here](#).)

As detailed on UW Oshkosh's tribute [website to the Mercury 13 women](#), the group was comprised of professional pilots, including some of the top female aviators of the day. Only 13 women were selected for the program.

"They underwent the same rigorous physical and psychological testing as John Glenn, Alan Shepard and other men whose names have become legendary," the Mercury 13 site reports. "Some of the women even outperformed their male counterparts. In summer of 1961, just before leaving for the next phase of training at the Naval Aviation Center in Pensacola, Fla., the women received telegrams telling them not to come. Due to the prejudices of the times, the project was cancelled. They never were allowed to fly in space."

About Jerri Truhill (from uwosh.edu/mercury13)

Truhill's first exposure to flying was at the age of 4, while sitting in the cockpit of an airplane chartered to take her father to a business meeting in Texas. When she told her father how much she loved flying, his answer was reflective of the attitudes of the era: "Work hard, do well in school and you can grow up to be an air hostess and fly all the time."

Determined to become a pilot, she began taking after-school flying lessons at age 15—unbeknown to her parents. She got caught, however, and was sent to a Catholic school in San Antonio. But that was only a setback in her path to the sky: by 1960, she was one of the country's most experienced pilots.

In a partnership (and, eventually, a marriage) with another great pilot, Joe Truhill, she flew twin-engine North American B-25s for Texas Instruments. She also helped to develop Terrain Following Radar and smart bombs, which entailed very dangerous, top-secret missions over the Gulf of Mexico. She has participated in numerous air races and has won more than a few trophies.

After she and the rest of the Mercury 13 were "scuppered by NASA" (as she puts it), she resolved to speak out on radio programs and in the press whenever she witnessed NASA favoring white men over others.

Truhill returned to Texas Instruments and also served as vice president for two companies: Air Freighters International and Air Services Inc., a test pilot and plane company.

Learn more:

- [Mercury 13 at UW Oshkosh](#)
- [2007 news clip: Women's Space Dreams Cut Short, Remembered](#)