

From the studio of
DARWIN WOLF

LADY LIBERTY

MONUMENT TO THE FIRST FEMALE FIGHTER PILOTS

A R T I S T ' S S T A T E M E N T

As husband and father to two very strong women, I'm a fanatical advocate for the right person for the job regardless of gender, race, belief system, whatever. The military is no place for anything but this strict meritocracy. When it comes to defending our nation and putting lives on the line, the strongest candidates must get the call, period.

Why do we make a fuss when women excel in traditionally male rolls? Because they're challenged by so many things men can only speculate at. Addressing the obvious first: the entire female physiology is contrary to physical combat. This physical detriment gives me a greater respect for these women because I've always been in awe of what they are first and foremost: they're created to be miracle workers, givers of life. They're one of God's most complex creations, yet they can go beyond this fantastic status and still thrive in "a man's world".

Secondly, an unintended obstacle for women in combat is chivalry. Men reading this will agree; they would instinctively step in front of a woman when threatened. While I truly hope chivalry never dies, it has no place in combat, even subtly. Imagine a male pilot whose father drove it into his head that he would always open a door for a woman, and then he does so for a fellow pilot who's female? While well intended, this has an effect on men and woman that has to be overcome. Imagine the hundred-fold impact this thought pattern would have in combat if it were not kept in check.

In the military, men are required to stifle the instinct to keep women out of harm's way. Officers who have spent lifetimes protecting their wives, daughters and granddaughters are expected to guard against consciously or subconsciously shying away from sending women into combat. I've always struggled with the idea that men are sent to fight and die for me. The fact that women are sent to do so is beyond my thinking, even though I fully believe in, and support their right to make that decision, and do so.

These conditions aren't listed here as reasons why I think women shouldn't be in combat. They're listed as obstacles military women must overcome. Even when the combat exclusion on female pilots was fully lifted in 1994, women still had to face many unforeseen issues, and they'd be fighting them long after they qualified for combat.

I dedicated this sculpture to three pilots: Navy Lt. Kara Spears Hultgreen, Air Force Lt Col. Martha McSally, and Air Force Commander Jeannie Leavitt. All are said to be the first female fighter pilots but official dates and qualifications seem conflicted and unclear. I believe this may have been intentional. The race to put the first female fighter pilot in the air was misguided and damaging to the accomplishment and the achievers.

There were accusations that training officers were motivated to make sure their branch won the race. It was said that corners were cut and statements were made about hastily pushing candidates through training, regardless of scores. When one of the pilots, Lt. Hultgreen, was killed in a carrier landing, female pilots were grounded and their training was called into question. This is where they had to, once again, fight for their wings. After much investigation and testimony, the aircraft in Lt. Hultgreen's accident, was determined to be at fault in her death. The other women were reinstated after their training scores were verified.

The sculpture itself is the most complex and heavily detailed work I've ever done. Had this opportunity come earlier in my career I might have had a heart attack or gone screaming back to my day job. As it was, I blew through my allotted sculpting schedule with only the boots and flight suit completed. The harness and helmet put me well over time and over budget, but I wouldn't change a thing. The sculptural challenge and honorable subject combined for a fantastic opportunity that I will always be grateful for.

I kept details like the zipper at the bottom of the flight suit fly in place, even though they looked kind of suggestive and goofy. That's the kind of thing I wanted in place to give small hints of how the gear, the training and even the routine was designed around male pilots. But in one case, the equipment designed for men would occasionally work better for women. The hose and coupling by the pilot's left thigh is the her connection to the on-board air compressor that inflates the pilots G-suit during hard banking turns. Without the compression keeping oxygenated blood in the pilot's upper extremities, blood would be pulled into the legs and the pilot would pass out. It just so happens that the slightly higher body fat percentage in women assists the compression in doing its job allowing some women to stand higher G forces.

I had two excellent technical consultants; Capt. Valerie Vanderostyne, one of the first two female fighter pilots with the South Dakota Air National Guard, and Capt. Samantha Vanderostyne, sister to Valerie, in charge of all SDANG equipment. The pair combined to fill me in on all visible details: gear is still universal from men to women, the pouch on the left thigh is for a knife to cut away from tangled gear or chute harness, the pouch on left shin is for Emergency Check List, pouch on left shin is for gloves or is empty, gloves are Nomex for fire protection, a personal or seat chute is used according to the plane being flown, flight boots have thicker soles than jungle boots but look very similar; patches worn: right front for command, left front for name/callsign, left shoulder for unit, right shoulder for squadron, rank top of shoulder. I've probably forgotten much, much more. They were better teachers than I was a student.

I also had a great source for period specific equipment in Brig. Gen. Russ Walz (ret), SDANG, a decorated pilot who flew at exactly the same time and with the same gear as our three subjects. Commander Walz cleaned out his closet and loaned every piece of gear I needed. Everything you see from the helmet to the boots was at hand so I didn't have to guess at what they would look like. This gave me a huge boost in my efforts to accurately include every detail.

The only pieces of the sculpture that aren't sculpted by hand are some of the cord sleeves, hose and the patches which created a huge dilemma. I wanted to include patches worn by the three pilots I was honoring but how would I be able to mix and match Navy and Air Force? It was while I was sculpting in the lobby of the Sioux Falls VA hospital that a former pilot told me it was common practice in joint operations to wear patches of their current unit even if they weren't fliers from the same branch. Whew. That was one of the many gifts I received while sculpting for the vets at the VA, one of the most rewarding segments of sculpting time in my entire career.

You may notice the pose of the sculpture; walking loosely, mid stride, head cocked, down and a little to the right, half smile. She's returning to base and she's thinking. In general women have been known do that more than men. I sculpted "Lady Liberty" to be an example of the contemplative pilot. I gave her that classic half smile of the "Mona Lisa" to also make you think; what is *she* thinking? Is she self-evaluating? Is she thinking about the person she just shot down, or of the friend who was just shot down? Or could it simply be that sly smile, "I really kicked the guys' asses today."

I titled this compilation of three pilots, "Lady Liberty", because it represents the first frontline women officially recognized for protecting our safety and liberties. While sculpting this piece, I also heard stories of the many women who were unofficially in combat in the air and on the ground prior to 1994. In addition, I heard many stories of women in combat in the War on Terror. Their increasing presence has been invaluable in winning hearts with the people of the Middle East. Some very strong women graciously schooled me and patently corrected some of my errant opinions when they probably could have just as easily messed me up pretty good.

My dad was Army and my brother is a Marine but I was unable to serve because of all kinds of health issues (the Marines actually would have taken me but I was afraid they'd kill me!). I hope I can serve those who went in my place by telling their story well every time I get the chance.

To my fantastic patrons of Peoria County, to the men and women in our armed forces, and to all of the women who contributed to "Lady Liberty", thank you.



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