



## Elizabeth Steele Whitbeck

February 28, 1921 - October 9, 2019

Whitbeck, Liz (Elizabeth Steele)

98, was intrepid – adventurous, unflinching, dynamic. At age 70 she demonstrated escaping a burning building by rappelling three stories down the side of the police precinct station. Rafting the class five rapids of New Zealand’s Shotover River Liz was among the oldest persons to do so, also at 70.

She led a life of commitment. Following graduation from Potsdam State Teachers College, now Potsdam SUNY, Liz became a teacher in northern New York near the St. Lawrence River. After teaching each day she climbed a nearby tower to serve as a volunteer plane spotter along the Canadian border as WWII enveloped Canada.

Liz was outraged at the unprovoked attack on her country at Pearl Harbor. She felt an urgent call to duty and was among the first women to join the Marine Corps as the U.S. itself entered the war. Women’s uniforms didn’t exist yet, leaving Liz to march in sandals as she started boot camp. Her teaching degree, plane spotting experience and interest in aviation led to an assignment teaching instrument flying to USMC bomber and fighter pilots at Page Field, Parris Island, SC. There she achieved the rank of Staff Sergeant.

As the war was ending Liz was relocated to Manhattan to work as a rehabilitation specialist helping returning Marines obtain jobs and adjust to peacetime life. As the top ranked woman Marine in New York/New England Liz was among the first people to receive the Victory Medal when these medals were awarded to one representative of each military service in a Central Park ceremony.

Following the war the government terminated women from the Marine Corps although as a civilian she continued in her job as rehabilitation specialist. When the government ultimately decided to re-establish women’s presence in the USMC Liz (then Elizabeth Janet Steele) was the first woman to sign an enlistment contract and was made commander of the largest U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Volunteer Training Unit, 3-1(WR).

As such she recruited women to join the Marine Corps in New England, New York and New Jersey.

In 1948 she married USN LCdr Bill (Wm J) Whitbeck in Manhattan who had become an advertising executive. Later they moved to Bill's hometown of Stillwater, MN where their only child Betsey (Elizabeth Cecilia) was born. They found a home in Minneapolis' Kenwood neighborhood, enjoyably residing there for the next 63 years. Liz became involved in neighborhood doings, such as joining the industrious Kenwood Sewing Club.

Liz' USMC experience trained her to become a catalyst and leader. When she served as a VP and board member of the Friends of the Minneapolis Public Library she observed that every year the library discarded thousands of yet readable books. This waste struck her as an unfortunate loss of potentially valuable resources, so she organized the very first public book sale. Such book sales continued for many years, especially enabling lower income families to own books too expensive to buy new. She believed that owning even one book contributes to creating a different mindset toward reading and learning in children, improving their opportunities for success.

In an effort to familiarize more people with their public library, Liz initiated and chaired a committee to offer public library tours. Her touring experience then led her to be a founder of the Tour Managers Assn of MN where she was active for 32 years. For 38 years she was active with the Friends, during which time her love of libraries brought her to the study of library science at the U of M.

Liz and Bill are considered founding members of the East Isles Neighborhood Assn, volunteering there for 51 years. Similarly she was a founding member of the Fifth Police Precinct Advisory Committee, serving for 20 years. The purpose of this committee was to bring the police closer to the community, enabling neighbors to meet police officers in a social, non-threatening context.

A one-time chair of her League of Women Voters unit, Liz was an active member for 40 years, and was active as a Girl Scout troop leader and consultant for 18 years. A nearly 50-year member of the Woman's Club of Minneapolis she was a VP and program chair among other positions. Her biggest program hit was speaker David Eisenhower who had just finished writing his book about his grandfather, IKE. She served as an election judge for decades.

She felt all of these civic entities fostered building community relationships and understanding public policy.

Semper fidelis: From the USMC standpoint Liz was active with the National Women Marines Assn for 32 years during which she served as state pres., board member, 13 times a delegate to the national convention, and co-chaired that national convention in 2002. The Governor appointed her to the United Veterans Legislative Council and she was a member of the Marine Corps Coordinating Council.

For outstanding leadership and contributions to communities and society the Women Veterans Initiative named her the 2017 Woman Veteran of the Year. She was also honored with the MN Humanities Center's 2017 Veteran's Voices Legacy Award. In 2008 the MN State Legislature honored her WWII service during a ceremony commemorating the WWII Victory in Europe Day.

When asked why she was so active in her community she said "I just love meeting people and feeling useful." Liz was the epitome of inclusiveness. On a social basis, whenever a new family moved into her neighborhood she and friends would host a welcoming coffee party. For 28 consecutive years she and dear friend Martha Head held an annual holiday coffee party to which about 400 neighborhood women would be invited. Its purpose was to introduce neighbors to one another and provide them an opportunity to socialize.

Vivacious Liz and genial Bill, her treasured husband of 65 years, were welcome additions to any gathering and beloved by many who were enriched by their unusually positive, forward-looking attitudes. They enriched their own life together as avid naturalists, reveling (and competing) in identifying rocks, plants, constellations and birds, even following Canada Geese migrations cross country to Niagara Falls. Both were active in the Planes of Fame museum and were moderates in the Republican Party. Adventurous travelers, together they visited all 50 states and six continents.

As a mother Liz' commitment was unstinting, attending most school programs that involved her daughter Betsey and even sewing costumes when necessary. She and Bill supported the school community by being members and officers of PTA for 10 years.

Liz had real zeal, astonishing energy and unlimited enthusiasm. She somehow managed to do whatever people needed her to do, both family and friends alike. Liz came through. Her word was good and her friendship loyal, a gift treasured by those who received it. Her sterling character and brilliant mind were revered by all who knew her.

Elizabeth Janet Steele (Liz) was born 2/28/21 to Harry Clinton Steele of Chadds Ford, PA, and Nannie Marguerite Steele of Gouverneur, NY. Following the deaths of her father

during childhood and mother during teen years she and her brother were also raised by her grandmother and greater family. Despite these tragic losses she learned perseverance early, working hard in her family's dairy and ice cream business. Her bright eyes and welcoming smile greeted all. Friends and strangers alike called her "beautiful."

Liz Whitbeck passed away peacefully October 9, 2019 and was predeceased in 2013 by her husband Bill. Daughter Betsey Whitbeck and husband Jim Nelson survive her. Also surviving her is brother Cecil (Lois) Steele who became a WWII Marine participating in the occupation of Japan. Cecil and Lois' children all survive Liz: Chris (Liz) Steele, Ellen Steele, Peggy Steele, and Nan (Denis) LaParr and families. She is also survived by Whitbeck niece Anne (Brian) Huysman & nephew William C. (Kim) Whitbeck, adopted grandchildren Martha Elizabeth Head (Chris) Kirwan, Virginia Head, Michael (Erin) Rybicki, and sister USAF Cpt. Jessica (USAF Maj. Joshua) Messer and families.

Interment ceremony for Liz will be 10AM Nov. 1st, at Fort Snelling National Cemetery, Enter through 2nd gate and gather in Assembly Area #4 at 9:45. A Celebration of Life will be held at The Woman's Club of Minneapolis following the ceremony at Fort Snelling.

Washburn-McReavy.com

Hillside Chapel 612-781-1999

# Cemetery

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## **Hillside Crematory**

5125 West Broadway

Crystal, MN, 55429

# Comments

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“ Sincere condolences from the members of the Women Marines Association. “If the Army and the Navy ever looked on Heaven’s Scenes, they will find the streets are guarded by United States Marines.” (3rd stanza of the Marines Hymn). Take comfort in knowing your beloved Marine has left this life to take up her rightful place in Heaven’s detachment.

The Women Marines Association is dedicated to preserving the history of our veterans. We continue to build a diverse collection of uniforms, photos, papers and other artifacts donated by our members and their families. If you have items you would like to know more about or would like to have your loved one memorialized by donating items to the collection, our Historian, Nancy Wilt, would be happy to speak with you. She can be reached at: Nancy Wilt, WMA Historian, Curator of the Women of the Corps Collection, PO Box 633, Hunt, TX 78024, Phone: 830-238-3893, or [niwilt@aol.com](mailto:niwilt@aol.com).

Eileen Skahill

National Chaplain

[Chaplain@womenmarines.org](mailto:Chaplain@womenmarines.org)

Eileen Skahill - December 19, 2019 at 04:48 PM

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“ Emerald Garden Basket was purchased for the family of Elizabeth Steele Whitbeck.



October 31, 2019 at 12:03 PM