

Jane Hart, Activist and Nearly an Astronaut, Dies at 93



Jane Briggs Hart and Senator Philip A. Hart, Democrat of Michigan, in 1970. She would fly him to campaign stops. Credit...Rich Sheinwald/Associated Press for The New York Times

By [William Grimes](#) June 12, 2015

Jane Briggs Hart, a flying enthusiast, would-be astronaut and competitive equestrian and sailor whose outspoken views on women's rights, the Roman Catholic Church and the Vietnam War sometimes made political life a challenge for her husband, Philip A. Hart, a Democratic senator from Michigan in the 1960s and '70s, died on June 5 in Bloomfield, Conn. She was 93.

Her death was confirmed by her daughter Jane Cameron Hart, known as Cammie.

Ms. Hart, known as Janey, stood out in Washington at a time when congressional wives were expected to be ornamental. In the early 1960s, at the age of 40, she took part in a [privately financed project](#) to test women for fitness to enter NASA's astronaut training program, submitting to the same physical and psychological tests administered to the Mercury 7 astronauts.

She and 12 others who made the cut became known as the Mercury 13. NASA, however, continued to insist that only qualified test pilots could enter its astronaut program and did not admit women until 1978, in a class that included Sally Ride, who became the first American woman in space in 1983.

Ms. Hart's politics were liberal and vocal. A founding member of the National Organization for Women, and a Roman Catholic, with eight children, she once told The

Chicago Daily News, "The Catholic Church is racist, and its position on birth control is ridiculous."

In 1969 she was arrested with seven others for trying to hold an ecumenical Mass for peace inside the Pentagon. The intent, she said, was "to bring the idea of peace and love of God into this house of death."

In 1972, after President Richard M. Nixon announced the mining of North Vietnamese harbors, Ms. Hart informed the Internal Revenue Service, by letter, that she would no longer pay income tax. "I cannot contribute one more dollar towards the purchase of more bombs and bullets," she wrote.

Senator Hart, also a liberal, staunchly defended his wife when reporters came calling, even when the couple's views diverged. "There is nothing pastel about Janey," he once told reporters.

Jane Cameron Briggs was born on Oct. 21, 1921, in Detroit, where her father, Walter O. Briggs, was an industrialist and the owner of the Detroit Tigers. She attended Catholic academies before enrolling in Manhattanville College, in Westchester County, N.Y., which she left without taking a degree. She later earned an anthropology degree from George Washington University in 1970.

Ms. Hart was sporty and daring, riding against top professionals in equestrian jumping competitions. An avid sailor, she participated in the annual Port Huron to Mackinac boat race 15 times, and at 73 crewed a sailboat crossing the Atlantic. She earned a flying license at 18, and in the late 1950s became the first woman in Michigan licensed to fly a helicopter.

During World War II, Ms. Hart joined the Red Cross Motor Corps and drove trucks from Detroit's auto plants to military bases and ports. She married Mr. Hart, in civilian life a lawyer in Detroit, in 1943, just as he was being shipped overseas with the Army's Fourth infantry Division. When he went into politics, she often piloted him to campaign stops by helicopter.

Mr. Hart died in office in 1976, after choosing not to seek re-election because of poor health. The Hart Senate Office Building in Washington was named in his honor a few months before his death.

In addition to their daughter Cammie, Ms. Hart is survived by three other daughters, Ann Hart, May Hart and Laura Hart Cole; four sons, Walter, James, Michael and Clyde; eight grandchildren; and seven great-grandchildren. Their first child, Philip Jr., died in a drowning accident at 3.

Immediately after Mr. Hart's death, President Gerald R. Ford called Ms. Hart to ask if there was anything he could do. As a matter of fact, yes, she told him. He could grant amnesty to all Vietnam draft evaders and deserters. He did not comply, but the following year, the newly elected president, Jimmy Carter, did.