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The “Always Terrified Airwomen” of the Air Transport Auxiliary:

The Women Who Flew Military Aircraft in Second World War Britain

“Anything to Anywhere”

The Ferrying Operation

Although some said that ATA stood for “Always Terrified Airwomen” or even “Ancient and Tattered Airmen”, for the old and disabled men who were allowed to join, Gerard d’Erlanger, the Commandant, liked to think it stood for “Anything to Anywhere”. Members of the ATA were needed to fly over 100 different types of aircraft. These were broken up into six classifications, based on type and amount of engines in the plane.

Pilots were trained to fly one or two of each type and then given Ferry Pilot’s Notes, so that they wouldn’t have to remember the specifics about each type. The RAF, who were usually trained for only one or two types, were sometimes nervous to turn their precious aircrafts over to these little women with a bunch of note cards. Lady Du Cros tells how the RAF would say,

“How much time have you done on this type of aeroplane?” and if you said, ‘well I’ve never seen one before, but its all here in the book,’ then they looked at your take off with terror, they couldn’t believe that...” (5)



However, the ATA had more on their minds than just the type of aircraft they were flying that day; members of the ATA, both male and female, flew in almost all weather without instruments, without radio, and without the luxury of noting on their maps where barrage balloons and anti-aircraft guns were, in case those maps fell into the wrong hands.

Despite these dangers, it was always foremost in their minds that they were, ‘paid to be safe, not brave,’ their job, above all else, was to deliver the aircraft in working order. For this reason some in command found the women were better ferry pilots than the men.



The Director of Training once told Alison King, that:

“[The women] had the qualities necessary, you see, not the dashing impatience of the fighter pilot but just the desire to fly well and do the job properly. They took more trouble over the cockpit drill for instance, were more careful about finding out beforehand where the bad weather was and going round it, and they never showed off. They somehow did not have the urge to beat up, fly low, or in any other way ‘show Mother what they could do’. Surprising, too, when one hears so much of women’s nerves that, although naturally upset and depressed at damaging an aircraft if involved in an accident, they were not so mentally upset as the men who found themselves in the same predicament, and indeed regained their normal approach to life more quickly.” (8)

In the Beginning

The Origins of the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA)

The ATA was a civil ferrying organization formed in 1939. Its primary responsibility was flying new aircraft from the factories to the aerodromes around the country, freeing more Royal Air Force (RAF) pilots for combat. Initially, it was staffed only by male pilots who were, through age or disability, ineligible for the RAF.

In 1940, the ATA was allowed to recruit eight women pilots, under the guidance of Miss Pauline Gower. Gower had been a member of the Civil Air Guard, an organization devoted to training both male and female pilots before the war. Originally, the women were only allowed to fly the trainer aircrafts, but they eventually qualified on all classes of aircraft. By the end of the war, 166 female pilots flew with the organization, representing approximately 20% of the pilots in the ATA.

“Always Terrified Airwomen”

The Perception

Entry and promotion in the ATA was not seamless; the women pilots had many social obstacles to overcome.

The Glamour

Once they were recruited, the women were surrounded by a media frenzy. One was featured on the cover of the *Picture Post*, while all were the subject of numerous magazine and newspaper articles. As Alison King, the Operations Officer of the all women’s ferrying pool in Hamble noted:

“I suppose it is inevitable that women who fly, or indeed who do anything a little out of the ordinary, are of more interest to the public, and you and I, than the men who do the same thing. The odd and unusual is always more of a talking point than the accepted” (8)



The Outrage

Not all of their press was positive. Many felt that the women were taking jobs from male pilots, especially C. G. Grey, editor of the influential magazine, *the Aeroplane*. His most famous quote on the subject was,

“The menace is the woman who thinks that she ought to be flying a high-speed bomber when she really has not the intelligence to scrub the floor of a hospital properly.” (9)

The women had to also prove themselves to the men of the Air Ministry and Royal Air Force. Lady Du Cros, one of the first eight ATA women, mentioned the pressure, saying:

“We had this appalling responsibility weighing on our shoulders, you see ... if a man took [an aeroplane] up and broke it, its just too bad... but if we’d broken one immediately they’d say, ‘you see, we said they couldn’t do it! And they can’t!’ so we had to be twice as careful as everybody else...” (5)

The Acceptance

Yet, as the women qualified on more and more types, these prejudices gave way. The Commanding Officer of the all female ferry pool at Hamble, Margot Gore said:

“I never had anybody say anything derogatory to me or nasty, in any way, [there was] surprise...particularly later on when we came in four-engines. They did look very startled when a rather small person got out of a very big aircraft...” (7)

Their relatively painless acceptance is most certainly due to the leadership of Pauline Gower. She simply had her girls prove their unflinching competence, in 1941 she is credited for having said,

“We are called ATA –‘Always Terrified Airwomen’ – but we’re going to answer that by just quietly going on with the job. So far, we have delivered 150 aeroplanes from the factory to the base without a hitch.” (6)



Pauline Gower

Women in a Man’s World

The Experience

The women found themselves being frequently compared to their many male counterparts, yet, despite their gender-line challenging occupation, the women of the ATA *did* want to be seen as women. Many of them were attracted to the ‘smartness’ of the uniform with its peaked cap and gold wings, and when asked about make-up one ATA woman, Diana Barnato-Walker said:

“We all tried to look as feminine as possible, [as] we were doing what was called a man’s job...” (1)

She tells how they used to grow their fingernails as long as they could, even though it made it difficult to push the starter coil and booster coil in the aircrafts at the same time, so most of them would use the top of their lipsticks to push one and the bottom of the lipstick to push the other (1). Another story is from Mary de Bunsen about two ATA pilots that she calls the ‘Audreys’,

“The two Audreys, who were also very good pilots, had a special line of feminine vapors, ‘My dear,’ one or the other would exclaim in the mess, ‘I’ve got my first Hudson (or Mitchell, or whatever it might be) and I know I shall crash and I’ve got a pain (cold, temperature, etc.)’ And they would totter out, leaving a trail of handkerchiefs, lipsticks, handbags, etc., which would be picked up by willing (male) hands. They would then fly whatever it was, superbly to its destination, where they would be assisted out of the aeroplane and the same pantomime would take place.” (2)



Despite stories about women like the overly-feminine ‘Audreys’, the ATA girls wanted to be seen as the competent pilots they were, as well as full-fledged women, and not as women attempting to ‘ape’ men, as they were sometimes accused. However, as the story about the ‘Audreys’ shows, being a woman in a man’s world did lead to some amusing stories, for example:

- One night out in London, some of the girls went to a revue, at one point the female singer looked around the audience for a serviceman to serenade. The singer saw the gold wings and began to croon before light revealed that the unknown uniform actually belonged to Margot Gore, who swore she would never wear it to the theatre again. (8)
- Another story is of a pilot who crash-landed beautifully in a field, and then was trapped in her airplane until the rescue crew arrived, because she was ‘afraid of the cows’. (4)

The Forgotten Pilots

The End of the War



The ATA ended in 1945 with the war, because their express purpose had been to help the RAF during the wartime. There is a monument to their service in St. Paul’s Cathedral, with a list of honor to those who died, of which 158 were men, and 15 women (8). For the women there is also ‘The Women of World War II Monument’ in Whitehall London, which has 17 sets of clothes and uniforms, representing the hundreds of jobs women performed during the war.

Despite these sites of memory, many of the women who flew feel as if they were forgotten, most notably Lettice Curtis, one of the early women pilots, who wrote a memoir entitled, *The Forgotten Pilots*. Although there were few of them the women contributed individually just as much as the men did. For example, Curtis ferried 1, 467 aircraft during the War, while one of the male pilots, George Dutton, ferried 1,265 aircraft (3). They were also the first women in Britain to be awarded ‘equal pay, or equal work.’

I hope that through research like mine, these women will not be forgotten, but honored for their bravery, sacrifice, and service.

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