

A salute to the ATA, 60 years on



operational tasks, the ATA ran their own maintenance, medical, administration and catering organisation. Initially the pilots who ferried the planes returned to base by train. A flying taxi service using Ansons and Fairchild's was established so that by 1943 one ATA pilot did the work of three.

ATA pools reached from Hamble on the Solent to Lossiemouth in the Moray Firth. When women pilots wanted to join the ATA, the sparks really flew. Pauline Gower, an MP's daughter with 2,000 hours under her belt ferrying 30,000 passengers, wasn't taking 'no' for an answer. She secured Churchill's intervention and paved the way for more than 110 women to fly alongside 600 Great War fighter aces and commercial pilots rejected by the RAF on grounds of health or age – the self-styled *Ancient and Tattered Aviators*. The legendary Amy Johnson, who had flown solo to Australia, was ferrying an Oxford south via Blackpool without proper instruments. Flying above the clouds, she waited for a gap to appear; none did. Eventually she ran out of fuel and baled out over the Thames Estuary. By sheer bad luck she drowned next to a navy vessel; Lt-Commander Walter Fletcher perished attempting to save her. E.C. Cheesman, who wrote the story of the ATA in 1945, escaped the same fate when he baled out successfully after failing to get back down through the clouds.

Even Douglas Bader was impressed by the women fliers and visited the home of Diana Barnato-Walker, the ATA member who later became the first British woman to break the sound barrier, and who today lives in Kent. WGG Duncan-Smith, the Spitfire ace and father of Iain, called Diana one of the best of an exceptional group of pilots.

Some of the 600 men of the ATA were equally remarkable, like Stewart Keith Jopp, the flying ace from the Great War who lost his arm and eye to a Very pistol. He was a

Left: the redoubtable Lettice Curtis steps into a Spitfire

AOPA member **Nigel Griffiths MP*** writes about the successful campaign to honour the wartime pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary, men and women

Lord James Douglas Hamilton has one of the most remarkable mementos from the early days of flight, written in lipstick by a Spitfire pilot. His aunt Audrey Sale Barker was a pioneering transcontinental aviator; in 1932 she flew with Joan Page to Cape Town in a Gypsy Moth. They crashed on the way there and they crashed on the way back. Badly injured and cowering under the wing for protection from the sun, Audrey hailed a passing Masai herdsman and passed him a note pleading for help at the nearest mission. All she had to write with was her lipstick. Within a decade she was flying Spitfires over Britain.

For 60 years the achievements of one of the most remarkable operations in World War II has been neglected. Fewer than 800 civilian pilots in the Air Transport Auxiliary ferried 309,000 fighters and bombers between factories and airfields and around the country, covering 18 million miles to keep the RAF supplied with serviceable aircraft. They were the war's unsung heroes. Throughout the war, ATA pilots were required to fly VFR only, and mostly without radios. Often they took off

having studied only a postcard bearing essential handling information.

The ATA was the brainchild of a young pilot and well-connected British Airways executive Gerard D'Erlanger. In 1938, when war seemed unavoidable, he wrote to Air Minister Harold Balfour suggesting a territorial air force of experienced civilian pilots who could help the RAF by ferrying planes to front-line airfields. So the Air Transport Auxiliary was formed. Pilots were recruited from British flying clubs, the Civil Air Guard, veterans of the 1914-18 war, and experienced fliers from 27 other countries. Frustrated pilots from neutral countries like the USA came over, including their most famous female pilot, Jackie Cochran.

Those with 500 hours experience were created First Officers, who were allowed to fly twins, while Second Officers with less experience ferried single-engine craft. Later in the war, the ATA trained new pilots. The ATA wanted to have every pilot capable of flying anything the RAF had on its books and by the end of the war, they flew 147 separate types, right up to the Lancaster. Over and above their

member of No 1 Fighter Squadron when he joined the Royal Flying Corps in 1916. More than 20 years later he showed up and insisted in taking the flying test. He passed, like two other one-armed airmen. Of the 147 fatalities that afflicted the ATA, Keith Jopp wrote *"Bad weather and high ground took the heaviest toll, followed by technical failure, with pilot error a long way behind."* Writing of the women ATA pilots he said: *"Those who knew and trained them acknowledged that the women were just as skilful as the men, and, on the whole, far more painstaking and conscientious."*

His niece, Betty also flew in the ATA. She's in South Africa now, and recalls how the weather closed in when she was ferrying a Barracuda torpedo dive bomber up to Lossiemouth. Forced to ditch in the Firth of Forth, as her aircraft sank to the sea-floor she waited, cool as a cucumber for the cockpit to fill with water, then unhooked her harness, slid back the canopy and swam to the surface where a fisherman picked her up.

Joy Lofthouse was one of the youngest pilots. She told me she loved flying so much that she was almost the last to leave the ATA when it was disbanded in 1945. Her sister Yvonne lives in the USA, which contributed over two dozen female ATA pilots. Since the Auxiliaries were not part of the UK military flying services, the US couldn't object to its

Jenny Broad about to deliver a Typhoon



Joan Hughes is dwarfed by a Shorts Stirling



**This photo: Bobby Sandoz, Opal Anderson, Jadwiga Pilsudska and Mary Zerbel-Ford
Bottom: Lettice Curtis and Pauline Gower at the controls of an ATA Anson**



pilots flying here. Prestwick was the main Atlantic bridge, receiving 17,000 US planes under Lend Lease, and many more after the US fleet was bombed in Pearl Harbour.

94-year old Mary Hunter told me she preferred Hurricanes to Spitfires. Mary, who lives in Wales, had to leave in 1943 when she was expecting her first child, and was told by Pauline Gower, she "was not allowed to carry that sort of passenger." There were many famous foreign fliers: Jadwiga Pilsudska, the daughter of the founder of modern Poland who fled to England and joined the ATA in 1940 and now lives in Warsaw, and the heir to the King of Siam, Prince Chirosoakti, who perished flying a Hurricane from Kirkbride to Arbroath when he

got caught in clouds in a narrow valley.

The ATA played a key role in the relief of Malta, which was down to its last four Hurricanes, by ferrying 99 Spitfires in 1942 to Abbotsinch for embarkation on the United States aircraft carrier 'Wasp'. The vessel made two trips from the Clyde, prompting Churchill to tell the House of Commons "Who said a wasp can't sting twice?"

Lettice Curtis who lives in Wargrave, Berkshire was one of the most prolific pilots, flying over 400 four-engine bombers and over 150 Mosquitos – which my own father flew in during the war. Churchill's Minister of Aircraft Production Lord Beaverbrook summed up the ATA's achievements at the end of the war,

telling 12,000 guests at the farewell pageant at its HQ, White Waltham: "They were soldiers fighting in the struggle just as completely as if they had been engaged on the battlefield."

After the war these women – and men – just faded back into civilian life. They received no special honours, no campaign medal, no badge of valour. And for six decades their exploits have gone unrecognised, while the Bevin Boys and the Land Women have had their rightful dues. At long last, their achievements are to be officially recognised. I put the case to the Prime Minister in January, and now a Badge of Honour is being commissioned. At its peak, the ATA had 3,241 pilots, flight engineers, mechanics and ground staff. There are only 100 left, and it is gratifying to know that these heroes will be acclaimed at long last. ■

*Nigel Griffiths is MP for Edinburgh South. A former consumer affairs and small business minister, he flies the Robinson R22, R44 and Bell 206L. He was prompted to seek recognition for the ATA after reading Giles Whittell's book 'Spitfire Women' – Harper Press, £20.

Below: PPL(H) Nigel Griffiths MP

