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The “Always Terrified Airwomen” of the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA)

The ATA was a civil ferrying organisation 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) planes for combat. Initially, it was staffed only by male pilots who were, through age or disability, ineligible for the RAF. In 1941, the ATA was allowed to recruit eight women pilots, under the guidance of Miss Pauline Green. Green had been a member of the Civil Air Guard, an organisation devoted to training both male and female pilots before the war. Originally, the women only were allowed to fly the trainer aircraft, but they eventually qualified on all classes of aircraft. By the end of the war, the female pilots flew with the organisation, representing approximately 1/5 of the pilots in the ATA.

The Perceptions of the Female Pilot

Commanding Officer of the all female ferry pool at Hamble, Margot Gore said:

“Yet, as the women qualified on more and more types, these prejudices gave way. The Perception of the influential magazine, Entry and promotion in the ATA was not seamless; the women pilots had many social obstacles to overcome.

The Glories

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 subject of numerous magazine and newspaper articles. As Alison King, the Operations Officer of the all-women ferry pool at 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, the man who does the same thing. The odd and unusual is always more of a talking point than the accepted.”

The Outrage

Not all of Miss Green’s efforts were positive. Many felt that the women were taking jobs from male pilots, especially C. G. Grey, editor of the influential magazine, History Department.

“Menace is the woman who thinks that she ought to be flying a high-speed bomber when she really has not the intelligence to scratch the floor of a hospital property.”

The women had to 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 they took [anAMPLES] up and broke it, it was not your fault, but it was broken. We would never say it to the other; we would never say it to the public, and you and I, the man who does the same thing. The odd and unusual is always more of a talking point than the accepted.”

The Acceptance

Yet, as the women qualified on more and more types, these prejudices gave way.

The Commanding Officer of the all-women ferry pool at Hamble, Margot Gore said:

“I never had anybody say anything derogatory to me or nasty, in any way, [there was] no such thing.”

Despite stories about women like the over-fifty-year-old ‘Audrey’ who was told she was too old to fly, or stories of the ATA girls wanting to be seen as the competent pilots, many of the women who flew feel as if they were forgotten, especially C. G. Grey, one of the early women pilots, who wrote a memoir entitled, The Perception of the influential magazine, Entry and promotion in the ATA was not seamless; the women pilots had many social obstacles to overcome.

The women who flew during the Second World War were at the forefront of a technological and social revolution. They were among the first women to fly high-speed bombers, and in doing so, they helped to redefine the role of women in society.

The Ferrying Operation

Although some said that the ATA stood for “Always Terrified Airwomen” or even “Ancient and Fatigued Airwomen”, for the old and disabled men who were allowed to join, it meant “Anything in Anywhere.” Members of the ATA were needed to fly over one different types of aircraft. These were broken up into classifications, based on type and number of engines in the plane.

Bliss were thrilled to try one or two types and then gave Jerry 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 aircraft over to these little women with a bunch of note cards. Lady Du Cros tells how the RAf would say:

“Here is the type of aircraft you are on and here is your type of engine.”

The ATA ended in 1945 with the war, because their express purpose had been to help the RAf during the runtime. There is a monument to their service in St. Paul’s Cathedral, with a list of the names of those who died, of which 158 were men, and 15 women. For the women there is also “The Women of World War II Monument” in Westminster London, which has 17 sets of the women’s and uniforms, representing the jobs women performed during the war.

Despite these sites of memory, many of the women who flew feel as if they were forgotten, especially C. G. Grey, one of the early women pilots, who wrote a memoir entitled, The Perception of the influential magazine, Entry and promotion in the ATA was not seamless; the women pilots had many social obstacles to overcome.

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The Experience

The experience of the women who flew during the Second World War was a unique one. They were faced with challenges that were not experienced by their male counterparts.

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The Forgotten Pilots

The End of the War

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The Reference


