

UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

THE “ALWAYS TERRIFIED AIRWOMEN” OF THE AIR TRANSPORT AUXILIARY:
DEFINING FEMININITY AMONG THE WOMEN WHO FLEW MILITARY AIRCRAFT IN
SECOND WORLD WAR BRITAIN



BY
ANNA PETERSON

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PROFESSOR NICOLETTA GULLACE
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*For my Great-Grandmother,
Clara Carlson*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction.....	1
II. Chapter One: Perception of the Women of the Air Transport Auxiliary.....	6
<i>The Outrage</i>	
<i>The Glamour</i>	
<i>The Skepticism</i>	
<i>The Acceptance</i>	
III. Chapter Two: Femininity Among the Women of the Air Transport Auxiliary	27
<i>The Expectations</i>	
<i>Femininity</i>	
IV. Chapter Three: “Sexualized Femininity” and the Soldier-Hero	42
<i>The Marvel</i>	
<i>The Camaraderie</i>	
V. Conclusion	57
VI. Bibliography	60
VII. Picture Appendix	63

INTRODUCTION

As the Second World War began in Britain it became clear that control of the air would be a deciding factor in the coming conflict. As a result, in September 1939 the British created the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) to ferry military aircraft from factory to aerodrome, under the control of Gerald d'Erlanger, the Director of British Airways, who had been charged with its formation. This was a civilian organization that was initially staffed with male pilots, who, through age or disability, were ineligible for the Royal Air Force (RAF). However, in 1940, eight women pilots were invited to join under the command of Miss Pauline Gower, Senior Commandant of the ATA Women's Section.¹

By 1945, the women pilots accounted for approximately 20% of all the pilots in the organization, which had 166 women, including 25 American women, and 1,152 men.² While they were only a small percentage of the ATA, women pilots enjoyed the same responsibilities and did the same work as the men. During the war, for example, Lettice Curtis, one of the ATA women, delivered 1,467 aircraft, while George Dutton, delivered 1,265 aircraft, contributing essentially the same service to the organization.³

The men and women pilots also had an almost identical accident rate,⁴ resulting in the loss of 158 male and 15 female pilots.⁵ The majority of these accidents were due to the

¹ D. Collett Wadge, ed., *Women in Uniform* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co. LTD, 1946), 381.

² Lettice Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots: The Story of the Air Transport Auxiliary 1939-45* (London: The Eastern Press, LTD., 1982), 141-143 and 208.

³ Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots*, 320-321.

⁴ Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots*, 309.

⁵ Alison King, *Golden Wings: The Story of Some of the Women Ferry Pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary* (London: C. Arthur Pearson Limited, 1956), 167.

unpredictable English weather. The priority of the ATA was to get the aircrafts delivered as soon as they were ready, which necessitated that the pilots fly in all weather, including snow, fog or even ice.⁶ While the pilots of the ATA never participated in combat, their daily battle with the elements was as close as they came, causing Lord Beaverbrook, Minister of Aircraft Production 1940-1941, to comment that, “The men and women of the Air Transport Auxiliary were civilians in uniform who played a soldier’s part in the Battle of Britain and who performed, throughout the war, a task of supreme importance to the RAF. They brought the airplanes to the squadrons. In foul weather and fair, by night and day, they kept the ferry moving.”⁷ True to this mission, the motto of the organization was *Atheris Avidi* –Eager for the Air.⁸ By 1945, when the war ended, the ATA had flown over 100 types of aircraft and delivered 308,567 aircraft in total.⁹ As the organization had been created for the sole purpose of supporting the RAF during the war, the ATA lowered its flag on May 30th, 1945, when the war came to a close.¹⁰

Women’s position within the ATA challenged the established gender lines of wartime Britain. While many women performed support work, few carried out ‘male’ tasks alongside men. Sonya Rose, Lucy Noakes and others have noted that women within such positions made an exaggerated attempt to maintain their femininity to separate themselves further from their male counterparts. The press and public, also, worked to categorize the women of the ATA as glamorous aviatrixes, regardless of the distinctly unglamorous nature of their work. The men of the RAF and the Air Ministry needed to be gently prodded into accepting them as anything more than a liability, due to the physical and mental incapacities they believed to be inherent of

⁶ Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots*, ix.

⁷ E. C. Cheesman, *Brief Glory: The Story of the Air Transport Auxiliary* (Chippenham, Wiltshire: Antony Rowe Limited, 2001), 3.

⁸ King, *Golden Wings*, 183.

⁹ Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots*, 306.

¹⁰ Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots*, 283.

women. The female pilots of the ATA were stuck between two conceptions of womanhood, neither of which wholly accommodated their anomalous position. In order to satisfy both the expectations of femininity and the requirements of the air force, women of the ATA spent extraordinary amounts of time and energy reconciling the concept that one advertisement of the era dubbed, “Beauty is your Duty.”¹¹

In his recent monograph, *Spitfire Women of World War II*, Giles Whittell states that, “to be obsessive about flying and deliberately careless about anything conventionally ‘female’ was, in fact, the norm for ATA girls.”¹² It is with this contention that his, otherwise excellently written, synopsis of the female experience within the ATA goes awry. The women were not ‘deliberately careless’ about their femininity, but, in fact, the opposite. As Noakes argues in *War and the British*, the Second World War “cut across gender boundaries as never before, as women entered many areas that had previously been conceived of as belonging exclusively to men. Yet at the same time, many gender divisions were reinforced.”¹³ While the women of the ATA were in such close proximity to the military men during wartime, they attempted to emphasize their sense of traditional femininity to offset and justify their presence in military support. By the same token, the war obliged the men to resign themselves to the closeness of women, however that same femininity that the women strove for made their proximity more acceptable to the men.

The maintenance of femininity and womanliness among the women of the ATA was important in order for the women to be seen as fulfilling the expectations of feminine wartime citizenship. As Rose argues, for women in World War II to be seen as ‘good citizens’ they had

¹¹ J. Waller and M. Vaughan-Rees, *Women in Wartime: The Role of Women’s Magazines 1939-1945* (London: Macdonald Optima, 1987), 100.

¹² Giles Whittell, *Spitfire Women of World War II* (London: Harper Press, 2007), 27.

¹³ Lucy Noakes, *War and the British: Gender and National Identity, 1939-91* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), 14.

to both contribute to the war effort and maintain the traditional codes of femininity.¹⁴ However, as with the position of the women within the ATA, their obligations to join up often conflicted with satisfying the norms of femininity. To reconcile this issue, many women turned to what Rose calls 'sexualized femininity,' which focuses on the notion that "being physically attractive and focusing on self-adornment were necessary preoccupations for women even in wartime."¹⁵ This allowed women to express their femininity, even while performing typically male tasks.

Men also used the "sexualized femininity with its focus on the female body...to make acceptable the 'gender-bending' obligations of citizenship for women."¹⁶ Therefore, although women were flying military aircraft, men could still see female pilots as something separate and apart from the idealized military hero.¹⁷ Men of the RAF were also comforted by the notion that women were involved only out of necessity, and were temporary additions to the flying force. As Cynthia Enloe states, "In both world wars the contradictions between the need to mobilize women as soldiers and the need to prevent women's presence from undermining the military's legitimizing image of manhood was softened somewhat by the very notion that the time was peculiar and finite: female recruitment was only 'for the duration'."¹⁸

Therefore, while Whittell claims that the women purposefully avoided being seen as feminine, it seems that the reverse was, in fact, the case. Women of the ATA saw their own femininity as integral to their wartime citizenship. While the public embraced the notion of sexualized femininity to glamorize female pilots and men used it to see them as women first and

¹⁴ Sonya Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 109.

¹⁵ Rose, 134.

¹⁶ Rose, 135.

¹⁷ Noakes, 17.

¹⁸ Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?: The Militarization of Women's Lives* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 138.

pilots second, the women manipulated images of femininity in order to fulfill the expectations of remaining women while operating within a masculine environment. As a result of the dueling images of wartime British womanhood, these women formed a unique sense of femininity, which tied many traditional gender norms to an understated and elegant competency that allowed them to do their jobs, and still remain women.

CHAPTER ONE

PERCEPTION OF THE WOMEN OF THE AIR TRANSPORT AUXILIARY

In 1940, when the first eight women pilots were invited to join the ranks of the ATA, the British public was not yet ready to accept females within such a masculine occupation. Their reluctance remained in spite of the existence of such famous prewar record-breaking female aviatrixes as Amelia Earhart, Jackie Cochran, and Britain's own, Amy Johnson. The air was still seen as a masculine domain, unsuited for women. This point is even more firmly made when one looks at the negative public reaction to the policy of the Civil Air Guard (CAG), created in 1938, which offered flight training subsidies for prospective pilots of either gender, therefore increasing the number of female flyers substantially.¹ These women were critiqued for 'wasting' the resources allocated to the CAG. The criticism of the 'She-CAGs,'² transitioned easily into disparagement for the women of the ATA, during the first months of the war.

The women of the ATA were initially condemned for their interest in flying. The public complained that these 'Ferrywomen' were attempting to ape men, while also stealing jobs that rightly belong to those men trained as pilots.³ Scores of people sent letters to the editor of the influential aviation magazine, *The Aeroplane*, to protest the inappropriate nature of the female presence within the ferrying organization. They suggested that if the women were as patriotic as they were reported to be, then they should not be undercutting the men of the country and should aspire for wartime positions more befitting their sex. C. G. Grey, the editor of *The Aeroplane* at the beginning of the war, had a sympathetic ear for these outraged citizens, and published a rash

¹ Lettice Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots: The Story of the Air Transport Auxiliary 1939-45* (London: The Eastern Press, LTD., 1982), 11-12.

² 'RAF', "The Indignant She-CAG," *The Aeroplane*, May 10, 1939, Correspondence sec., vol. 67, 610.

³ Harold Collings, "Women as Ferry Pilots," *The Aeroplane*, January 5, 1940, Correspondence sec., vol. 387, 30.

of negative comments about the women, with the addition of his own editorial response. In fact, the best known and most cutting remark aimed at the female flyers was coined by C. G. Grey himself, when he suggested that, “[t]he 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.”⁴

While respected aviation magazines might have reacted viciously to the entrance of women into the ATA, other popular media outlets saw it as a splendid photo opportunity. They wanted to give the public what they thought it wanted, and that was glamour. With the nasty business of war upon them, magazines such as the *Picture Post*, *Illustrated London News*, *The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, *Daily Sketch*, and *Daily Mail* saw the women of the ATA as an opportunity to lighten the atmosphere. They swarmed to the aerodrome and took pictures of the women at tea, at leisure, with their parachutes, in their uniforms, etc. The excessive press coverage threatened to trivialize the women, as well as the work they were doing, by making them appear to be part of a publicity stunt. It also fueled the public’s distaste, inciting one *Aeroplane* reader to write in with the comment that, “the present ATA is nothing more or less than a tea party – yes’r, and they get paid for drinking the tea!”⁵

At the beginning of the war, military men, like the general public, were reluctant to accept the women among their ranks, and they had doubts that the women had the physical capacity for such taxing work. Despite the fact that the women were required to have substantial flying experience to be eligible, the men worried that they would still be overpowered by the heavy military aircrafts that they would need to control. When some women were finally

⁴ Sinclair O’Neill, *Wartime Women: Memories of a Forties Generation* (Chichester, West Sussex: Cutmill Books, 2002), 14.

⁵ Noel North, “Those Unpopular Women,” *The Aeroplane*, February 23, 1940, Correspondence sec., vol. 387, 262.

allowed to take the bomber conversion course, which would qualify them to fly light and medium bombers, “most male pilots shook their heads, ‘you’ll never be able to hold ‘em, dears, if one engine cuts,’ they condoled and sucked in their breath at the thought.”⁶ The men were not just concerned with the women’s strength, but with their minds as well, fearing that the women might be ‘flighty’ and unable to perform under war conditions.

Most of the public uproar and military consternation took place during the beginning months of the war, a period now known as the ‘phony war,’ which lasted until May 1940. This was a period during which war had been declared, but the British government had yet to take any action. This left the citizenry time and energy to worry over the gender boundaries that the women of the ATA were bending. However, as the war began in earnest, public commentary on women died down, and the media coverage dropped off, leaving the women in peace to convince the men of the RAF that they could carry out their duties. The issues raised between the covers of *The Aeroplane* had not been resolved, but it appears that, as the war gained momentum and as the women continued to prove themselves as adept pilots, the British were willing to leave them in peace, *for the duration*.

THE OUTRAGE

The Civil Air Guard was conceived in October 1938 to shore up foundering civil flying clubs. It created a market for the clubs by subsidizing any person between the ages of 18 and 50 who could pass the medical required to attain their private pilot’s ‘A’ License. All but two flying clubs in the country decided to participate in the scheme, and within a fortnight, 4,000 were

⁶ Alison King, *Golden Wings: The Story of Some of the Women Ferry Pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary* (London: C. Arthur Pearson Limited, 1956), 27.

enrolled.⁷ In July 1939 10,000 CAG members were currently undergoing training, while 3,000 - 4,000 had already received their pilot's licenses.⁸ During this time, however, the presence of women among those being training to fly light aircraft had not gone unnoticed.

There were complaints that women were wasting the time of CAG instructors, time that could be better used by male pilots. This issue was dealt with by a woman who wrote *The Aeroplane* and identified herself only as 'Woman CAG.' She argued that the CAG subsidies were the *only* way for a woman of little income to learn how to fly, whereas men can, and should in her opinion, join the 'orthodox services.'⁹ On behalf of her fellow female CAGs she pointed out that,

Yet another criticism is that the women only join the CAG for notoriety. I don't believe it. For these women the Civil Air Guard represents the crumbs from the rich man's table. Given the chance to fly for the RAF you will find them all waiting on the doorstep tomorrow – the whole 299 of them *and* I would bet on it...Never, to my everlasting sorrow, can I know that pride of belonging to the greatest Service in the World, for I am only a much despised WOMAN CAG¹⁰

Beneath this letter, which was printed in the Correspondence section of *The Aeroplane*, the editor, C. G. Grey, argued that the RAF would be overburdened by extra pilots and that those men should to keep their jobs, with the intention to be released to the RAF should the need arise. He also contended that, "the only reason for allowing women into the CAG is to prevent them from being anti-RAF, and so becoming a hindrance to the expansion. By letting them in they are made into moving advertisement agencies for Aviation, though some of them can hardly be regarded as advertisements in themselves. Very few women are any use to Aviation in the air."¹¹

⁷ Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots*, 11.

⁸ Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots*, 12.

⁹ 'Woman CAG,' "Feminine CAG," *The Aeroplane*, April 26, 1939, Correspondence sec., vol. 67, 537.

¹⁰ 'Woman CAG.'

¹¹ 'Woman CAG.'

In May another woman wrote in over her frustration to the editor's response to 'Woman CAG.' She titled her letter, "Indignant She-CAG," but signed her letter "RAF." She argued that many women wished to join the Services, but knew that they would not be allowed, and that the editor's response was "like rubbing salt in cuts- of women."¹² Unfortunately, the editor's response to her letter could only have disheartened 'RAF' further. He mocked her for sending her correspondence anonymously, saying, "in spite of the courage which fills her with a desire to wreck the Empire's aeroplanes instead of rocking the Empire's cradles, [she] had not the courage to sign her name."¹³ He also stated that women are more useful "keeping the home fires burning" and that "the woman who claims an absolute all-round equality with man is not only an infernal nuisance to man, but generally ends by being a nuisance to herself and her women friends as well."¹⁴

Grey was not alone in his opinion of women pilots. One person wrote in with the suggestion that the money spent on training women in the CAG could be better spent on parachutes.¹⁵ One young woman, who Grey noted was "sensible" and "represents the majority of women," wrote in with the opinion that,

I have learned that except as the wife or sweetheart of someone in the flying World there is very little room at all for women in Aviation...Women are temperamentally unsuited to make good pilots...The average woman pilot has her good days, but she more frequently has her bad ones. In fact, she is unreliable, and employers realize this. So, 'RAF,' let us stick to our cookers, sewing machines and typewriters, and leave the men to handle the flying machines. After all, how often do we hear a sensible man declaiming that he can cook or sew as well as a woman? Let us, therefore give the men the same 'square deal' they give

¹² 'RAF.'

¹³ 'RAF.'

¹⁴ 'RAF.'

¹⁵ Gwynne Johns, "She-CAG and Parachutes," *The Aeroplane*, May 17, 1939, Correspondence sec., vol. 67, 640 and Patricia Parker, "Up She Rises!" *The Aeroplane*, May 31, 1939, Correspondence sec., vol. 67, 716.

us in this respect; and let us remember, too, 'RAF,' that they really don't care for 'he-women' TWENTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD ANNE READ

In her one letter, and with her twenty-two years of wisdom behind her, Anne Read, suggests that these bothersome women in the paper should just stick to 'women's work' and not interfere with the men, while at the same time warning them that men don't find 'he-women' attractive. As Grey noted in his response to Read, it is more than likely that many would have agreed more with her than with 'RAF.'

In fact, it inspired another woman to write in to encourage other women to accept their limitations and traditional place within society.

The *average* woman is a menace on the roads, or a bore. Heaven help us if they take to the air...just as I am intolerant of men knitting or pushing a pram, so I dislike women who strut about in badly fitting trousers, and who, like the majority of girl grooms, are wonderful in theory, and useless in practice.¹⁶

But the men were not to be outdone. 'A Mere Man' wrote in to argue that war was too grim a business for women, and that the British should not be expected to welcome women into the RAF before "Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini...admit Frauleins and Signore into their aerial fighting services."¹⁷ He complained that these "stern realists" were laughing at the British for wasting their time and money training women to fly, and offered that women should be required to find something useful to do with themselves.

I suggest that before any female be allowed to be a She-CAG she should qualify as a nurse, or cook, or something USEFUL. All this desire to thunder about in heavy lorries, or dash round in posh Staff cars, or career about in the sky in aircraft, is merely one more manifestation of the female desire to ape men. So for goodness' sake, girls, keep off the grass and let the men get on with the job which is essentially a man's... A MERE MAN¹⁸

¹⁶ Glenda Spooner, "A Horse-Coper's View," *The Aeroplane*, July 12, 1939, Correspondence sec., vol. 67, 74.

¹⁷ 'A Mere Man,' "Female CAGs," *The Aeroplane*, August 2, 1939, Correspondence sec., vol. 67, 172.

¹⁸ 'A Mere Man.'

It was into this atmosphere that the Women's Section of the Air Transport Auxiliary was born. Even before *The Aeroplane* could run its article discussing the new addition to the ferrying operation, it was printing complaints from its readership about the loss of men's jobs to women.

Why this encroachment of women on a man's job? Such work as ferrying, etc., should be confined to pilots unfit for combative service in the RAF and others above military age. What does the Government expect these men to do? Do they expect them to join the Labor Battalion of the Army for work in France or some other form of Home Defense? You cannot expect ex-pilots to do this for the sake of women who want to 'show off.'...Women are not seeking this job for the sake of doing something for their country, but for the sake of publicity; one has only to glance through the lay Press for proof. Women who are anxious to serve their country should take on work more befitting their sex, instead of encroaching on a man's occupation. Men have made aviation reach its present perfection. Women have aped men and have contributed nothing to its development.¹⁹

Following this, C. G. Grey, no longer the editor of *The Aeroplane* but still contributing, wrote an article titled "A Rank Scandal," which discussed the new women ferry pilots. He reported that the women were being paid the exorbitant sum of 600 pounds a year to fly old machines. He stated that he had, "no objection to the Air Ministry's employing women if there is any shortage of male pilots. But when one considers that there are thousands of competent male pilots walking about with their hands in their pockets, one cannot help thinking that they might be usefully employed in ferry work, just to keep them in practice."²⁰ Apparently, however, the men of the RAF *did* have enough to do, and were not simply 'walking about with their hands in their pockets,' because the push to transfer the ferrying duties out of the RAF and into a separate organization came directly from the Ministry of Aircraft Production. Also, in an article titled "'ATA' Girls" *The Aeroplane* managed to set straight the fact that the women were in fact not receiving 600 pounds per annum, and were in fact receiving an undisclosed sum

¹⁹ Harold Collings, "Women as Ferry Pilots," *The Aeroplane*, January 5, 1940, Correspondence sec., vol. 387, 30.

²⁰ C. G. Grey, "A Rank Scandal," *The Aeroplane*, January 12, 1940, vol. 387, 35.

assured to be less than that of the male pilots. It was a simple, informative piece and ended with the encouraging thought that, “given a chance there seems no reason why they shouldn’t do their job well.”²¹

This article, however, did not quiet *The Aeroplane*’s upset readers. Between January and March 1940, sixteen letters discussing the women of the ATA were printed in the one page Correspondence section of the magazine. They are not uniformly negative, and the majority of them complain about what a bore the topic had become, yet the letters continued to be received and subsequently printed. One woman declared that, “the whole affair of engaging women to fly aeroplanes when there are so many men fully qualified to do the work is disgusting. The women themselves are only doing it ‘more or less’ as a hobby, and should be ashamed of themselves.”²² While one man wrote in to defend them arguing that they had earned the right to fly, saying, “No, Sir, hats off to the ATA girls...and let’s encourage them. If by the end of the War they have ousted us from our jobs, it will probably be our own faults and up to us to go one better.”²³

One reader who declared himself to be a member of ‘the National Men’s Defence League’ writes in to argue again that men are being left idle by these women ferry pilots, and that their appointment “marks another stage in the advance of the feminine invasion of men’s jobs.”²⁴ He is also concerned about the impression that the Women’s Section will give the Germans. “Germany will think that Britain is at the end of her pilot air reserve.” While in the same edition another man argues that, “when women are capable of flying fast and/or heavy

²¹ “ ‘ATA’ Girls,” *The Aeroplane*, January 19, 1940, vol. 387, 92.

²² Betty Spurling, “The Ferrywomen Again,” *The Aeroplane*, January 26, 1940, Correspondence sec., vol. 387, 124.

²³ ‘B. 1790,’ “Welcome for the Atagirls,” *The Aeroplane*, February 2, 1940, Correspondence sec., vol. 387, 154.

²⁴ R.C. Pinkerton, “The Feminine Invasion,” *The Aeroplane*, February 23, 1940, Correspondence sec., vol. 387, 262.

aircraft to their destinations in all weathers, by all means pay them for their trouble,” but in the meantime, “someone has grievously erred in allowing a handful of women pilots to ferry toy trainers from A to B at the magnificent salary of 6 pounds per week.”²⁵

There continued to be a smattering of letters to the editor after March 1940, but the ire seemed to have worn off of the majority of the public. Just as Noel North in his letter above suggests, as the women continually proved their ability to ferry increasing types of aircraft to all destinations in almost all weathers their notoriety wore off and they were allowed to simply perform the tasks set to them. However, before they could settle in comfortably they had another type of publicity to combat from the popular media.

THE GLAMOUR

In his book, titled *Brief Glory: The Story of the Air Transport Auxiliary*, E.C. Cheesman begins his chapter on the women of the ATA with the note that,

Throughout the war there was a distinct tendency on the part of Press to glamorize the life of the girl pilot. This was in part due to the novelty of the work and the undoubted smartness of the uniform with its gold wings, but it seems chiefly to have been due to the probably erroneous idea that it was what the public wished to believe. In actual fact this angle often caused a considerable amount of embarrassment to the victims and to the Ferry Pilot organization in general, and gave quite the wrong idea of the sterling work the women performed during the war.²⁶

In her memoir detailing her time as Operations Officer in the ATA, Alison King suggests that, “I suppose it is inevitable that women who fly, or indeed do anything a little out of the ordinary, are

²⁵ North.

²⁶ E.C. Cheesman, *Brief Glory: The Story of the Air Transport Auxiliary* (Chippenham, Wiltshire: Antony Rowe Limited, 2001), 71.

of more interest to the public...than the men who do the same thing.”²⁷ Gower and d’Erlanger had been prepared for just this type of additional public interest in the creation of the Women’s Section. On January 9, 1940 various newsrooms were contacted to announce a “photographic opportunity.” The eight members of the newly formed section were to be available the next day at Hatfield aerodrome near London.²⁸ The women were not seeking out publicity, but in fact attempting to curb the public’s interest. “The idea in inviting the press was to give them everything they wanted in one concentrated dose and hope they would be sated until something more momentous came along.”²⁹ Unfortunately, it did not manage to satisfy the voracious appetite of the papers for the sensation of the women ferry pilots.

That first day the press contrived pictures of the women running with their parachutes towards their aircraft. One of the women found this funny, as they were still only flying the trainer Tiger Moths. When the photographer yelled, ‘Run!’ she said, “What, scramble? To Tiger Moths?” and the press responded, yes.³⁰ It was a completely unrealistic scenario, as it was doubtful that anyone would call the base in urgent need of a trainer, but the women did run “in [their] new creaking flying suits, and [their] new stiff fur-lined flying boots carrying [their] 30 lb parachutes.”³¹ (Figure 1) The press also took pictures of the original eight in their dress uniforms and sitting at tea. Apparently they were asked to have a tea-party on the wing of one of the Tiger Moths, but that request the women refused.³²

²⁷ King, *Golden Wings*, 14.

²⁸ Giles Whittell, *Spitfire Women of World War II* (London: Harper Press, 2007), 61.

²⁹ Whittell, 62.

³⁰ Whittell, 62.

³¹ Whittell, 62-63.

³² King, *Golden Wings*, 120.

It was the sincere hope of both Gower and d'Erlanger that after the initial photo op the women would be left alone to simply do their job. Unfortunately, the press remained interested.

When asked about the press, Margaret Gore, one of the women pilots, responded,

They used to come down and were a bit annoying, I think we almost had more press trouble when Hamble started because we were almost in a warzone...and they were inclined to be a nuisance...always trying to get stories about boyfriends, they wanted to take photographs of you doing silly things, like drinking tea under the wing of a Spitfire, or knitting.³³

King relates another story about a news reporter visiting the women's pool at Hamble.

No one was there to receive him initially, so he sat with King until Gower returned. Seeing the reporter upon her arrival, she immediately stated, "Now for heaven's sake, please don't glamorize us."³⁴ The clever reporter used her comment as his headline, but his article was not quite what the C.O. has asked for. In King's words,

When the article appeared the headlines ran: 'WOMAN C.O. SAYS DON'T GLAMORIZE US.' It went on to talk of neat Nylon legs, Mr. Cochran's Young Ladies and Flying Debs. They were 'Atta Girls,' and Hamble was 'a stronghold of femininity,' whatever that might mean...And the girl who landed in a Spitfire, who slipped off her helmet, who sipped a cup of tea, who glanced fearlessly up or shyly down, invariably shook out her *golden* curls. She was slim, beautiful, nonchalant, devil-may-care, yet modest –and none of us had ever met her!³⁵

It was this girl that the press was after for their cover stories, and *Picture Post* was the lucky publication to finally manage to get the photo. In 1944 the *Picture Post* ran an issue with Maureen Dunlop, one of the women of the ATA, on the cover. She has just stepped out of her aircraft, and has her parachute slung casually over one shoulder. The sun is glinting in her hair

³³ Margaret Gore, IWM Acc. No. 9285/4.

³⁴ King, *Golden Wings*, 120.

³⁵ King, *Golden Wings*, 121.

as she runs a hand through it and she is smiling wistfully off into the distance.³⁶ (Figure 2)

However, the majority of the photos that the press managed to get were hardly as idyllic.

In her memoir, *ATA Girl: Memoirs of a Wartime Ferry Pilot*, Rosemary du Cros printed a news clipping with a large picture of one of the girls, dressed in her flying suit and parachute, from behind. The clipping sports the title, “8 Girls ‘Show’ R.A.F.: How D’ye Like the Togs Girls?”³⁷ (Figure 3) The caption for the picture says, “Perhaps it doesn’t look quite so chic as your usual confections, this Air Transport Auxiliary uniform, but we LIKE your harness, and the bustle which is the parachute. We like your air: in fact, we LIKE you flighty!”³⁸ The article makes special mention of the marital status of each of the women, and characterizes them all as wealthy women, whose ATA pay is “probably just pin-money.”³⁹

Articles such as this one trivialized the work that the women were doing. It made them appear as if they were flying just as a hobby to fill their free time, instead of doing the most useful war work that they were allowed. When Marjorie Cole, one of the women pilots, was later interviewed she stated that, “one felt terribly privileged...you felt that you were doing the maximum job that anybody could do as a girl in this country, which was truly a feeling...”⁴⁰ As Cole’s comment shows the women knew that they were lucky to be able to fly during the war, and as such they took their responsibility very seriously, something that the newspapers did not give them credit for.

³⁶ *Picture Post*, September 16, 1944, vol. 24, no. 12.

³⁷ Rosemary du Cros, *ATA Girl: Memoirs of a Wartime Ferry Pilot* (London: Frederick Muller Limited, 1983), 40.

³⁸ Cros, *ATA Girl*, 40.

³⁹ Cros, *ATA Girl*, 40.

⁴⁰ Marjorie Cole, IWM Acc. No. 13344/1, recorded October 25, 1984.

Pauline Gower had tried to limit the amount of press that her girls received, but only managed to “ignite a fascination with the women.”⁴¹ In return she implored newsmen to “not glamorize us,” only to later read an article about a slim, pretty, *blond* flyer that she had never met.⁴² She decided that the only recourse was to be simply unassailable. She was determined that they would develop a flight record that could not be criticized.

THE SKEPTICISM

Gower took the same tact with the men of the RAF and Air Ministry who were uneasy with the creation of the Women’s Section. A booklet published by the Air Force Ministry focusing on the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force discusses this general mistrust of the abilities of women.

Many senior officers, for example, expressed doubts about the behavior of women under fire...No one knew how far substitution could satisfactorily be carried out. It was taken for granted that women would be useful in domestic and clerical trades for instance; but no one could foresee whether they would be successful in trades which had no counterpart, or in which women were not usually employed, in civil life, such as radar, flight mechanic, electrician. No one knew whether, in countries where white women had usually led easy and sheltered lives, they could now successfully replace men, living and working in a military service under war conditions.⁴³

Women flying military aircrafts, even just to ferry them from one location to another, during wartime, certainly fits into the area of occupations ‘in which women were not usually employed,’ and as such caused disquiet among the men of the Air Ministry.

⁴¹ Whittell, 62.

⁴² King, *Golden Wings*, 121.

⁴³ Air Force Ministry, *The Women’s Auxiliary Air Force* (England: Air Publication, 1953), vi-vii.

Gower, as the Commanding Officer of the Women's Section, took it upon herself to instill the faith of the Air Ministry and RAF men in her pilots. She knew that the women would not be accepted based on face value, and therefore simply had to be given the time and opportunity to prove themselves and develop "a reputation for thorough competence."⁴⁴ To do so they needed to not only fly flawlessly, but also deliver a sufficient quota of aircraft. Gower knew that her first few women had to perform faultlessly, as any error would be blamed on their sex instead of the situation.⁴⁵ Just as Gower could have wished, the first eight women flew beautifully, and with no accidents. In 1940, she is recorded as proudly saying, "we didn't bend a blade of grass."⁴⁶ Yet, this came at the cost of great personal stress on the part of the women pilots.

Rosemary du Cros remembers the stress and the responsibility that came with being one of the first ATA girls. They knew that if they were unable to measure up, then more women would not be added to the section, and everyone would say that they had 'known' that the women would not be able to cut it. In an interview she tells how the women felt the Air Ministry and RAF would respond to any mishap on the part of the women, "we had this appalling responsibility weighing on our shoulders, you see...if a man took [an aircraft] up and broke it, it's 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..."⁴⁷

Yet, the women did convince the men of the Air Ministry to allow them to qualify on faster and bigger aircrafts. However when it came time for them to qualify on bombers, they again ran into considerable skepticism. The men simply couldn't believe that these tiny women

⁴⁴ Fahie, 145.

⁴⁵ Fahie, 145.

⁴⁶ Valerie Moolman, *Women Aloft* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1981), 136-138.

⁴⁷ Rosemary du Cros, IWM Acc. No. 9359/5, recorded 1986.

could control such a large aircraft. This became especially apparent when the women's pool was established at Hamble, which was surrounded by factories that produced light and medium bombers. As such, some of the women were sent to conversion courses to learn how to fly them. Alison King remembers the consternation that this caused among some of the men,

Who would hold up horrified hands at the thought of more women going on to Class 5. "No, no, dears," they'd say in effect, "this goes too far. Just because you've got a few 'heavies' near you, you think you've got to fly them. And you're *little* girls anyway, well, not big. It's as much as my strength can do to hold them. What about an engine cut? Phew!"...in spite of all the dire warnings about 'little girls', there was not one four-engined accident, however slight.⁴⁸

Du Cros tells a similar story about an argument that she once had with a Wing Commander about a York that she was picking up one day. He mentioned that, "it was so heavy compared with my five foot three and seven stone weight. I pointed out that I was not proposing to carry it after all, but on the contrary to make it carry me." She also makes sure to highlight the fact that, "the controls of a big aircraft were not at all heavy in the air."⁴⁹

Both of these encounters took place once women had been flying heavier aircraft for at least some time. However, in his book, *Brief Glory*, Cheesman relates a story, told by Captain H.R. Henderson, of the first female solo flight in a Halifax, one of the four-engined bombers. Lettice Curtis had just taken off when the Group Captain commanding the Station arrived unexpectedly in the Control Room. He learned, to his incredulity, that it was a woman pilot flying the Halifax. He decided to watch her landing on the balcony, only to run back to the Control Room having discovered that the runway in use was only 30 yards from the Tower. "Which way will the Halifax swing when it lands?" He demanded, and was relieved to learn,

⁴⁸ King, *Golden Wings*, 126-127.

⁴⁹ Cros, *ATA Girl*, 81.

“Away from the Control Tower, Sir, with the cross wind.”⁵⁰ Captain Henderson, however, had more faith in his student,

I watched confidently; the others excitedly...the wheels kissed the surface gently and the 30-ton aircraft rolled steadily down the runway in the smooth manner which seldom characterizes the first solo, and came to a dignified halt. ‘It didn’t swing!’ said the S.M. in a musing tone. ‘It didn’t even bounce!; he went into further detail. ‘And my lads have always kidded me how difficult the Halifaxes are. Why damn it, they must be *easy* if a little girl can fly them like that!’⁵¹

From this story one can see how the men were intrigued by the idea of a woman flying such a large plane, but how that excitement gave away to a momentary panic about which way the plane would swing if she could not in fact hold it. One can also see how the men reacted to the fact that she pulled off a flawless landing by making light of the accomplishment. The final comment from the S.M. also highlights the male concern with the infallibility of the soldier hero icon. The S.M. assumes that if a woman can fly and land a Halifax, then it must take a lesser level of skill than he had otherwise assumed, when it was a feat reserved for men alone.

It was this reaction that had the women continually fighting at the beginning of the war for each advancement. As King said, “from then onwards, once the great steps were taken, the women went on to bigger and better types. There were stumbling blocks, of course. Each new type had to be fought for. For, whatever women had done in the past, they were still not necessarily thought to be quite capable of taking the next step.”⁵² Yet through the effective leadership of Pauline Gower, the women won over those who mattered most, and simply accepted that, “a few diehards in the RAF top brass clung to the idea that women were unsuitable

⁵⁰ Cheesman, 54-56.

⁵¹ Cheesman, 54-56.

⁵² King, *Golden Wings*, 25-26.

for fierce or heavy aeroplanes, but ATA quietly overrode them and converted everybody to a higher class as soon as they were ready for it.”⁵³

THE ACCEPTANCE

In her memoir of her time with the ATA, *Mount Up With Wings*, Mary de Bunsen states, “Pilots, like horsemen, are born, not made, and the accident of sex appears to have very little to do with it.”⁵⁴ While this was the point that Gower was attempting to show, de Bunsen, as a woman pilot, was not one of the people that Gower needed to convince of the fact. Gower had limited goals. She was not attempting to change the gender divisions within British society with the creations of the Women’s Section. She was simply attempting to contribute to the war effort in the best way possible, and make her and her girl’s contribution acceptable to the general public. Partially due to Gower’s quiet insistence that her women were as competent as the men, and partially due to the burgeoning war activity, the women of the ATA were eventually left alone to go about their work.

In his book, *A Harvest of Memories: The Life of Pauline Gower M.B.E.*, Gower’s son, Michal Fahie, discusses his mother’s outlook on how to convince the country that the Women’s Section was not a ‘boob,’⁵⁵ as one *Aeroplane* reader termed it.

Pauline’s answer to the criticism and doubts expressed was to ensure that she and the others developed a reputation through competence. This was not easy, as not only was it essential to avoid accidents, but equally important to deliver a sufficient quota of aircraft. With the unpredictable and often appalling weather,

⁵³ Cros, *ATA Girl*, 81.

⁵⁴ Mary de Bunsen, *Mount Up With Wings* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1960), 142.

⁵⁵ North.

the aims of a steady supply could easily conflict with the aims of safety. Any shortfall or mishap would be blamed on the fact that they were women.⁵⁶

He quotes Gower as saying in May 1941, "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."⁵⁷

Gower's system of unobtrusive competence might not have been as effective had the war not begun to accelerate dramatically. According to one of the original eight, Rosemary du Cros, as the country moved out of the 'phony war' and into active war, "the general public was really more interested in its own reactional war"⁵⁸ than what the women of the ATA were doing. Those Britons who still had the time to be concerned over the 'impropriety' of the Women's Section could always look for comfort in the assurance that it was "only for the duration."⁵⁹

Most people, however, did not have the time any longer. As du Cros notes in her memoir,

As the War went on and became very serious and people began to get tired, it came down to men and women becoming just people. Any person who was capable of doing something did it. All those pretty barriers that are put up in peacetime to make society more pleasant melt away in a big crisis and life becomes a grim struggle of tired grey people all doing whatever it is they can do.⁶⁰

Lettice Curtis, another of the early women pilots, had similar sentiments, even if she is slightly less eloquent in her communication of them. Once the shortage of pilots had become readily

⁵⁶ Michal Fahie, *A Harvest of Memories: The Life of Pauline Gower M.B.E.* (Peterborough, England: GMS Enterprises, 1995), 145.

⁵⁷ Fahie, 146.

⁵⁸ Rosemary du Cros, IWM Acc. No. 9359/5, recorded 1986.

⁵⁹ Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?: The Militarization of Women's Lives* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 138.

⁶⁰ Cros, *ATA Girl*, 81.

apparent to all, she is quoted as having said, “They didn’t mind if you were a man, woman or a monkey”⁶¹ so long as the aircraft got delivered.

When the press dealt with them, coverage was more evenhanded and less likely to exaggerate the glamour of their positions. One article, published in 1941, even ended with the note that, “the glamour which goes with the fight forces is not for [the ATA]. But a similar brand of courage is necessary for the job.”⁶² *The Aeroplane* was even moved to print an article that simply catalogued their development since formation, and ended with an advertisement of sorts by listing the conditions of acceptance.⁶³ By and large, however, the women of the ATA were left undisturbed. There seemed to be a general acceptance by the press, as the war moved on, that “the public wanted pictures of their brave boys –not the odd female amongst them.”⁶⁴

Some of the women of the ATA tell stories which show that the general public, at least in the areas where their ferry pools were, genuinely accepted them. At the Hamble Ferry Pool, the women lived in the town, usually in groups of two or three who lived in a flat together. Marie Monique Agazarian tells how when she was stationed there, the local farmers had no way to distribute their strawberries, so they would give them to the girls to deliver wherever they flew. She remembers how they would sometimes give the girls extra fruit as thanks.

I remember coming back one night, it was absolutely sweet, we got back having been flying God knows where and there in the middle of the kitchen table was the biggest bowl we had with milk in it and there was a little note: If you skim the top off this, you’ll have cream for your strawberries, love milkman.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Mary Cadogan, *Women with Wings: Female Flyers in Fact and Fiction* (London: Macmillian, 1992), 171.

⁶² Helena Page Schrader, *Sisters in Arms: British and American Women Pilots during World War II* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Aviation, 2006), 234.

⁶³ “‘ATA’ Girls,” *The Aeroplane*, September 27, 1940, Air Transport sec., vol. 387, 357.

⁶⁴ ‘Archie’ Hall, ed., *We, Also, Were There* (Braunton: Merlin Books, 1985), 42.

⁶⁵ Marie Monique Agazarian, IWM Acc. No. 009579/5 Transcript, 30-31.

Sometimes their gestures went beyond simply granting the girls gifts. The townspeople would show their appreciation for the job that the women were doing in the war by giving them some special treatment. Agazarian tells another story about one winter, after a big snowfall, when everything was frozen,

Off we went and we rang the plumbers, and they said, 'Ah no, we've got seventy calls, everything is frozen up. Who is it?' and we said, 'Well, it's the ATA pilots.' 'The flying angels! OK.' Off we went flying, and we got back that night. There were a lot of aeroplanes. We were pretty tired but we all got back, walked into the house –there was a huge fire burning in the two big rooms, and the place had been cleaned up –the ice –there'd been seven leaks and they'd mended them. And there was a note from the plumbers. 'We've mended the leaks, lit the fire for you, made your beds.' It was unbelievable, it really was.⁶⁶

As the war continued on for years, the public saw only the service that women were doing, and not the supposed impropriety of their occupation. It was recognized that the women in the organization "all were inspired by two great urges: the desire to help England and the desire to fly."⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

In 1940 the women of the ATA entered into an aviation community that wanted nothing to do with them. They had to stand criticism being published in the most influential aviation journal of the time. They were accused of 'aping men'⁶⁸ and being 'he-women,'⁶⁹ of extorting the government for more money than they were worth to fly 'toy trainers,'⁷⁰ and of "parading

⁶⁶ Agazarian, 30-31

⁶⁷ Cheesman, 71.

⁶⁸ 'A Mere Man.'

⁶⁹ Read.

⁷⁰ North.

around in uniforms and trying to catch as much limelight as possible with their silly tricks.”⁷¹

Yet the women were, simultaneously, attempting to quiet other types of attention, which portrayed them as glamorous, trivial girls. Only their own unfailing competence, assurances that their presence was temporary, and the sudden increase in the war action freed them from such public scrutiny.

While earning strawberries and cream from the general public was a major coup for the women of the ATA, it was not the only acceptance that they were striving for. They were also eager to gain the respect of the men of the RAF, the Air Ministry, and even their own organization. It was this necessity that weighed most heavily on their shoulders, as they considered their image. It was the men of the ‘top brass’ who would decide if the Women’s Section would continue to exist, would continue to be allowed to qualify on different types of aircraft, and would continue to expand their usefulness. It was these men that the women could not disappoint.

⁷¹ Frederick Coulson, “Those Women,” *The Aeroplane*, March 29, 1940, Correspondence sec., vol. 387, 446.

CHAPTER TWO

FEMININITY AMONG THE WOMEN OF THE AIR TRANSPORT AUXILIARY

In the midst of this public clamour and media speculation, military discomfort and masculine consternation, the women had a job to do. They knew that they were privileged to do such unconventional work during the war, and were therefore willing to put up with a certain amount of discomfort. While this meant that they flew long hours in open cockpits in one of the coldest winters in British history, carried their own parachutes, and wore trousers for warmth, they nevertheless embraced and cultivated femininity and glamour. Despite their daily interaction with the war, they still indulged their feminine vanities with such things as face powder and long fingernails, and even by identifying the Spitfire as the most 'lady-like' aircraft. The women reacted to the male environment by stressing their femininity, showing that womanhood and flying were not mutually exclusive.

This attention to femininity was welcomed within British wartime culture. As Sonya Rose argues, women needed to take part in the war effort to be considered good citizens, but to maintain that conception of 'good citizenship,' they could not lose their femininity and become overly masculine. As Rose states, "They should participate, yes, but not become transformed by that participation."¹ There was a public expectation that the women should be able to perform their wartime occupations, while still fulfilling traditional notions of what it meant to be womanly. This expectation could cause trouble for the women however. As was seen in the last chapter, the negative aspect of this assertion of femininity was that it could be exaggerated in the popular media and used to trivialize the work of the women. Yet, according to Rose, the

¹ Sonya Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 123.

consequences of not satisfying these conceptions were more solemn than subtle mockery from the press: “regardless of women’s overt contributions to the war effort,” Rose argues, “they could be accused of lacking good citizenship if they did not demonstrate feminine virtue.”²

The women of the time were well aware of this dual expectation, to ‘join up’ and remain feminine. Gerard DeGroot argues that, “diaries, memoirs, and interviews [of Servicewomen] reveal an obsession with clothes and cosmetics...[and] that the essentially masculine environment in which these women lived made them ever more keen to assert their femininity.”³ The popular women’s magazines of the time ran weekly encouragements promoting this mindset. Their advisements to women to participate in the war effort “were often worded in the familiar language of femininity,” and were paired with articles which “emphasized that joining the services did not necessarily mean a loss of femininity.”⁴

During the war women’s magazines were passed from woman to woman, before being turned in as scrap paper, and therefore played a large part in perpetuating the continued public expectations of women during wartime. They developed “a point of view about what sort of people [their] women readers were, and what sort of social attitudes should be enjoined upon them.”⁵ These social attitudes, focusing on the maintenance of femininity despite the war, were delivered to the women in the form of “virtually one long advice column, characterized by the

² Rose, 149.

³ Gerard DeGroot, *Lipstick on her Nipples, Cordite in her Hair: Sex and Romance among British Servicewomen during the Second World War* in *A Soldier and a Woman: Sexual Integration in the Military*, ed. Gerard DeGroot and Corinna Peniston-Bird (London: Longman, 2000), 106-107.

⁴ Lucy Noakes, *War and the British: Gender and National Identity, 1939-91* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), 67.

⁵ A C H Smith, *Paper Voices: the Popular Press and Social Change* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), 85.

use of the direct address, which tended to be the imperative mood, and the constant encouragement to readers to participate, feel part of it.”⁶

The women of the Air Transport Auxiliary existed within this larger cultural norm. They too had it impressed upon themselves the importance of continued womanliness, despite, or in fact due to, their ‘masculine’ occupation. For example, while the women pushed to be given clearance to fly all types of aircraft, regardless of its size or function, they did not resist their exclusion from piloting the so-called “flying boats.” This was because their prohibition did not suggest the women’s inability to fly the planes, but the impropriety of a lone woman spending an overnight on a ship populated only by servicemen.⁷ As a result of this argument hinging on the protection of the ATA girls’ honor, and therefore conforming to traditional norms of femininity, it was acceptable to the women. Furthermore, by accepting this dictum the women were, in essence, stressing their continued feminine virtue. By not pushing to be allowed to pilot flying boats, they verified that the women wished to remain moral.

Overall, the women accepted the cultural standards that made maintaining their femininity important during the war. They did not want to be seen as ‘aping’ men, but instead as women performing a task typical of a man. The women internalized this expectation, but also used it to their advantage. By being feminine the women were more easily accepted by society, because it was expected of them and therefore they were conforming in at least that aspect.

⁶ Smith, 85.

⁷ Mary Cadogan, *Women with Wings: Female Flyers in Fact and Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 171.

THE EXPECTATIONS

In her book, *War and the British: Gender and National Identity 1939-91*, Lucy Noakes spends a considerable amount of time discussing the affect that women's magazines had on the women of Britain during the Second World War. She argues that, "although the women's magazines addressed women as citizens with an important public role in the nation at war, existing codes of femininity were preserved."⁸ This assertion is apparent when one looks at the articles and advertisements between the covers of these magazines. Women were given examples of the ideal female-citizen and encouraged to act as these paragons of feminine fulfillment did. In 1939 an article appeared in *Women and Beauty* magazine, suggesting that,

We are the women of England, the women behind the men who go and fight for her, and the best way we can help is by being brave –brave enough to keep normal, however our nerves are frayed, or our lives curtailed. We can go on being beautiful, charming, graceful...It is our duty to go on being women whatever uniform we wear –we can go on being feminine –we can go on being glamorous... We can, if we will, go down to posterity as the women of England's war who were beautiful as well as brave.⁹

This quote is interesting for several different reasons. It focuses on the two expectations of women that Rose discusses, participation in the war effort as well as the maintenance of womanly beauty and femininity. It also stresses the traditional pre-war gender norms by describing the 'women of England' as 'the women behind the men.' This explicitly references the classic power balance between women and men, with the woman's role being a support for the man. Finally, this quotation emphasizes the role that 'beauty' plays in the conceptualization of femininity. This point is also highlighted in the varied ways that the men of the RAF

⁸ Noakes, 63.

⁹ J. Waller and M. Vaughan-Rees, *Women in Wartime: The Role of Women's Magazines 1939-1945* (London: Macdonald Optima, 1987), 13, quoted in Noakes, 53.

remembered the women of the ATA always as being ‘dazzling’ with ‘flowing hair,’ regardless of their actual appearance.

The magazines capitalized on the tie between femininity and beauty to relate their message to women. Early in 1940 *Icilm Beauty Aids* ran an ad campaign in women’s magazines which used the headline, “Beauty is your Duty,” and the subtext, “*Icilm* is making it possible for thousands of women to do their essential duty of being beautiful.”¹⁰ (Figure 4) Another company, *Tangee Lipstick*, used this model of advertisement as early as November 1939, when they ran an ad featuring a beautiful WREN (Women’s Royal Navy) with the headline, “*Tangee Lipstick* for Beauty on Duty.”¹¹ This type of advertising campaign called on the girls to fulfill their twofold obligation as citizens: to be patriotic while remaining feminine, and therefore beautiful, during the war.

Noakes stresses this concept of beauty as a duty, highlighting the different ways that men and women were addressed during the war years, women through women’s magazines, and men through army education publications, which “described very gendered ideals of active citizenship.”¹² Women’s magazines emphasized how important it was that women “continued to pay attention to make-up and clothing while contributing to the war effort through war work.”¹³ The take-home message was that, “she made a vital contribution to the war effort while maintaining her femininity.”¹⁴ While on the other hand, men were told that, “the ideal male citizen joined the armed forces, where he learnt to forget divisions of class, status, and politics, subsuming them beneath the common experience of warfare and a common bond of

¹⁰ Waller, 100.

¹¹ Waller, 100.

¹² Noakes, 64.

¹³ Noakes, 64.

¹⁴ Noakes, 64.

masculinity.”¹⁵ The British society of the Second World War delineated very different models of active citizenship for women and men, with a woman’s depending heavily on the maintenance of her pre-war femininity, regardless of in which situation she now found herself.

Constance Holt was the civilian editor of *Woman’s Own Magazine* from 1939-1945, one of the most widely read magazines of the time.¹⁶ She was interviewed in 1986 and asked, “How important was appearance to women during the war?”¹⁷ Holt replied, “oh tremendously,” and then goes on to elaborate. She explains how women knew they couldn’t take all of their make-up off at night, because to do so would run the risk of having to rush their lipstick if there was a raid, and “you mustn’t be found looking a frightful ruin in –in the middle of a crisis, that’s very important.”¹⁸ She tells a story about a letter she received from a nurse in Coventry just days after “the great blitz on Coventry.”¹⁹ Apparently, the nurse was concerned about what to do about her face, because her skin wasn’t as good as it had been before the war. She was especially concerned because her boyfriend was supposed to be coming home on leave soon, and she wanted to look her best. Holt thought this was particularly interesting, saying, “the thing about the –the air raid on Coventry –which from outside and overseas and that seemed to be the only thing happening in Coventry, but it wasn’t you see. She –she – and she was a nurse. She must have been sitting in somewhere she could –or whatever she was doing –she was writing away to us about her face.”²⁰ Holt’s story about the nurse who managed to be concerned about her face,

¹⁵ Noakes, 64.

¹⁶ Rose, 122.

¹⁷ Constance Holt, IWM Acc. No. 11778/2, Transcript, recorded 1986, copyright: Thames TV, 9-10.

¹⁸ Holt, 9-10.

¹⁹ Holt, 9-10.

²⁰ Holt, 9-10.

while also dealing with the horrors of the wounded after a blitz, punctuates the point that it was impressed upon women that beauty and their civic duty were of similar, if not equal importance.

Working in tandem with beauty as an indicator of femininity, was the idea that to be feminine a woman had to be distinctly *not* masculine. The readers of the *Aeroplane* expressed this concern through their worry that the women of the ATA would be ‘aping’ men. It was, however, a larger cultural concern as well. There was “a perceived danger that women might become so modern and masculine in their new-found freedom that they would turn their backs on their feminine and maternal instincts.”²¹ In the pages of *Woman’s Own* magazine, Sonnie Hale, a famous variety actor of the Second World War, relates his advice to women on the matter, saying, “be truly feminine... You may be in one of the women’s services and therefore in uniform. If you are, remember there is no need to strut and shout around. There is no need to ape men.”²² Despite his concern over the issue, he was confident that women could join the Services and still remain feminine, “I have seen women look the epitome of feminine smartness in a riding habit which is as severe as any uniform.”²³ According to Rose, “Hale was telling women that they could join the war effort, but they must not, as a result, become ‘men’.”²⁴

The women of Britain were given two very distinct messages during the Second World War; first, they must do their bit to help the war effort, and second, they must remain feminine and beautiful while doing so. One women’s magazine even related doing these two things as a woman’s only way to “show Hitler how little he can scare British women with his Big Bad Wolf methods.”²⁵ Women saw maintaining their appearance as part of the war work that was expected

²¹ Colin McDowell, *Forties Fashion and the New Look* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 54.

²² Rose, 122-123.

²³ Rose, 123.

²⁴ Rose, 123.

²⁵ Waller, 81.

of them, and this belief was pervasive among women in the Services, as well as the women doing civil service, such as the women in the ATA.

FEMININITY

In her monograph focusing on the women ferry pilots, *Sisters in Arms: British and American Women Pilots during World War II*, Helena Page Schrader states that, “first and foremost, the women of the ATA were by all accounts very feminine...they sewed, knitted, worried about their appearance, flirted, dated, and generally behaved like women of their age.”²⁶ This, however, does not give the full picture of the women of the ATA. Being seen as women was very important to them, but it could not interfere with being seen as pilots. When Mary de Bunsen joined the ranks of the ATA Women’s Section she remembers her first impression of the veteran members being “very tough and very feminine.”²⁷ She went on to clarify that, “women are not necessarily tough because they fly, but this war-time flying required a certain amount of backbone.”²⁸ These sentiments were shared by another woman pilot, who said how important it was that, “you were treated as women, but on the other hand you were treated as pilots.”²⁹

Many of the women found, however, that their feminine instincts could be used to their advantage as ferry pilots. De Bunsen found that the women, in general, were more careful, and

²⁶ Helena Schrader, *Sisters in Arms: British and American Women Pilots During World War II* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Aviation, 2006), 209.

²⁷ Mary de Bunsen, *Mount Up With Wings* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1960), 94.

²⁸ Bunsen, *Mount Up With Wings*, 94.

²⁹ Marie Monique Agazarian, IWM Acc. No. 009579/5, Transcript, 21.

more likely to follow the instructions in the *Ferry Pilot's Notes* to the letter than the men.³⁰ On one memorable occasion, de Bunsen remembers how this careful instinct paid off.

The way we each tackled this trip reflects a difference between masculine and feminine psychology. The men –creatures of habit and braver than ourselves –all blinded off up the west of England via Liverpool, which was the way we knew best, ignoring the fact that there was an east wind and the weather was worse on the west side of the Pennines. Lucy and I tried to find a better way round. We studied the map and the weather reports thoroughly and realized that we would get much better weather east of the Pennines...the women got there first and the men had a very sticky time west of the Pennines.³¹

Here the women were able to work their way around a difficult weather situation, and still get the job done, while the men simply tried to push through the problem, which ended up making the trip even more difficult.

Stories, such as de Bunsen's above, show how the women embraced their own femininity while still doing their job. Many of the women had similar experiences. They, too, were immersed in a society that told women that they should 'join up,' but not lose their womanliness within the masculine world they would be required to immerse themselves in, and the women of the ATA took that to heart. Most of the women were subtle in their expressions of femininity. For example, one woman talks about how she wore lipstick and made sure that her hair was never off her collar and remarks on how they were all "quite spoiled, with maximum 100 girls and over a thousand men."³²

Many of the women remarked on how important makeup and hair were to them during their time with the ATA. Diana Barnato-Walker explained that there were, "no regulations as to makeup, [and that] we all tried to look as feminine as possible, [as] we were doing what was

³⁰ Schrader, 87.

³¹ Schrader, 87.

³² Marjorie Cole, IWM Acc. No. 13344/1, recorded October 25, 1984.

called a man's job." She also explains how the women felt that it was important to have long fingernails,

We used to grow our fingernails as long as we could...[however] it was very difficult to press the booster coil and the starter coil in the airplane at the same time, like you had to on, say, a Spit, had to press them both, so because your nails were too long, and they were quite stiff to push, these little button things, so most of us used to use the tops of our lipsticks, used to push one with the lipstick, the other with the lipstick top, to get them going, because you couldn't otherwise. There were little sort of stupid feminine things like that, that we did.³³

She also tells a story of how she kept a little powder compact in the front pocket of her boiler suit, because she was a little "vain."³⁴ While she might excuse away 'stupid feminine things like that' now, at the time, these little things allowed the women to feel that they had preserved femininity within the predominantly masculine organization.

With regard to their appearance the women were very satisfied with their uniforms. They wore navy blue tunics, which came with a skirt and a pair of trousers, and flying boots, which were only to be worn at aerodromes. They were also given a forage cap, greatcoat, black shoes, tie and stockings. They had to buy the blue RAF shirts for themselves, but the pilots got a pair of embroidered gold wings on their tunic.³⁵ (Figure 5) The women described their uniform as "very smart,"³⁶ and "very fetching."³⁷ Giles Whittell calls the fine tailoring of their uniforms "the one significant concession to female vanity made by the ATA."³⁸ Some of the women went beyond fine tailoring, however, and had "bright scarlet and lovat greens for their satin linings,"³⁹ instead

³³ Diana Barnato Walker, IWM Acc. No. 9361/3, recorded 1986.

³⁴ Diana Barnato-Walker, IWM Acc. No. 28597/2, recorded September 2005.

³⁵ Lettice Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots: a Story of the Air Transport Auxiliary 1939-45* (London: Eastern Press, 1985), 44.

³⁶ Diana Barnato-Walker, IWM Acc. No. 28597/2, recorded September 2005.

³⁷ Anonymous, IWM Acc. No. 9360/2, recorded 1986.

³⁸ Giles Whittell, *Spitfire Women of World War II* (London: Harper Press, 2007), 108.

³⁹ Alison King, *Golden Wings: The Story of Some of the Women Ferry Pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary* (London: C. Arthur Pearson Limited, 1956), 88-89.

of the standard lining, which, according to Alison King, “was rather frowned upon, but how could HQ stop something that really didn’t show!”⁴⁰

Even more contentious than the choice of lining was the issue of skirts versus trousers. The women were initially issued only with skirts; however, they insisted that flying in skirts was going to be impossible.⁴¹ The women insisted that not only was it going to be too cold in the open cockpit trainers, but that “you couldn’t fly if you wore skirts, you had the column here in front, which you generally held with your legs when you’re landing or doing something with the flaps...no you couldn’t fly in a skirt.”⁴² Walker explains how “with rather bad grace they issued us with rather good looking navy blue boiler suits with our rank badges on the shoulder, at the same time as they gave us these boiler suits a notice went on to the notice board in the various ferry pools, saying, ‘all women pilots will remove their trousers immediately after landing,’ which was a very badly worded notice, I think.”⁴³ The women’s insistence upon having trousers to facilitate flying shows how they only took their ‘feminine vanities’ so far, and refused to let them interfere with their ferrying work.

There was only so much the women could do about their more feminine reactions to certain situations however. Many of the women have tales that they have dubbed ‘women pilot stories,’ because they exemplify some of the more typical ‘feminine airs.’ For example, one woman pilot executed a brilliant forced landing in a field due to the mechanical failure of her aircraft. She was uninjured, however when the ambulance arrived they found her sitting inside the cockpit of her destroyed plane. “When asked afterwards...she admitted reluctantly that the

⁴⁰ King, *Golden Wings*, 88-89.

⁴¹ Diana Barnato-Walker, IWM Acc. No. 28597/2, recorded September 2005.

⁴² Maureen De Popp, IWM Acc. No. 28593/2, recorded September 2005.

⁴³ Diana Barnato-Walker, IWM Acc. No. 28597/2, recorded September 2005.

field was full of cows and that she was terrified to cross it until some male help arrived!”⁴⁴

Stories such as this again highlight the continued gender expectations. While the woman pilot was in the air, she was confident in her own ability to fly and unfortunately crash land, the aircraft. These actions were part of ‘doing her bit’ for the war effort, it was the job that she was given to do competently. However, once she was back on the ground, she becomes in essence, the ‘damsel in distress.’ She was, unconsciously, acting out her femininity by waiting to be rescued from her fear of the cattle, by men specifically.

Rosemary du Cros also tells a ‘woman pilot story’ about one time when she had a naval officer as a passenger, and found a huge spider in the cockpit with her.

Now I *hate* spiders, so I called out to a girl passenger, ‘For heaven’s sake come and remove this creature.’ She came forward and started to chase it. The poor sailor didn’t know what was going on because he was behind in the cabin, but he could see there was tremendous consternation in the cockpit and he thought, ‘This is it, evidently they have seen a German aeroplane chasing us and we are all going to be shot down any minute now.’⁴⁵

She tells another story about how when the women were first moved the Hamble pool two men, George Dutton and Armstrong Payne, were left behind for a couple months to help the women make the transition. Apparently, Payne favored practical jokes, and one day brought a mouse in to the mess hall, yelling, “‘I want to see if any of you really *are* women.’ To his great glee one girl did jump up onto a chair.”⁴⁶

Not all of these ‘women pilot stories’ resulted directly from actions on the part of the women, however. For example, one ATA girl was forced to crash land in the sea off of Scotland and was lucky enough to run into a fishing vessel. The men on the boat saw her struggling in the

⁴⁴ E. C. Cheesman, *Brief Glory: the Story of the Air Transport Auxiliary* (Chippenham, Wiltshire: Antony Rowe Limited, 2001), 79.

⁴⁵ Rosemary du Cros, *ATA Girl: Memoirs of a Wartime Ferry Pilot* (London: Frederick Muller Limited, 1983), 80.

⁴⁶ Cros, *ATA Girl*, 54-55.

water and went to pull her out, and then realized she was a woman. They mistook her for a mermaid and almost threw her in again, “however, when they recovered from their surprise, they revived her with hot tea and brought her ashore.”⁴⁷

The women remember these stories with fond humor, and while some of them might be slightly embarrassed by their reactions to certain situation, most of them felt that they were just being women. In the narratives of their stories they don’t flinch from calling themselves ‘vain’ or ‘silly’ because they were merely fulfilling the requirement to remain feminine while toiling away during the war.

They accepted their unique position as women within the organization and even projected that onto the different aircrafts that they flew. The Spitfire was the unchallenged favorite among the women, and many of the men. It was a beautiful aircraft, streamlined, and unrivaled in sheer power.⁴⁸ Yet, the women described this plane as the most feminine, “calling for more sensitive handling.”⁴⁹ The Spitfire allegedly, “had more glamour and threw it’s wheels outward in an abandoned, extrovert way.”⁵⁰ Another woman pilot said, “It was light as a feather, maneuverable, with no vices; in fact, the perfect ladies’ aeroplane.”⁵¹

While they identified the Spitfire as distinctly feminine, they regarded many of the other planes as masculine. The Flying Fortress, similar to the Lancaster, was seen as very masculine, because of its forbidding build, while the Walrus was considered distinctly unglamorous, with its awkward frame.⁵² Many of the women did not like the ungainly Liberator, and some of them

⁴⁷ Cheesman, 79.

⁴⁸ Whittell, 28.

⁴⁹ Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots*, 103.

⁵⁰ Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots*, 103.

⁵¹ Veronica Vokersz, *The Sky and I* (London: W. H. Allen, 1956), 56.

⁵² Schrader, 77.

even insinuated that there was “something vaguely unfeminine about even wanting to fly” one.⁵³ The Lysander was also seen as so masculine that when Audrey Macmillian, saw the “sinister, hulking-looking aircraft...[she] took one look and, with an expressive wave of her hand, drawled: ‘My *dear*, it makes me feel just *too* feminine!’”⁵⁴

The women separated the aircraft into masculine and feminine categories based on the looks and temperament of the aircraft. The Spitfire, “barely wider than one’s shoulders, with the power of a Merlin at one’s fingertips, was poetry of its own.”⁵⁵ It was the ‘perfect ladies’ aeroplane’ because it was agreeable and exciting to fly, whereas the hulking, clumsy, and awkward aircrafts were almost always described using more masculine adjectives.

The women were proud to be women within a predominately male occupation during the war. They embraced societal dictates on appropriate behavior for women and made those dictates work to their advantage within the organization. They wanted to feel pretty, and slightly glamorous, so long as it did not interfere with their work. They wanted to be able to jump on chairs and remove spiders from view without feeling ridiculous. They wanted to identify with the Spitfire, and see it as the womanliest aircraft in the sky. As a result of the cultural norms surrounding femininity they were able to adapt themselves into the organization without losing themselves to it.

⁵³ Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots*, 271.

⁵⁴ Vokersz, *The Sky and I*, 39.

⁵⁵ Whittell, 29.

CONCLUSION

During the Second World War British the standards for female citizenship hinged on two things: doing one's part for the war effort, and maintaining one's femininity while doing so. In general this meant that women should volunteer and continue to pay attention to their appearance—do their 'duty' by being beautiful. Women's magazines told them unflinchingly that to fail to do so would be letting the boys at the front down, "[give] 'the boys' a good time and [help] them forget for a spell the horrors of war. Don't be an added horror!"⁵⁶ Women also had to be very careful to not usurp masculinity, especially as they moved out of the private sphere and into the public sphere to fill the void left by the men who had taken up arms.

The women of the ATA lived with these societal norms and internalized them. They, in return, placed significant value on maintaining their beauty, so long as it did not interfere with their work. They found ways to keep their hair long and to make long nails and lipstick practical. They managed to dress up their uniforms with colorful linings, but refused to be denied slacks, as they made their jobs more manageable.

Social norms also allowed them the freedom to react in classically feminine ways without feeling out of place. They were receiving the message that women could be both competent *and* womanly, and therefore they strove to be both. They could hide from cows one minute and deliver 14 aircraft in the bitter cold the next. It allowed them to carve out a niche within the organization where they could comfortably name the most popular combat aircraft as 'feminine.'

⁵⁶ Waller, 81.

CHAPTER THREE

“SEXUALIZED FEMININITY” AND THE SOLDIER-HERO

While it has been seen that the men of the RAF and Air Ministry were skeptical of the physical capabilities of the women pilots, the men were also worried about getting their toes stepped on by those same women. Just as the women had internalized gender norms about femininity, British men had internalized gender norms about masculinity. The most predominant of these norms, during wartime, was the notion of the ‘soldier-hero.’¹ As Noakes argues, citizenship and “masculinity became bound up with notions of honor and valor.”² This concept of the masculine soldier-hero was inherently threatened by the presence of women performing tasks that had formerly been the preserve of men alone. The glorification of war is built around the valorization of the male soldiers, “he is the figure around whom myths accrue, who is commemorated in war memorials and ceremonies of remembrance, and who is seen as having undergone an experience that sets him apart from the rest of society.”³ As Kate Muir argues in, *Arms and the Woman*, “Wars are remembered with pride and are the province of Tommy, not Tracey.”⁴ Yet, the men saw this being jeopardized by the entrance of women into their own wartime rite.

Despite these attitudes, the admission of women into the ATA was helped tremendously by its civil status. As they were not *actually* part of the military machine, the military men could feel more secure and assured that the women’s “role remain[ed] a subsidiary one when compared

¹ Lucy Noakes, *War and the British: Gender and National Identity, 1939-91* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), 17.

² Noakes, 14.

³ Noakes, 164.

⁴ Kate Muir, *Arms and the Woman*, (London: Coronet Books, 1992), 17-18.

to that of the male involved in combat.”⁵ This contention correlates with Margaret and Patrice Higonnet’s theory of the ‘double helix.’ The Higonnets argue that, “the actual nature of the social activity is not as critical as the cultural perception of its relative value in a gender-linked structure of subordination.”⁶ They demonstrate this idea with the metaphor of the ‘double helix’ with its (male) dominant strand, and (female) subordinate strand. The Higonnets apply this theory to women during wartime, suggesting that at those times when women’s place moves simply from the “home” to the “home front” men still remain in a position of superiority and dominance.⁷ Their theory can be expanded to include the women of the ATA and the men of the RAF, with the women’s non-combat flying subordinate to the RAF men’s combat flying.

While many of the Air Ministry men were doubtful of the women physically, regardless of the fact that they were doing non-combat flying, the women were still primarily welcomed with surprise and delight by the men of the RAF. The first eight women began to fly before each RAF squadron had its own contingent of WAAFs (Women’s Auxiliary Air Force), making the arrival of a woman on base a novelty. However, what Sonya Rose terms ‘sexualized femininity’ is apparent in the manner in which the men remember their encounters with the women of the ATA. Rose has argued that men rationalized the presence of women in the military sphere, for the duration, by focusing on the ‘feminine good looks’ of those women.⁸ This sexualization of the women, as well as their civilian and temporary status helped, reconcile soldier-heroes to the presence of women.

⁵ Noakes, 164.

⁶ Margaret Higonnet and Patrice Higonnet, *The Double Helix*, in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. Margaret Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel and Margaret Weitz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 34.

⁷ Higonnet, 35.

⁸ Sonya Rose, *Which People’s War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 135.

While the men did not automatically accept the women of the ATA in their new positions, they recognized them as a necessity. The women were able to put to rest the concerns that they were physically incapable, while the men were able to find a conception of the women that allowed them to accept women in the midst by glamorizing them. Within the ATA itself, a comfortable coexistence developed between the men and women that allowed for the work to get done each day.

THE MARVEL

Although many of the top brass were uncomfortable with the entrance of women into an occupation so closely tied to the military, most of the military men around the country appreciated their unexpected appearances on base. At the beginning of the war, many of the men were not even aware that women had joined the ATA and were therefore taken completely by surprise. E. C. Cheesman noted the remark of an American in this situation, “a Mosquito landed and taxied up. It parked nearby, the engines stopped and out of the cockpit descended a rather dazzling blonde. The American stared and turned away, ‘OK’ he muttered, ‘they can send me home now. I’ve seen everything.’”⁹

This was a reaction to which the women became fairly familiar. Du Cros tells a story about a male passenger’s reaction to Jackie Mogridge being presented as his pilot once during bad weather, “Jackie appears and says, ‘Right, shall we go?’ And he doesn’t think she’s old

⁹ E. C. Cheesman, *Brief Glory: the Story of the Air Transport Auxiliary* (Chippenham, Wiltshire: Antony Rowe Limited, 2001), 82.

enough to ride a bicycle, let alone drive an aeroplane.”¹⁰ While, one of the ATA women remembers “taking a Mosquito once from South Hamble to one of those places up north, and taxied in...there’s a flight engineer telling me where to go, so I followed him in, and he said, ‘good lord, it’s a girl!’ ...to the other one.”¹¹ Gore also remembers this reaction from the men, saying, “[the men] did look very startled when a rather small person got out of a very big aircraft.”¹² (Figure 6) In an article titled “Girls of the ATA: the girl pilots who staggered even the RAF” the author memorialized a moment like this, saying, “as the young men crowded around [the aircraft], the pilot scrambled out of the cockpit, loosened ‘his’ flying helmet and, instead of the burly he-man they expected, they found themselves confronted by a smiling attractive face, surrounded by a mass of fair curls.”¹³

A strikingly similar description of E. Featherstone’s first encounter with one of the ATA women can be found in his memoir, “A Worm’s Eye View of RAF Millom, Cumberland: 1 November, 1941- 26 March 1943.”

I was on Duty Crew when I saw my first (and only) WWII female pilot and she was at the controls of a Spitfire. I didn’t know the gender of the pilot as I marshaled the aircraft into the allotted space near the Control Tower...from my ground-level viewpoint I saw the helmet come off, the head give a shake and the blonde hair come streaming out into the breeze. I was very impressed with everything that happened after that including the ‘swarm’ of young officers who seemed to come from every corner to view this A.T.A. phenomenon.¹⁴

What is particularly notable about both of these accounts with unexpected women ATA pilots is the common memory of attractive girls with flowing hair. Just as Gower complained about the

¹⁰ Alison King, *Golden Wings: The Story of Some of the Women Ferry Pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary* (London: C. Arthur Pearson Limited, 1956), 157.

¹¹ Maureen De Popp, IWM Acc. No. 28593/2, recorded September 2005.

¹² Margaret Gore, IWM Acc. No. 9285/4.

¹³ John W. Taylor, *Girls of the ATA: the girl pilots who staggered even the RAF* (IWM #K87/635)

¹⁴ E. Featherstone, IWM #95/20/1.

Press glamorizing the members of the Women's Section, the RAF men wanted to encounter a bit of glamour each time a woman flew in, and therefore remembered the meetings as they wanted to. For example, the RAF ground crew member, E. Featherstone, described his meeting with the most famous member of the Women's Section, Amy Johnson, the famous pre-war aviatrix. However, despite his glowing memory of blonde hair blowing in the wind, Amy Johnson actually had short dark hair. By remembering their encounter through the lens of sexualized femininity, he recalls an exaggerated aura of femininity regardless of the actuality of the meeting.

These men were living in the same wartime culture as the women, and were therefore getting very distinct messages about the different roles that men and women should be playing. As the women ferry pilots were out of place within the male sphere of the military, it appears that the men compensated by seeing the women as especially feminine. As Rose discusses, these men remember the women as very visibly feminine because by focusing on the feminine appearance of the women, the women pilots remain distinctive from the men. By maintaining their distinctly feminine appearance the women "make acceptable the 'gender-bending' obligations of citizenship for women,"¹⁵ which otherwise would have made the men uncomfortable.

This attitude allowed the men to be impressed by how many different types of aircraft the women pilots had flown. While RAF pilots specialized in one or two types, the members of the ATA needed to be able to fly over 100 different types of aircraft at a moments notice by using their set of *Ferry Pilot's Notes*. While this impressed the RAF, it also created its own set of nerve-racking moments for them. For example du Cros tells how, "When you went to collect

¹⁵ Rose, 135.

an aeroplane and [the RAF] asked, 'How much time have you done on one these?' If you said, 'Well, I have never seen one before, but it is all here in the book,' they were sometimes quite shocked and watched your take off with considerable apprehension."¹⁶

As the women proved themselves to be increasingly competent pilots, the RAF officers found several other uses for them. They would use the ATA girls to inspire confidence in nervous RAF pilots. For example, they would plan to have an ATA girl deliver a particularly intimidating aircraft to a new squad of RAF pilots, so that the recruits would not be afraid of flying that particular aircraft. According to one ATA women's pilot, "always there's a mystique built up about...a new type of aircraft. The pilots, they walk around with their hands in their pockets and they look at them. They see it coming and then if it lands...and then out jumps a girl...they're never frightened of the aeroplane again."¹⁷

A similar story is told by one of the male ATA Pool Commanders, Hugh Bergel. Apparently, the Typhoon had developed a daunting reputation, resulting in very few pilots being eager to fly it. Therefore, "the CO of one Typhoon OTU [Operational Training Unit] rang me one day to ask if I would as far as possible arrange for any future Typhoons to be delivered by our women pilots, to reassure his nail-biting pupils."¹⁸ Likewise, an RCAF fighter pilot remembers how some pilots under his tutelage were nervous about flying the Tempest. "However, the first aircraft was delivered to West Malling by the Air Transport Auxiliary

¹⁶ Rosemary du Cros, *ATA Girl: Memoirs of a Wartime Ferry Pilots* (London: Frederick Muller Limited, 1983), 45.

¹⁷ Marie Monique Agazarian, IWM Acc. No. 009579/5 Transcript, 33.

¹⁸ Helena Schrader, *Sisters in Arms: British and American Women Pilots During World War II* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Aviation, 2006), 71.

(ATA), and the pretty young lady who piloted it powdered her nose and put lipstick on before she got out of the cockpit, so they decided that the Tempest was not that difficult to fly.”¹⁹

The most startling story however comes from a squadron in the north. According to Guy Gibson, VC, DSO, DFC this group of pilots flatly refused to fly the Beaufighter, claiming that,

It stalled too quickly and that it was unmanageable in tight turns. They were sitting about one foggy day on their aerodrome when there was no flying possible, and were discussing the subject heatedly, when suddenly a Beau whistled over their heads at about 100ft, pulled up into a stall turn, dropped its wheels and flaps and pulled off a perfect landing on the runway. Naturally, this attracted a lot of attention. They all thought that this pilot must have been one of the crack test pilots who had come up to show them how. As it taxied up to the watch office, they all crowded around to get the gen. However, a lot of faces dropped to the ground when from underneath the Beau crawled a figure in white flying-suit, capped by blonde, floating hair; it was one of the ATA girls. I am told that this squadron had no trouble from Beaus from that day on.²⁰

Again, a group of male pilots is convinced by the arrival of a girl pilot in a troublesome aircraft, that perhaps the aircraft is not quite so difficult to fly after all. All of these stories exemplify how the RAF officers used the women to play on the soldier-hero complex of the men in their units.

However, this was not the only type of morale building that the women of the ATA did for the men of the RAF. Diana Barnato Walker remembers another favor asked of the girls by the RAF. Apparently, some of the girls were ferrying new Mosquito XXXs to a RAF squadron that had recently lost a significant number of aircraft. Gore gave them their delivery chits, saying, “‘You’ve got all day to do this one job...’ adding that she had chosen a good-looking bunch of us girls, so we should be sure to make ourselves as attractive as we could. ‘Efficient and pretty, please,’ she said finally, and added that she would later be sending a transport for us

¹⁹ Schrader, 71.

²⁰ Schrader, 72.

all.”²¹ Adding that the girls could stay to chat and eat lunch in the Officers’ Mess, Gore sent them off. It was unusual for them to be told to dawdle for lunch, “instead of gulping the issue bar of chocolate.”²² However, the girls found out later that the “crews had suffered severe losses and that the squadron CO had confided to Margot that his men could do with some bucking-up.”²³

Seemingly, the men of the RAF both enjoyed the company of the women pilots, while also being slightly unnerved by them. They found the women’s ability in the cockpit impressive and somewhat unbelievable. As with the men of the Air Ministry, some of them continued to question their skill, but most of them were delighted to work in conjunction with them.

THE CAMRADERIE

Within the ATA itself there was surprisingly little recorded conflict between the men and women pilots. This is very likely due to the fact that it was a civil, not a military, organization and that all of the women had to pass the same test that the men had to, to be eligible. It was also reinforced by the fact that, aside from having their own CO and being paid less, the women were treated no differently than the men. Also contributing to the camaraderie was the fact that ferrying was a relatively solo job, each pilot working individually to complete each delivery, resulting in a self-sufficient environment. Along the same vein, the men were not expected to baby the women in the least, in fact, due to the maturity of the members; one person even

²¹ Schrader, 70.

²² Schrader, 71.

²³ Schrader, 71.

described it as having a 'corporate culture,' where the members were very professional, and looked at their work as very much a job, not a wartime adventure.²⁴

One of the few women pilots taken from the WAAF to be trained from scratch, June Farquhar, remembers the introductory speech that the officer gave at the beginning of ground school before they began to fly.

He told us in no uncertain terms that we would survive entirely on our own merits. We had elected to do a man's job and would be treated as men. Parachutes were heavy and aircraft often parked a long way away. We could not expect to be helpless females and get things carried for us. If we made stupid mistakes we would suffer the consequences, there would be neither prejudice nor favoritism because we were women. If any of us behaved in an undisciplined manner, or did anything contrary to ATA rules and regulations, we were likely to be sent back to the WAAF. 'If that happens...' he said, '...I couldn't care less.'²⁵

In this straightforward, pragmatic way this group of new women were told that they were entering an organization with established customs of self-sufficiency and respect between the members.

In her memoir, King comments on the unique nature of the gender equilibrium within the ATA, saying, "It is not often that men and women are set to do jobs in exactly the same circumstances, and with exactly the same opportunities."²⁶ One woman pilot mentioned that even within the mixed pools, where men and women worked daily side by side, the women were "treated exactly the same."²⁷

From the perspective of the women there is consensus that the men and women worked effectively together. Du Cros told an interviewer that the men and women worked together "on

²⁴ Schrader, 204.

²⁵ Y.M. Lucas, *WAAF with Wings* (Peterborough, England: GMS Enterprises, 1992), 26.

²⁶ King, *Golden Wings*, 177-178.

²⁷ Benedetta Willis, IWM Acc. No. 8490/4, recorded October 19, 1984.

the whole, very well.”²⁸ Another ATA woman explained that she encountered no prejudice to speak of from her fellow ATA men.²⁹

A similar portrait is painted by the men of the ATA about the women of the organization. One said, when asked what the feeling was about the women by the men, “oh, there wasn’t any feeling, it was just accepted, they did their job.”³⁰ While another remembered that perhaps the women would have liked more choice of aircraft, but that there was no prejudice against them on the part of the men.³¹ Another ATA man describes the women ferry pilots by saying, “they were very good, handsome, really marvelous pilots,” and also noting that the men and women “were all a team.”³² While another ATA man stated that there was “no difference at all [in treatment], shared the same mess, everything, but don’t forget, it was only 15% women, so it wasn’t a great problem.”³³ He went on to mention that there was no feeling among the men that it should not be the same,

No, not once it was established...once, you know, that there’s no difference really, and there was no health reasons, no physical reasons...that anyone should get special treatment at all. The girls, I think, it was more difficult for the girls to get in, I think they had to show a higher standard initially than the men, possibly due to a little prejudice, but once they were in –the same. I never heard anyone saying, ‘oh, you can’t expect women to do that,’ or anything. I knew they were probably well sorted before they came to us...³⁴

As one can see from the testimony of these men, the members of the ATA accepted the women based on the fact that they were already screened to enter the organization. Therefore, they could simply function alongside the men without causing a fuss.

²⁸ Rosemary du Cros, IWM Acc. No. 9359/5, recorded 1986.

²⁹ Joyce Lofthouse, IWM Acc. No. 9850/3, recorded July 14, 1987.

³⁰ Anthony Max Leonard, IWM Acc. No. 9802/2, recorded June 8, 1987.

³¹ Peter Mursell, IWM Acc. No. 9998/3, recorded November 10, 1987.

³² Leonard Thornhill, IWM Acc. No. 28593/2, recorded September 2005.

³³ Neville Whitehurst, IWM Acc. No. 9999/5, recorded November 9, 1987.

³⁴ Neville Whitehurst, IWM Acc. No. 9999/5, recorded November 9, 1987.

This relationship was different from the relationship between the women of the ATA and the RAF men. Within the ATA, the members simply went about their business, and there was very little evidence of the men remembering the women within a 'sexualized femininity' context. This disparity can be attributed to the individualistic culture of the ATA, where the members could work relatively independently, unlike the established, masculine *esprit de corps* of the military, where the presence of the women needed to be justified. The ATA, unlike the RAF, included women almost from its formation, therefore their inclusion was less of a novelty.

Perhaps as a result of the newness of the ATA, some of the men were even able to see that the women had different strengths than the men, particularly in the way they approached ferrying. For example, the Director of Training once expressed to King that he thought the women pilots were *better* ferry pilots than the men.

They 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. This *may* be something to do with pride and not having so much of it to hurt!³⁵

The Director of Training was not alone in this opinion however; Flight Captain J. Gen Genovese expressed similar sentiments, saying, "They were a competent group of flyers, those women, and for the most part extremely conscientious. None of them, so far as I ever heard, was subject to the same tendency toward horseplay that most of the male contingent displayed."³⁶

³⁵ King, *Golden Wings*, 179.

³⁶ J. Gen Genovese, *We Flew Without Guns* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1945), 95-96.

In her book, *Sisters in Arms*, Helena Page Schrader states that, “in short, the story of the women of the ATA is an exemplary case study in eliminating sex discrimination and integrating women into an –already extraordinary –organization to the benefit of all concerned.”³⁷ One link in her contention, is the fact that the women were originally allocated only a percentage of the pay that the men received, despite the fact that this was rectified in the 1943, when the women of the ATA became the first women in Britain to be awarded ‘equal pay for equal work’.

Setting women’s pay at approximately 20% less than male pay was standard within the British Treasury of the time, and therefore could be taken for granted.³⁸ However, for the men of the ATA, as well as the general public, it was an important point. As one woman pilot put it, it was “an affront to society for a woman to ask to get equal pay for equal work...[as] the idea was that the man had a family to support and woman alone did not.”³⁹ While this woman was being flippant, for many people it was an ideal in which they whole-heartedly believed.

In their letters to *The Aeroplane*, a sticking point for many of the readers was the misconception that the women were being paid more than or as much as the men. One man, Noel North, wrote that, “Someone has erred grievously in allowing a handful of women pilots to ferry toy trainers from A to B at the magnificent salary of £6 per week.”⁴⁰ In response to this letter, another reader wrote in the placate the concerns of North, by focusing on the fact that the women were not receiving nearly the amount of pay that the newspapers were reporting, and that

³⁷ Schrader, 9.

³⁸ Giles Whittell, *Spitfire Women of World War II* (London: Harper Press, 2007), 233.

³⁹ Whittell, 233.

⁴⁰ Noel North, “Those Unpopular Women,” *The Aeroplane*, February 23, 1940, Correspondence sec., vol. 387, 262.

“most of these women are flying because they need a job, and I cannot see anything to be ashamed of supporting a family, as some of them do, out of the small pay they receive.”⁴¹

From this correspondence one can see the social importance of the fact that the women were being paid less than their male counterparts. This was also, undoubtedly, an important factor in the women’s acceptance by the men of the organization. The simple fact of pay allowed the men to maintain their dominant position on the ‘double helix’.⁴² Aside from social and Treasury policy, the men could justify their greater pay by the fact, that in the beginning the women were not allowed to fly all types of aircraft.

However, once the women had qualified on all the different types of aircraft, there was no longer anything anyone could say about their supposed physical inferiority. Therefore, in early 1943 Gower saw fit to push for equal salaries for her women. She arranged a meeting with Sir Stafford Cripps, Minister of Aircraft Production, and convinced him of the women’s worthiness. Consequently,

On May 18th Miss Irene Ward asked the Minister of Aircraft Production in the House of Commons whether women pilots of the ATA received the same rate of pay as men. To this the Minister replied that it had been decided that as from the beginning of June women pilots of the ATA who were engaged on full flying duties would receive the same rates of pay, rank for rank, as men similarly employed. ‘Is the Right Honorable and learned Gentleman aware of how gratifying it is that this decision has been arrived at without pressure from women Members of the House?’ Miss Ward replied, to which Cripps answered, ‘I am grateful.’⁴³

In his book, *Spitfire Women of World War II*, Whittell refers to this as Gower’s “moment of triumph.” Noting that, while she had not been able to do much flying during the war, she had been working hard on the ground for the women of the ATA, and that she had “lead a stealthy if

⁴¹ H. Stapleton, “Women and the Future,” *The Aeroplane*, March 8, 1940, Correspondence sec., vol. 387, 332.

⁴² Higonnet, 35.

⁴³ Curtis, *Forgotten Pilots*, 200.

not quite bloodless coup” to achieve ‘equal pay for equal work.’⁴⁴ With this change in status, the women of the ATA were truly recognized as equal to the men within the organization. While this did put the women on an even keel with the men, it seemed to not disrupt the camaraderie within the organization, as the women had been involved for the past three years, and were, by then, taken for granted.

The men and women of the ATA simply had to work together to get their jobs done. They reached out to one another when it was necessary, but generally worked under the auspices of a broad respect for one another. Curtis emphasized the fact that many of the men were “vastly experienced pre-war pilots, and yet, whatever they may have thought about women flying four-engined aircraft –and some certainly had reservations –they never for one moment showed anything other than absolute friendship and kindness.”⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

The men closest to the women of the ATA had varied reactions to their entrance into the organization. The women found it necessary to prove their worthiness time and time again, yet as they continually showed their competency and as the war picked up they were accepted by all different ranks. As E. C. Cheesman states in *Brief Glory*,

At first there was naturally a certain amount of skepticism in Service circles as to whether the women would have the endurance and necessary qualities to cope with the ever-growing variety of operational aircraft, but as time went on and they methodically continued to ‘deliver the goods’ this attitude changed to a more easy camaraderie and a healthy admiration of their work.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Whittell, 232.

⁴⁵ Schrader, 172.

⁴⁶ Cheesman, 74.

While one woman in the ATA even described this camaraderie as, “a kind of brotherhood, as it were, which included you,”⁴⁷ many of the women made a special note of their elevated respect for the fighter pilots of the RAF. Just as the men had been saturated with the ideal of the soldier-hero, so had the women. They fully believed that there was a distinct difference between the ferrying that they were doing, and the combat flying that the men of the RAF were doing. Du Cros discusses this point in her book, saying,

To begin with some of the young and dashing RAF pilots, who liked to think that in order to fly fast, heavy, fighting aeroplanes you had to be something of a superman, felt a little bit deflated when they saw that we could handle them too. The more sensible ones could see, of course, that there was a vast difference between fighting in an aeroplane as they had to do, and just flying it carefully from one place to another as we did. So there was no longer any ill feeling over that, and indeed they were supermen.⁴⁸

This recognition among the women of the ATA, that they were not beating the men at their own game, so to speak, went very far in creating the ‘brotherhood’ and ‘camaraderie’ among those who flew during the Second World War.

The strongest factor in the positive relations between the men and the women of the ATA was the fact that “winning the war, not proving a point, was the overriding goal of the ATA and its leadership.”⁴⁹ The women were not attempting to prove to the world through their membership in the organization that women were as able to fly heavy military aircraft as men, or that they belonged in the military. They were just doing their bit.

⁴⁷ Pamela May D’Auvergne Gollan, IWM Acc. No. 10035/7, recorded July 23, 1987.

⁴⁸ Cros, *ATA Girl*, 58.

⁴⁹ Schrader, 228.

CONCLUSION

At the end of 1945 the ATA shut down the organization. As its purpose had been to assist the RAF during wartime, its usefulness ended with the end of the war. Some of the women pilots, however, felt that it was a quite ignoble end to an organization that had supplied an essential service during the fighting. In her memoir, Lettice Curtis, stated,

On November 30, 1945 the ATA flag was lowered for the last time from the flag-post near the main entrance to the airfield and with only a few lines here and there in the press, the Air Transport Auxiliary, unnoticed and unsung, ceased to exist. For, by now, everybody was too busy planning their post-war world to notice the passing. Even the RAF, it seemed, had already forgotten the Service, which kept them continuously supplied with aircraft, throughout the whole war. We said goodbye to each other and made dates to meet again in other places and then it was over. Already the days filled with flying were assuming a dream-like quality—it was almost as if they had never been.¹

Indeed, after the war the gender lines were reinstated, leaving many women of the ATA to wonder if the past five years had been a nerve-wracking, exciting dream.

Despite Curtis' characterization of the ending of the ATA, the ATA benevolent fund held an air pageant to raise money for the families of the deceased ATA pilots. 12,000 spectators paid admission to see the flying display, and Lord Beaverbook, the first Minister of Aircraft Production, spoke on behalf of the valuable work of the ATA, stating, "Just as the Battle of Britain is the accomplishment and achievement of the RAF, likewise it can be declared that the ATA sustained and supported them in the battle. They were soldiers fighting in the struggle just as completely as if they had been engaged on the battlefield."²

¹ Lettice Curtis, *The Forgotten Pilots: The Story of the Air Transport Auxiliary 1939-45* (London: The Eastern Press, LTD., 1982), 283.

² Alison King, *Golden Wings: The Story of Some of the Women Ferry Pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary* (London: C. Arthur Pearson Limited, 1956), 182.

Despite such high praise from Lord Beaverbrook, and the fact that the women of the ATA had been flying a variety of aircrafts over the last five years, after the war they found it nearly impossible to get jobs in aviation, especially when they were competing against the real heroes of the war, the now retired RAF pilots. Curtis remembers this vividly, stating, “I was a pilot. I’d earned my living as one for nearly a decade and had flown most types of aircraft. But the emerging airlines wouldn’t even look at us women.”³

However, the legacy of the women of the ATA is not quite as bleak as Curtis leads one to believe. In 1956, when Alison King wrote her memoir of her time with the ATA, she gave examples of the women who had stayed in aviation, including Curtis, who was working “in the air flight test, observing and reporting on performance and maneuverability.”⁴ Another one of the female pilots, Freydis Leaf, became the first female British Air Racing Champion in 1954.⁵ Six women were also awarded the MBE for their service in the ATA, one of the highest military honors in Britain.⁶ However, as Curtis insinuates, the greatest majority of women returned to the lives they had led before the war, primarily as wives and mothers.

Many of the women of the ATA describe their time in the organization as “a slice of the most wonderful time of one’s life.”⁷ They felt “terribly privileged...”⁸ As one woman said, “you felt that you were doing the maximum job that anybody could do as a girl in this country, which was truly a feeling.”⁹ The sky had been a predominantly masculine domain before the war. Yet

³ Sinclair O’Neill, *Wartime Women: Memories of a Forties Generation*, (Chichester, West Sussex: Cutmill Books, 2002), 17.

⁴ King, *Golden Wings*, 185.

⁵ King, *Golden Wings*, 185.

⁶ King, *Golden Wings*, 181.

⁷ Marie Monique Agazarian, IWM Acc. No. 009579/5, Transcript, 55-56.

⁸ Marjorie Cole, IWM Acc. No. 13344/1, recorded October 25, 1984.

⁹ Marjorie Cole, IWM Acc. No. 13344/1, recorded October 25, 1984.

as the women excelled, while still acting as women, they felt that they were able to show that, “the skies are *also* feminine.”¹⁰

All the members of the ATA are now memorialized in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, with a list of honor for those who died while in service of the war. On the memorial, the words, “Remember then that also we in a moon’s course are history,” alluding to the feeling that the ATA pilots have been forgotten in the contemporary memory of the Second World War. However, for the women, there is also the ‘Women of World War II’ Monument in Whitehall, London, which has seventeen sets of clothes and uniforms, signifying the hundreds of jobs women performed throughout the war. (Figure 7) The clothing hangs, empty, as if on pegs in someone’s foyer. To some it seems as if it is waiting for the woman to return to don it and return to her duty. To many, however, it instead represents the message that after the war, the women were to hang up their uniforms and that British society should return to as much pre-war normalcy as possible.

¹⁰ King, *Golden Wings*, 183.

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Picture Post, September 1944

PICTURE APPENDIX



Figure 1: One of the photos taken of the original eight women pilots ‘scrambling’ to their Tiger Moths, shown in Helena Page Schrader, *Sisters in Arms: British and American Women Pilots during World War II* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Aviation, 2006)



Figure 2: Maureen Dunlop’s photo was used on the cover of *Picture Post* in September 1944, Shown in Giles Whittell, *Spitfire Women of World War II* (London: Harper Press, 2007)



Figure 3: Article shown in Rosemary du Cros, *ATA Girl: Memoirs of a Wartime Ferry Pilot* (London: Frederick Muller Limited, 1983), 40.



Figure 4: Advertisement promoting duty to be beautiful, shown in J. Waller and M. Vaughan-Rees, *Women in Wartime: The Role of Women's Magazines 1939-1945* (London: Macdonald Optima, 1987), 100.

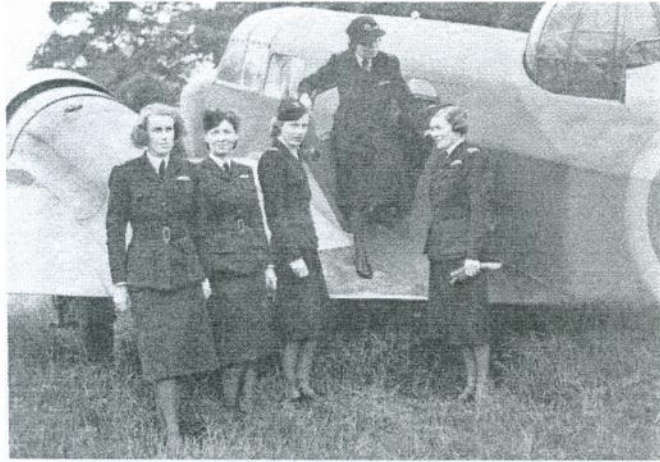


Figure 5: Example of ATA uniform in photo of (left to right) Lettice Curtis, Audrey Sale-Barker, and Pauline Gower, with Gabrielle Patterson climbing out an Avro Anson, the aircraft the women used as a taxi, shown in Giles Whittell, *Spitfire Women of World War II* (London: Harper Press, 2007)



Figure 6: Joan Hughes, one of the youngest and shortest ATA women pilots, walks beneath a Short Stirling, one of the four-engine bombers, shown on the cover of Alison King, *Golden Wings: The Story of Some of the Women Ferry Pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary* (London: C. Arthur Pearson Limited, 1956)

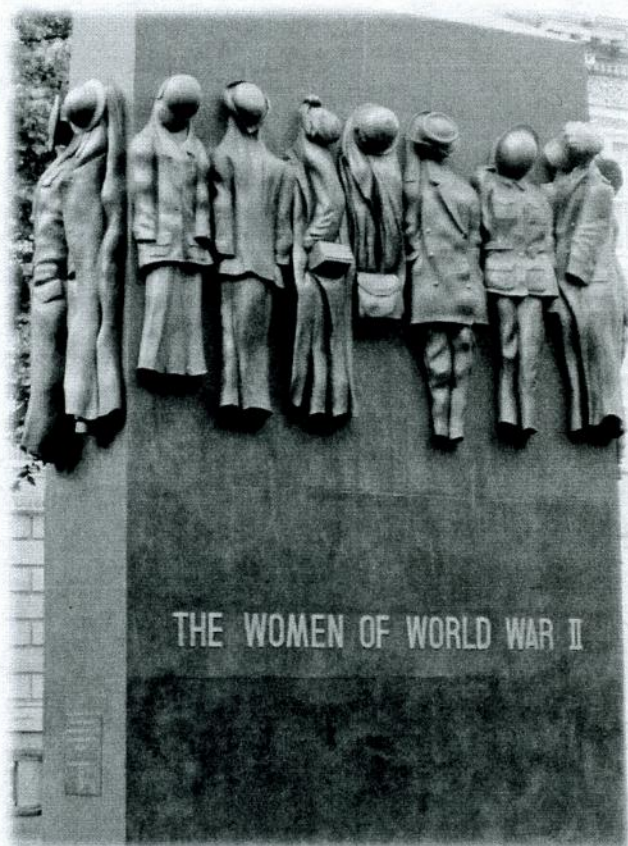


Figure 7: 'Women of World War II' Monument in Whitehall, London, photo by author