

M J F O R E M A N

BOMBER GIRLS

In it together...



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M J Foreman

SAMPLE PAGES

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First published in 2014 by Endeavour Press Ltd.

Foreword by Warrant Officer Neville Croucher

When I was asked by the author to write an introduction to this book I was delighted to have the opportunity to pay tribute to the wonderful women pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary of World War Two, who I worked with during my own RAF flying career.

They flew up to 140 varieties of aircraft straight out of the factories and delivered them directly into the hands of us excitable young pilots so that we could get into the skies and defend our country from Nazi invasion.

I often wonder where we would have been without these courageous women who flew in all weathers, often in types of aircraft they'd never piloted before and without the use of instruments to ensure they reached us on time.

Whilst I realise the Soviet air fighting force had its 'night witches' – the regiments of women pilots who Stalin had allowed to go into aerial combat – I am still in awe of how the women of Britain's own Air Transport Auxiliary contributed to the war effort. They were forbidden to fight the Luftwaffe in the air, of course, but they did an inspirational job as ferry pilots from 1941 – 1946.

I wasn't alone in admiring the ATA pilots – men and women – for their work. The ATA women as far as I remember just got on with their job with no fuss, and they were mostly cheerful too. More often than not, like us, they carried on their duties during times of mourning for family and friends killed in action.

The ATA girls I met briefly were a modest bunch. They were often quiet, polite, and courteous when they arrived at the hangar to sign off their delivery.

Looking back now I realise they probably had their guard up against some of the more misogynist RAF crews who never held back with dismissive and impolite comments about women pilots (I never got to find out what these bumptious types had to say about the Russian aviatrices who were busy claiming

their fair share of enemy aircraft in battle).

Unlike their male counterparts the women knew in the back of their minds about the aforementioned gender bias which did not exactly warrant them the warmest of welcomes at some airfields.

Some air and ground crewmen would question these women's credentials to deliver aircraft, even asking them if they had the strength to work the controls.

Indeed the editor of *Aeroplane Magazine* of the time wrote an article suggesting women should learn how to scrub floors properly instead of training to fly aircraft. Unbelievable!

Before the war women were perceived as being only fit to play the roles of wives and mothers – the little homemaker cooking the family dinner.

This generalisation was soon debunked by those 166 ATA women who fulfilled their passion and instinct to fly in a bid to serve their country. They took risks en route to male RAF crews with some of them dying because of bad weather creating poor visibility.

There was no radio contact or radar for these women. They weren't trained on instrument flying either. On occasions their aircraft even blew up at take off, or engine failure led them to crash into the hills. I heard stories of sabotage being blamed for some accidents. There were, I am sorry to say, some men who just didn't want to accept women were just as good at flying a Spitfire or indeed a Halifax Bomber as men.

So whether they flew single engine fighters, two engine aircraft, or indeed held their Class V certificate to get our great Lancaster Bombers into the air their contribution was significant to the British success in the skies of wartime.

I began my own RAF flying career in earnest in 1942 as a Wellington Bomber pilot and therefore I know how much training and focus must go into flying these weighty aircraft.

The Wellington is a big chunky old twin engine aeroplane built to carry heavy loads of explosives which could be discharged over enemy targets throughout Europe.

What with me being only five feet eight inches in height I had a problem reaching the rudder pedals with ease so had to fly with the seat pushed right forward. This wasn't a comfortable way to operate the controls but I enjoyed the challenge of the Wellington, until the I got caught in a crosswind and landed on one wheel and she rolled onto the grass. That was even more reason for me to admire the women who mastered the controls of the four engine Bombers – something I never got the chance to fly because after my skirmish in the windswept Wellington I was moved to a fighter squadron – back to the single engines.

As a member of 289 Squadron I flew Hurricanes mostly around the coast protecting our ships and watching for submarine activity. I also piloted Airspeed Oxford twin-engine aircraft when I was ferrying various top brass military personnel about the country.

I saw action while at the controls of the Hurricane though and was often shot at by the Germans flying their Me109s at me. I'd land and find my Hurricane MkI riddled with bullet holes. I was lucky and was never shot down but sadly many of those I worked with never returned from a sortie.

Imagine flying near the coast as a female ferry pilot without bullets on board to defend yourself if any rogue Me109 came at you out of nowhere. Women were forbidden to fire guns and so their journeys made them a sitting duck for the enemy who wouldn't think twice about taking pot shots at a British war plane. This is another reason these women are to be celebrated for their courage and determination to get our aircraft to us in one piece.

There was a rumour buzzing about that legendary aviatrix and ATA girl Amy Johnson had been shot down by mistake by one of our own anti-aircraft guns as the fog blinded her off course. Johnson was ferrying one of my old favourites the twin engine Airspeed Oxford when it went down in the Thames Estuary in 1941. Her body was never found.

I'd like very much to salute the 'Bomber Girls' of the ATA, and indeed all of those women who either flew or worked as essential ground crew helping to

ensure our aircraft reached us safely and efficiently during the dark days of World War Two.

Last year I had the tremendous luck to meet up with two surviving ATA girls; Mary Ellis and Joy Lofthouse are both in their 90s. They are amazing and I told them so.

I think I owe the ATA women a beer or two!

Warrant Officer Neville Croucher

Formerly of 289 Squadron



ATA First Officer Mary Wilkins (Ellis) seen here in 2013 in east Kent with RAF Flt Lt Charlie Brown who is the pilot of Spitfire Mk Vb BM597 belonging to Historic Aircraft Collection.

Pictures: Author's collection.



BEAUTIFUL: The Merlin-engined Spitfire BM597 of the Historic Aircraft Collection flies over east Kent - Battle of Britain country – with pilot RAF Flt Lt Charlie Brown. Women aviators of the ATA flew all marks of Spitfire from the Mk I up to Mk XVI -the later models often had Griffon engines.