

Women Pilots of the ATA

12th November 2015 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

John Smith gave a very interesting illustrated talk about the Women Pilots of the ATA (Air Transport Auxiliary) and with particular reference to Hamble, which was one of only two all women ATA Ferry Pools during the Second World War. He said it was a privilege to be giving the talk on the site of one of the busiest ATA 'Ferry Stations' in the country, which was staffed solely by women flyers.

The ATA performed an essential role during the Second World War, delivering aircraft to and from the factories where they were made or repaired to the RAF airfields all over Britain. Hamble was one of the country's biggest Spitfire repair bases, as well as having aircraft factories modifying them or manufacturing parts.

At the start of the Second World War, John explained the three armed services all employed women, but not in front line duties and none were flying. Most women pilots, pre-war, could afford to fly and in light aircraft.

This changed when Pauline Gower, who had operated an aircraft business pre-war providing joy rides, approached an helpful ally, Gerard d'Erlanger, the person who set up the all male ATA. This led to Pauline forming a group of eight, mostly well off women, joining the ATA but more followed soon afterwards.

At first they flew training aircraft but due to the demand for more pilots to deliver the country's fighter planes, soon progressed to Spitfires and Hurricanes. The women ATA pilots were comfortable with the small size of the Spitfire cockpits, which tall RAF pilots found cramped.

John spoke about some of the significant women ATA pilots, particularly those based at Hamble. One of these was Diana Barnato, a front runner pilot of the women ATA. Her father was a famous racing driver and chairman of Bentley Motors. The women based at Hamble came from many countries such as Poland, Chile, Australia, South Africa and the USA. As the war developed women ATA pilots came from all walks of life and had no previous flying experience.

Most of the delivery flights to and from Hamble were reasonably close as the factories and operational airfields it served were in the south of England. Similar to other ATA ferry pools, this enabled several delivery flights a day for each woman ATA pilot. The ATA pilots were not allowed to use radios so as to avoid being identified by enemy aircraft.

The ATA pilots had to fly a wide range of aircraft sometimes at short notice, so they all carried a small booklet called the 'Ferry Pilots Notes' to brief themselves about the aircraft which they were about to fly. Eventually the ATA women flew aircraft ranging from Wellington and American B-17 Flying Fortress bombers to the Walrus seaplane. Lettice Curtis was one of the pioneers of flying these heavy bombers and she was based at Hamble for a short while.

John gave details of the death rates of ATA pilots, particularly the women pilots. Most were due to aircraft malfunction or bad weather, rather than pilot error.

At the end of the war the ATA disbanded and little was heard of their war effort until recognition of their work only recently. One ATA woman pilot became an airline pilot after the war and Diana Barnato Walker became the first British woman to break the sound barrier. Today women fly passenger airliners and serve in the RAF as frontline fighter pilots.

John was an excellent speaker who put over the story of the ATA women pilots in a very good and interesting way, which the large audience very much enjoyed. It was a surprise when he said there were very few memorials to the ATA, with Hamble's being the main one. A story well worth telling.