

Air Transport Auxiliary at Hamble

At the beginning of the Second World War the ATA was set up to enable RAF pilots to undertake operational duties rather than move aircraft around the country between factories, maintenance units and airfields. Volunteers, who would not have normally met the RAF requirements for operational service because of their age, medial/physical limitations, were trained to undertake these duties.

Initially the ATA only took male applicants but soon accepted females as well, and it was the first major organisation to treat men and women equally as a matter of policy e.g. pay, duties, uniform etc. The well known female pilot Amy Johnson joined the ATA and was killed in service on a delivery flight.

ATA pilots were restricted to flying in daylight and without a radio. They were confined to 'contact' navigation which meant always being in the sight of the ground and they found their way by using a map.

As there were over 100 types of aircraft to deliver they were classed in difficulty and flown by ATA pilots with the appropriate training and experience. Class 1 consisted of light aircraft which were the first flown by the new pilots. Next was Class 2 single engine fighters such as the Spitfire & Hurricane, while Class 5 contained four engine aircraft such as Lancaster and Halifax bombers. The highest Class 6, Flying Boats, was the only one that women did not eventually fly.

As it was essential to have information available to fly unfamiliar aircraft at short notice the ATA produced Ferry Pilot Notes, a booklet which contained concise vital information on each of the aircraft, to enable pilots to deliver them even if they had not flown that type before.

The ATA delivered aircraft to the RAF and Fleet Air Arm. After delivering an aircraft it was hoped the Operations Officer could arrange another to fly back or second best to arrange a flight back with someone else. If this could not be done the ferry pool had its own taxi aircraft to pick up the pilots but if this was not possible pilots would use the train for long journeys or a car for short journeys.



Former ATA pilots at the opening of Hamble's Memorial in 2010

An ATA Ferry Pool started at Hamble in September 1940, lead by Captain Brian Wardle, and at the beginning it was a sub-pool of No 1 Ferry Pool, but soon it became No 15 Ferry Pool and a year later became an all-women Ferry Pool.

The initial group of ATA women pilots was formed at Hatfield under Pauline Gower. When sufficient number of women pilots had been trained, Hamble became the first of only two all women Ferry Pool that operated during the Second World War.

On the 29th September 1941 a group of women ferry pilots transferred to Hamble to form an all-women ATA ferry pool. They took over from the all-male ferry pool with the previous head of Pool, Australian Geoff Wikner, leaving to be replaced by Margot Gore as CO (Commanding Officer) with Rosemary Rees as her deputy. Alison King was appointed the non flying Operations Officer.

A few male pilots stayed on for a short while to help familiarise them with the operations and area, as well as to ferry aircraft that the women were not yet qualified to fly. One of these men was Bruce Campbell who was to return to Hamble in the 1950/60s to build his famous Christina powerboats.

The previous all-male pilots were mostly British and American but although the new women group were also mostly British it included a pilot from South Africa. Eventually women from other countries served at Hamble e.g. Poland, Argentina, USA, Chile, Denmark, Australia. Well known British women pilots such as Diana Barnato and Lettice Curtis were members of Hamble's Ferry Pool.



Diana Barnato getting into a Spitfire at Hamble

As there was no accommodation available at the airfield these ATA women lived in rooms or rented dwellings in village, such as Mere House, Sydney Cottages, Royal Southern Yacht Club and houses in Satchell Lane.

The main object of Hamble's ferry pool was to quickly clear aircraft from the factories in the vulnerable Southampton area. At Eastleigh, Vickers produced Spitfires and Cunliffe Owen Blenheims, Airacobras, Hudsons & Lancasters. Vickers also had two other dispersed satellites factories with all types of Spitfires. Airspeed produced Oxfords at Christchurch and Portsmouth, while AST at Hamble was the country's main Spitfire repair base. AST eventually worked on larger aircraft such as the American B17 Flying Fortresses bomber.

Hamble Ferry Pool also delivered aircraft for the Fleet Air Arm to places such as Worthy Down, Gosport and Lee on Solent.

Important airfields such as Eastleigh were surrounded by barrage balloons for protection and ATA pilots had to find out the secret arrangements for landing. Some of the other hazards that the pilots had to avoid included anti-aircraft guns and training areas, plus bad weather.

The women's ferry pool started with 10 pilots plus a junior taxi pilot, one Operations Officer and 1 driver with 5 engineers to deal with 2 Avro Ansons and 2 Fairchild Argus taxi aircraft. By summer 1942 it had grown to 30 pilots and 20 engineers to service 5 Ansons and 6 Fairchilds. Additional support staff included 4 drivers, 3 in operations, 2 adjutants, a map & signals officer, a resident sick bay sister plus canteen staff and typists. This required more accommodation so a dedicated ATA one storey building was constructed and opened in July, which included a mess room, dining room and staff offices.



ATA Women's Mess Room at Hamble

Margot Gore as CO could not fly each day due to administrative duties but always flew whenever she could; Margot flew with apparent ease four-engine B-17 Flying Fortresses skimming a few feet above the AST hangar. AST started undertaking modifications to the American Fortress bomber in early 1943.

An example of a typical winter day of ferry flights at Hamble involved 20 pilots ferrying aircraft, plus 3 taxi aircraft. They would deliver Spitfires from Hamble to White Waltham (near Maidenhead), Barracudas back to Lee on Solent and Seafires from Lee to Hamble. By the end of the morning most pilots completed two round trips but a few had achieved three.

There were other local airfields, which have not already been mentioned, that Hamble's pilots would take aircraft such as Marwell. Occasionally some went to Chattis Hill, near Stockbridge, which was a secret aerodrome with two camouflaged hangars hidden in trees. The place was secret because earlier in the war it became a dispersal airfield and factory for new Spitfires following the bombing of the Vickers Supermarine factory at Woolston.

Hamble ferry pilots were in the ideal position to see the build up to D-Day but had to keep the details to themselves. On the evening of June 5th pilots returned with stories of a great assembly of aircraft having black-and-white strips painted on their wings (special D-Day identification markings). At 11 a.m. on the morning of D-Day, the first Spitfire, fresh from the battle over France, landed at Hamble, which was to become one of the forward repair units. It was designated a 'prang-patch' for aircraft coming back in trouble from the front in Normandy, just 80 miles or so across the Channel.

ATA activities continued at Hamble until the end of the war with flying ceasing on Saturday 11th August 1945 and the Ferry Pool closed on the 15th.

Unfortunately the ATA suffered the inevitable loss of life and this included Hamble based Honour Salmon (nee Pitman) and Dora Lang. In 1942 Honour was delivering an Oxford aircraft in bad weather when she flew into a hill near Devizes due to poor visibility. Dora was killed in 1944 when her

Mosquito reared up, turn on its back and dived into the ground just before landing at Lasham.

At the end of the war the ATA had flown 415,000 hours delivering 309,000 aircraft of over 100 different types. Margot Gore and Rosemary Rees from Hamble were two of the four women ATA pilots that received a MBE.

Hamble's ATA Women's Ferry Pool - 1944



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