

## **Grandma Flew Spitfires In The War**

Michael Percy discovers the brave women who smashed the status quo in wartime Britain and took to the skies in fighters and bombers.

The effort of climbing the ladder into the spitfire simulator at Maidenhead Heritage Centre threatened to be too much for Molly Rose so she stood at one side and watched others enjoy the re-creation of flying at 400 mph. – and in many cases a crash landing as well.

But seventy years ago, at the height of World War Two, Molly Rose flew the real thing. She was one of 168 female pilots whose job it was to ferry war planes from the factories to front line bases all over England.

They served in the Air Transport Auxiliary which was created at the outbreak of war with its headquarters at White Waltham aerodrome near Maidenhead. At first the ATA recruited male pilots who, for many reasons, were not fit for combat flying but could release operational pilots for front line service.

The first eight women pilots were assigned to the ATA in 1940 under the leadership of Pauline Gower, an accomplished pilot in her own right with 2000 hours commercial flying experience. The male ATA pilots looked on with interest and not a little trepidation. They were concerned that women pilots would lose valuable aircraft but their biggest fear was that the women might actually make a good job of it!

Women were initially restricted to flying Tiger Moth training aircraft and over 2000 of these were successfully delivered during the first winter of the war. Finally, in July 1941 the women were given the chance to prove they could fly operational aircraft when five of them took test flights in a Hurricane fighter. They passed with flying colours.

Richard Poad, ATA historian and chair of the Maidenhead Heritage Centre explained how important the women's leader Pauline Gower was in the history of the ATA.

“She was a consummate politician. Without her women would never have been allowed in the ATA. She was quietly persistent, took the right people to lunch, put words in their mouths and planted questions in the House of Commons.

“By 1941 Pauline Gower got permission for women to ferry combat aeroplanes. By 1942 the women were flying four-engined bombers. In 1943 she finally got equal pay for the women making the ATA possibly one of the first equal opportunity employers.”

Being a pilot in the ATA was not a soft option. They faced long flights from the factories in the north of England and Scotland often alone and having to navigate by peering down at unfamiliar landscapes using maps and a compass. They flew every type of combat aeroplane from Spitfires to four engine Halifax bombers.

Veteran pilot Molly Rose explained. "Before you took off you always went into the met office to see what the weather was going to be like. And then you simply map read. You couldn't go down and look at station signs to find out where you were because they'd all been taken down because of the war. Same applied to sign posts on the roads. Railway lines were a big help as were clumps of trees. Surprisingly I didn't ever deliver an aircraft to the wrong place!

"But I had a lucky escape once when I came face to face with one of the Cotswolds whilst flying a Spitfire north. Fortunately I had enough power to put full throttle on and get over it. I think it might have surprised some people on the ground and it certainly gave me quite a surprise."

ATA pilots trained on categories of aircraft so they could often face a particular aeroplane type they had not flown before. Each pilot had a little booklet called *Ferry Pilots Notes*. Some of the notes are surprisingly brief as in this one for the throttle control on the Spitfire: *At maximum revs the automatic device is overridden and higher rpm is obtained (avoid selecting by mistake'*. Good advice at 400 miles per hour.

Molly Rose smiled when she remembered these little books. "With an aircraft you need to know take off speed and landing speed and best cruising speeds to be economic with the fuel. And that's roughly all you need to know about any aircraft."

By the end of the war the ATA had 764 pilots of both genders supported by over three times that number of ground staff. Many of the ground staff were women like Wyn Roper of Maidenhead who was conscripted into the ATA at the tender age of seventeen to become an aircraft maintenance engineer.

"I got my call up papers in 1942," she explained. "You either had to go into war work or you had to join the forces. I chose to go into war work and I was very lucky to be sent to White Waltham because you could have been sent anywhere.

"I went for an aptitude test at West Drayton and I passed that. They said to me you'll go to the ATA. I was lucky that I could still stay at home because I didn't expect to. I lived in Winter Hill Road in Pinkneys Green and cycled to work across the thicket. I went for training for three months. They taught us everything and at the end we had to strip an engine down. Before that I'd never even held a spanner."

A similar experience faced Margaret Vera Carter who lived in the Cox Green area of Maidenhead at the start of the war. Sadly Margaret died in 2008 having never mentioned ATA to her daughter Pam Casement.

"I found two photographs of people outside a Nissan hut," explained Pam of Stompits Road in Maidenhead. "I was looking at the faces of about twenty women and then one caught my eye. I thought, that's my mum – strange. But what's she doing? I didn't know when the photograph was taken or where. She was very careful with her appearance so it was odd to see her wearing an overall with her usual high heels."

Pam was determined to investigate the mystery photos but she needed more evidence from her mum's papers. That came in the form of a book called *Brief Glory* which was the official history of the ATA and a certificate of service.

The certificate read: *This Certificate is issued by way of Record and in recognition of your Services with the Air Transport Auxiliary. The ATA was formed in 1939 upon the Declaration of War by Great Britain, for the purpose of delivering His Majesty's aircraft to the Royal Air Force and The Royal Navy and for Air Transport tasks Auxiliary to the War Effort. You have played your Part and shared in the Achievements of an Organisation that has every Reason to be proud of its Record.*

"I don't know why mum never mentioned it," said Pam. "This was something she should have been very proud of. I suppose when you've been through a war and there was so much suffering you just want to forget."

Pam was able to piece together her mother's secret wartime exploits during a visit to Maidenhead Heritage Centre where there is a permanent exhibition about the ATA – including the Spitfire simulator. It transpired that the group photograph Pam had discovered also contained Wyn Roper so they must have known each other at White Waltham.

Wyn Roper looked closely at the photograph but at first was not sure if she was in it. "I did look at one of the women in the photo and think that could have been me. Now I'm sure it is." She peered at another face from the past. "That's Betty Almond who came from Littlewick. I'm sure. She became my best friend. I met her on the training course and she was my friend for ever after."

There are very few surviving members of the ATA and it is sad that Margaret Vera Carter (Grantham by marriage) and Wyn Roper lived just a few miles from each other for over sixty years and never managed to have a chat about the old days before Margaret died.

**INFORMATION SIDE BAR** - Maidenhead Heritage Centre at 18 Park Street Maidenhead has a permanent ATA exhibition including a life size Spitfire cockpit flight simulator. Open Tuesday – Saturday 10am - 4pm. Check web site for details of possible closure for building work early in 2012.  
[www.maidenheadheritage.org.uk](http://www.maidenheadheritage.org.uk)

**SPECIAL PANEL with ATA group photo** – Caption for the ATA group photo: This photo was discovered by Pam Casement amongst her mother's papers. Margaret Grantham (*née* Carter) is second row extreme right. Wyn Roper is second row, third from left. Betty Almond is on Margaret's right. If you can help to identify any of the ATA women in this picture, or identify where it was taken, please get in touch.