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# The Women of the Air Transport Auxiliary in Second World War Newsreels

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A small, but revealing, set of Second World War newsreels exist that feature the pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA). Newsreels are an important source of knowledge about the ideology of authorities in wartime Britain. The immense popularity of the cinema meant that newsreels became an important way for the government to communicate with the general public about the progress of the war and also to recruit them into war service. The war was labour intensive, and the government followed a number of initiatives to maximise combat personnel, most notably the widespread employment of women in supporting military roles. The ATA was established to provide a pool of pilots to undertake essential, but not combat, flying during the war. It was made up of pilots who were deemed unfit to serve in the Royal Air Force, a determination that allowed women, by dint of not being male, to join its ranks. The British government were keen to utilise women yet at the same time retain social norms that position employment outside the home as “man’s work”. An examination of extant Second World War newsreels reveals that women pilots were initially positioned as a novelty, undertaking lighter, less serious duties than their male counterparts whilst dressed in feminine attire. As the war progressed this shifted rapidly to a recognition that the women were undertaking serious work on par with their male colleagues.

Pilots were important military assets during the Second World War, and the need to maximise their potential in combat created the impetus to employ women in varying capacities in the air force. Women joining the military, which had been the traditional preserve of men, represented a break with the established social norms of the various Axis and Allied countries. As Leila J. Rupp argues “all societies ... assign distinct roles to men and women, and these are reflected in public or popular images, defined as the descriptions or representations of people presented by the popular media for public consumption”.<sup>1</sup> As a widespread form of media dissemination, newsreels are an invaluable source of government propaganda from the Second World War, revealing the ideology that underpinned their content.<sup>2</sup> They also reveal the rapidity with which social change occurred under war conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Grace E. Stephenson, “British Newsreels at War, 1939–45: A Significant Source for Scholars,” *British Journal for Military History*, Vol 6, 3 (2020), pp. 148–54.

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The use of newsreels as a primary source has long been discussed in academia, but was hampered by the uneven access to the archives.<sup>3</sup> The recent creation of online databases which provide free access to extant newsreels overcomes this obstacle. Newsreels are now a potent source for social, cultural, and political information; however, “historians have yet to make extensive use of this rich resource and its potential as ‘unwitting testimony’ of twentieth-century British history”<sup>4</sup>. This study uses a discrete set of extant Second World War Newsreels that feature the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA), the organisation for ferrying aircraft for the Royal Air Force (RAF). These are sourced from the publicly available archives of the five prominent British newsreel companies: British Movietone News, British Paramount News, Pathé Gazette, Gaumont-British News, and Universal News.<sup>5</sup>

The propaganda campaign was an important element of the war effort for the British government during the Second World War and “newsreels played their part in that successful story of ‘propaganda with facts’”.<sup>6</sup> Although one concern surrounding the use of newsreels as a primary source is that as they could be used to promote particular ideologies, they may be unreliable witnesses of audience reception or beliefs,<sup>7</sup> this study will focus on the ideologies that these newsreels reveal and how these could shift quickly due to military necessity under war conditions. It does this through considering elements within them, such as the framing of the subjects through narration, the images they choose to display, and the elements within these such as uniforms. In doing so, it seeks to understand the extent that newsreels can inform our knowledge about the roles women pilots played during the Second World War, and how they were received by the public.

## Newsreels

By the Second World War, newsreels were one of the most consumed forms of news sources in Britain, achieving a “greater degree of social penetration than anywhere else in the world, except for the USA”<sup>8</sup> and five companies had come to dominate the newsreel market — British Movietone News, British Paramount News, Pathé Gazette, Gaumont-British News, and Universal News.

The British government, building on their experience during the First World War, were keen to oversee production of newsreels during the new conflict. Although the government censorship scheme through the Ministry of Information was voluntary, military footage also had to go through military censorship, a much more strident scheme that had the power to impound and withhold footage indefinitely. Further, the Ministry of Information put in place a rota system, whereby one company was allowed to film events, and they had to share the approved footage with their competitors. This pool system “led to the vast homogenisation of product amongst the five major British

<sup>3</sup> Emily Rutherford, “Researching and Teaching with British Newsreels,” *20th Century British History*, Vol 32, 3 (2021), p. 441, <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwab014>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 460.

<sup>5</sup> The archives are both held on the company websites, with some also being published on YouTube. The Universal archive is incomplete due to a fire in the 1970s that destroyed many newsreels.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Pronay, “Chapter 4: The Political Censorship of Films in Britain Between the Wars,” in *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918–45*, eds, Nicholas Pronay and D. W. Spring (London and Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press, 1982), p. 174.

<sup>7</sup> Rutherford, “Researching and Teaching,” p. 449.

<sup>8</sup> Pronay, “The Political Censorship of Films,” p. 175.

(as well as the five major American) newsreel companies between 1940 and 1945”.<sup>9</sup> As we will see in the analysis below, there are often several versions of the same newsreel in the archives. This homogenization has the potential to reveal ideologies of both the military and the political wings of the government. The reach of British newsreels during the Second World War stretched across Allied nations, with countries such as Australia and Canada being key markets. Despite this reach, analysis shows that newsreels were adapted for local audiences,<sup>10</sup> where “the allocation of specific topics and story locations varied predictably according to likely patterns of audience interest.”<sup>11</sup>

Newsreel companies were commercial enterprises and were also responding to consumer demand. Audiences of Second World War newsreels demanded authenticity,<sup>12</sup> and the stage-managing of visual scenes, commonly done in WWI, was reduced. This was not always the case with the audio portion of the newsreels. Film was a silent medium during the First World War, with intertitles and carefully selected music played by live accompanists working to fill the gap of narration and incidental sound. Although integrated sound was now common, audio was dominated by narrators, music, and sound effects. With the use of narration being used to convey the story, intertitles decreased, being used primarily to authenticate details or to provide further information.<sup>13</sup> Narrators commonly spoke with the Received Pronunciation, a class-related rather than regional accent, which was “associated with educated speakers and formal speech” and “connotations of prestige and authority, but also of privilege and arrogance”.<sup>14</sup> Although narrators told the story, their style could shift within a newsreel,

from the position of a distant and wise observer and at times from the position of a first-hand witness caught in the midst of the action ... [with] claims to present untampered imagery (“No Hollywood fake pictures these!”) while openly tampering with the sound, leading the viewer to believe that the narrator’s speech was recorded on the spot instead of in a studio (“Look, look, it’s a hit!”).<sup>15</sup>

This positions the narrator as credible witness to events, adding to the perceived “authenticity” of the story, despite the obvious manipulation. The pool system and newsreel style combined to be a potent form of propaganda in the Second World War, helping earn the British news industry a reputation “for having even in wartime an honest, free, and truthful media”<sup>16</sup>.

### Women in military uniform

One key aspect of the newsreel propaganda was the promotion of war work on the home front to young women, a demographic that frequented the cinema. No doubt

<sup>9</sup> Masha Shpolberg, “The Din of Gunfire: Rethinking the Role of Sound in World War II Newsreels,” *NECSUS — European Journal of Media Studies*, Vol 3, 2 (2014), p. 115.

<sup>10</sup> Scott L. Althaus, et al., “Global News Broadcasting in the Pre-Television Era: A Cross-National Comparative Analysis of World War II Newsreel Coverage,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, Vol 62, 1 (2018), pp. 163–64.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163–64.

<sup>12</sup> Shpolberg, “The Din of Gunfire,” p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Sangster, “Received Pronunciation and BBC English,” *BBC Voices*, BBC, 25 April 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/voices/yourvoice/rpandbbc.shtml>

<sup>15</sup> Shpolberg, “The Din of Gunfire,” p. 125.

<sup>16</sup> Pronay, “The Political Censorship of Films,” p. 124.

women also appreciated their contribution to the war effort being showcased alongside that of men. During the Second World War, many of the belligerent nations used female labour to boost their workforce. The employment of women for war work has a long history; however, the work was usually gendered, that is women would take on support roles such as meal preparation or nursing. During the First World War in Britain, women's roles were expanded, and several dedicated quasi-military organisations were formed to regiment this work. Nearly 5 million women would undertake war work, including 100,000<sup>17</sup> who served in the women's wings of the armed forces, including the Royal Navy and RAF. The roles made available to women were clearly defined as non-combat; combat roles being restricted to men. Outside Britain the situation was similar, except for small groups of women who became soldiers in countries such as Russia, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania. Employing women in traditionally masculine occupations presented governments with more than just logistical management issues; and recruiting women to the armed services also meant negotiating longstanding social and political constructs of gender roles. The end of the First World War meant that many war jobs were no longer needed making many women unemployed and what jobs remained being reserved for men. Many women, having tasted independence, were reluctant to return to domestic roles.<sup>18</sup> By the Second World War social changes had begun to impact the socialisation of gendered work, in the UK Suffrage had been granted to all women in 1928 and more women were seeking work outside the home. The British government recognised the benefits of using women in select home front jobs, freeing up more men for frontline combat. In anticipation of war, auxiliary wings of the armed forces were set up and active recruitment drives targeting women were conducted.<sup>19</sup> For women, the drive to contribute to war work may have been partly driven by feminism and the desire to be independent but for the British government a different set of issues were apparent:<sup>20</sup> "This need for women's labour during the war threw up some difficult contradictions for a society wedded to the belief that a woman's place was in the home."<sup>21</sup> By placing women's war work into auxiliary organisations, the government was able to send a clear signal of separation and impermanency. The government was also under pressure "to respect employers' wish not to make concessions, such as higher pay for women that might need to be carried over into peace time".<sup>22</sup> This separation of women service workers from men was signalled through the use of uniforms, with many services issuing distinct "feminine" versions of male uniforms.

<sup>17</sup> Imperial War Museums, "12 Things You Didn't Know About Women in the First World War," 20 April 2024, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/12-things-you-didnt-know-about-women-in-the-first-world-war>

<sup>18</sup> Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*, 1 ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Several organisations where women served were set up either in preparation for the war or shortly after conflict began. The largest of these were the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (28 June 1939), the Auxiliary Territorial Service (9 September 1938), and the Women's Royal Naval Service (April 1939). These all had counterparts that had been established during, and then disbanded shortly after the end of, the First World War: Women's Royal Air Force (1918–1920), Women's Army Auxiliary Corp (1917–1921), and the original Women's Royal Naval Service (1917–1919).

<sup>20</sup> Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840*, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Richard Croucher and Mark Houssart, "'Send Us More Arms!' Bringing British Women into War Production Through Films in World War Two," *Labor History*, Vol 59, 2 (2018), p. 124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2018.1385883>

Gendered dress is so entrenched in Western society that we can often think it is obvious that women during the Second World War should have a skirted uniform and men not. Historically the woman's work uniform has embodied social constructs of gender and tended to be associated with domestic service, the maid, or the nurse, for example. In comparison, military uniforms were associated with masculinity, and women wearing these uniforms could disrupt gender boundaries.<sup>23</sup> Partitioning women's military work into separate organisations from that of the men's allowed for the creation of distinct uniforms that reinforced the gender divide. This is illustrated clearly in the design of women's uniforms which incorporated skirts rather than trousers. Evidence of social unease surrounding the female figure in uniforms can be found in popular culture accounts in films from the 1930s, which illustrated the dual role uniforms played when placed on men and women:

Uniforms as costumes served to give credence of strong notions of masculinity but problematic notions of femininity. Female characters were portrayed as problems (threats, unstable, ambivalent, and weak). Generally, their cinematic predicaments were resolved once the female characters abandoned their uniforms for civvies and exchanged the public sphere for the fantasy of domestic bliss.<sup>24</sup>

These depictions suggest that women's military work was seen by many as a necessary, but temporary, requirement during war and that peace would see a return to the status quo.

Uniform itself is a form of propaganda. Clothing is, Grant McCracken argues, a communicative device, albeit one without a syntagmatic context; the messages within are pre-determined allowing the observer to "read" the clothes.<sup>25</sup> In the case of uniforms, their structured nature provides for both explicit and implicit communication. The uniform confers the status of the wearer, both in society and within the service organisation. The use of badges, medals, and other decorative elements communicate the wearer's organisation, rank, achievements, roles, and so forth. Uniforms serve to overlay the identity of the person who wears them that of the organisation. The wearing of a military uniform imbues the wearer with the authority of that state, allowing the wearer to communicate their service and express their citizenship to their fellow citizens. For some wearers, this adds a layer of pride. Not all uniforms were considered equal during the Second World War and a social hierarchy appeared. Men and women serving in elite roles, such as pilots, were often accorded a higher status, and at times a better-quality uniform.<sup>26</sup> During the Second World War, these understandings of service uniforms were widely understood. The use of uniformed service personnel in newsreels leveraged this public knowledge.

Newsreels provided a way to manage what Anna Froula termed "the uncanny nature" of women soldiers.<sup>27</sup> Yvonne Tasker outlined how British Movietone's short

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Craik, "The Cultural Politics of the Uniform," *Fashion Theory*, Vol 7, 2 (2003), p. 141.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 66.

<sup>26</sup> Pilot Veonica Volkersz wrote about her "quite terrible" London Auxiliary Ambulance Service uniform "which made no pretension to fitting" in contrast to her "exceedingly smart", individually tailored ATA uniform. Veronica Volkersz, *The Sky and I* (London: WH Allen, 1956), pp. 25, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Anna Froula, "'Conspiracy of Silence': The Containment of Military Women in World War II Newsreels and Short Films," in *A Companion to the War Film*, eds, Douglas A. Cunningham and John C. Nelson (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley, 2016), p. 121.

film *Britannia is a Woman* (1940) presented service women with reference to the social and government ideology. Aimed at both a domestic and international audience, “the film is at pains to emphasize the patriotism, competence, and respectability of British military women who are seen marching, cooking, and typing” with an emphasis on how women were freeing up men to do the more important tasks.<sup>28</sup> However, within this film were glimpses that women could contribute more:

*Britannia Is a Woman* concludes its military section with a few brief images of women of the Air Transport Auxiliary. These female ferry pilots are portrayed in an informal group; we see them standing beside their planes, smoking and laughing. They wear boots and greatcoats, but we also see them in full flight gear, ready for duty as the voice-over intones, “[This is] surely one of the most adventurous jobs which has so far fallen to the fair sex.” Here the commentary touches on the possibility of a new role for military women.<sup>29</sup>

Although the number of women who served in the ATA was far lower than in many other auxiliary services, their employment suggested that women had the potential to do much more in this war than in previous ones. In the lead up to the war, some women pilots expected, or at least hoped, to be called up to military service. ATA pilot Maureen Dunlop reportedly told journalists that she would have flown in combat if it was required: She said: “I thought it was the only fair thing. Why should only the men get killed?”<sup>30</sup> Although British women would not be afforded the opportunity to fly as operational pilots with the RAF until 1990, the employment of women in the ATA is an important advancement in the history of women military pilots.

### *Women pilots*

The establishment of the ATA was with precedence. During the First World War the RAF had a pool of pilots whose job was to ferry aircraft from the factories in Britain to the 15 Aircraft Acceptance Parks in France. There were less than 400 pilots employed to do this, but by the end of the war they were delivering around 3,000 aircraft per month. In the interwar period, the RAF were concerned about their war readiness and the supporting infrastructure and laid out plans to “leap in to war production at short notice”.<sup>31</sup> With the likelihood of war becoming more certain, plans to establish a ferry pool began and the ATA began operations on 15 February 1940. Recruitment into the ATA could only be done after the individual had been turned down by the RAF of the Fleet Air Arm, which left the door open for women pilots.<sup>32</sup> Thus they were recruited into the ATA from the very outset, with the first eight women entering service on 1 January 1940, 6 weeks before operations began.<sup>33</sup> By the end of the war 168 women had been employed by

<sup>28</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Soldiers' Stories: Military Women in Cinema and Television Since World War II* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 31–32.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Mary Ellis and Melody Foreman, *A Spitfire Girl: One of the World's Greatest Female ATA Ferry Pilots Tells Her Story* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2016), p. 86.

<sup>31</sup> G. W. Williamson, “Air Transport Auxiliary,” *Royal United Services Institution Journal*, Vol 88, 550 (1943), p. 107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071844309419505>

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Wynn, *Air Transport Auxiliary at War: 80th Anniversary of Its Formation* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Aviation, 2021), Loc 104.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Loc 152.



the ATA. They would be the only women who regularly flew planes as part of their war duties.<sup>34</sup>

The women's section of the ATA was established on 14 November 1939 under Commander Pauline Gower. The women pilots of the ATA were, significantly, employees of the same organisation as the men. This was due to its Auxiliary service; however, it entitled them hold the same ranks and wear the same formal uniform, albeit with a skirt, and for flying they were issued with the same flight gear: "fleece-lined flying boots, helmets, goggles, and the so-called 'Sidcot suits'"<sup>35</sup>. At the start of the war the women pilots were employed with 20% less pay than their male counterparts, and they could only fly "non-operational types of plane, such as trainers or communications aircraft"<sup>36</sup>. The commander of the woman's section, Pauline Gower would persist throughout the war to ensure wider opportunities for her women, to be treated as equal to the male pilots and, crucially, to be awarded equal pay, which they would receive in 1942, becoming the first UK government employees to do so.<sup>37</sup> She would always address those under her command as "women" and never "girls". She also resisted glamorisation of the women by the sections of the media who would focus reports of pilots being "former beauty queens and socialites"<sup>38</sup> rather than on the serious war work being undertaken.<sup>39</sup>

### The Depiction of Women of the ATA in Newsreels

This research examines 12 newsreels produced from 5 sets of footage produced over the course of the Second World War. Following the pool system, the same footage was made available to all the participating newsreel companies, who were then allowed some autonomy about how they fashioned the story for their audiences. For some stories included here there is only one newsreel available on the websites for a story, for others there are two or three versions available. This analysis will group together newsreels sourced from the same footage, noting the nuanced differences between them.

The newsreels were sourced from the online archives of Pathé, Gaumont, Paramount, and Movietone. They represent all that are available for viewing on their website. Footage for Paramount, Pathé, and Gaumont are all sourced from the British Pathé

<sup>34</sup> Some women pilots joined the WAAF in the anticipation that they would be able to serve in a flying capacity, however, they would be largely grounded for the entirety of the war. "As Beryl E. Escott writes in her history of the wartime WAAF, its personnel 'did not fly (except by luck, accident, or to carry out air checks)'"', as cited in Tasker, *Soldiers' Stories*, p. 32. ATA pilot Veronica Volkorsz wrote how she forswore taking up a position with the WAAF when she heard that women would not have the opportunity to fly. See Volkorsz, *The Sky and I*, pp. 24–25. Opportunity would come to WAAF women in 1943 when the shortage of available pilots became so dire that the RAF called for expressions of interest from WAAF volunteers to be trained for the ATA. They received 1,400 applications. Beryl E. Escott, *Women in Air Force Blue: The Story of Women in the Royal Air Force from 1918 to the Present Day* (Wellingborough: Patrick Stephens, 1989), p. 178; Volkorsz, *The Sky and I*, pp. 24–25.

<sup>35</sup> Helena Page Schrader, *Sisters in Arms: The Women Who Flew in World War II* (Croydon: Pen and Sword Aviation, 2015), pp. 28–29.

<sup>36</sup> "Women Join and Do 'A Man's Job,'" Maidenhead Heritage Trust, n.d., <https://atamuseum.org/women-join-and-do-a-mans-job/>

<sup>37</sup> Charles Paul May, *Women in Aeronautics* (New York: Nelson, 1962), p. 140.

<sup>38</sup> Julie Fountain, "'The Most Interesting Work a Woman can Perform in Wartime': The Exceptional Status of British Women Pilots During the Second World War," *Cultural and Social History*, Vol 13, 2 (2016), pp. 213–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2016.1202010>

<sup>39</sup> May, *Women in Aeronautics*, p. 140.

archive, while the British Movietone footage is from the Youtube archive.<sup>40</sup> Others that have not been released or may no longer be extant are not included.<sup>41</sup> Although this may have been a hindrance, the aim of this research is to exam the shifts over time that occurred with the presentation of female pilots and the newsreels included here demonstrate this.

### **Women Pilots for “Ferry” Service** *Movietone* 14 January 1940

#### **Women Pilots Deliver Planes from Factory to RAF** *British Paramount Newsreel* 15 January 1940 [no sound]

The first set of newsreels were published in mid-January 1940, just 2 weeks after the first eight female pilots were recruited by the ATA, and appear to be part of the press launch announcing their employment.<sup>42</sup> The earliest newsreel in the archive is dated 14 January 1940 and is simply titled *Women Pilots for “Ferry” Service* and released by Movietone. It depicts the eight new recruits with their Commander, Pauline Gower. The narrator tells us:

These women are in the news at home because they have taken on a somewhat unusual war job. Miss Pauline Gower is their leader, and their work is to ferry new aircraft of the Royal Air Force from factory to aerodrome. All these women of the Air Transport Auxiliary are most experienced pilots, each with a record of about a thousand flying hours to her credit. This, the first section, expects to put in over 15,000 miles a week. By carrying out this duty they’re relieving the pressure of work that would otherwise fall to RAF pilots.

In this short snippet, we can see the framing of women in these “uncanny” roles, to borrow Anna Froula’s phrase.<sup>43</sup> Commander Gower is referred to as “Miss Gower”, rather than by her rank, and the audience is reassured that these women are carrying out lesser tasks than the men. The framing of women’s contribution to the war as mundane tasks that allowed men to undertake more important activities was a common one that can be found throughout Second World War newsreels, and propaganda, in general. Anna Froula found similar language deployed in the depiction of the Women Air Service Pilots, the US counterpart of the ATA.<sup>44</sup> Interesting here too is the narrator saying “This, the first section”, which suggests that more women may be joining the ATA in the future. The framing is also defined by the use of sound. The clip is narrated by the presenter with a Received Accent, the only accompanying sounds being upbeat military music and plane engine noises. The women are not given a voice.

The dress of the women in this newsreel is quite significant. They are dressed in flight suits, complete with boots, caps, gloves, goggles, and parachute rather than their uniforms. Dressed ready for flying they are shown reading maps, entering the cockpit, taxiing planes, and taking-off. This is undermined somewhat, by the inclusion of footage where a pilot needs assistance from a male colleague to enter her cockpit.

They are also flying older bi-winged aircraft, which contemporary audiences would have recognised as slower, older craft. This accurately depicts the type of flying the women did. The aircraft handled by the ATA had been split into six classes, with lighter

<sup>40</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHq777\\_waKMJw6SZdABmyaA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHq777_waKMJw6SZdABmyaA)

<sup>41</sup> There may be other newsreels which are uncatalogued to date. The Movietone Youtube channel has almost 50,000 newsreels as of June 2024; however, it is unclear if this consists of the full catalogue or a selection.

<sup>42</sup> Royal Air Force Museum, “Air Transport Auxiliary: The First Eight Women,” *Online Exhibitions*, 15 April 2020, <https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/online-exhibitions/air-transport-auxiliary/the-first-eight-women/>

<sup>43</sup> Froula, ““Conspiracy of Silence,”” p. 110.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 115–18.



single-engine planes being classified as Class I, Class II faster, heavier single-engine planes (including Spitfires and Hurricanes). Class III aircraft were light twin-engine planes (e.g. Blenheims), and Class IV were heavy twin-engine planes (e.g. Wellingtons and Mosquitos). Class V encompassed the large four-engined craft (e.g. Lancasters and Halifaxes). Finally, Class VI was for the Sunderland flying boats. Pilots were given clearance to fly aircraft dependent on their experience. At the start of their deployment, the women were cleared only for flying Class I craft, and therefore restricted to the De Havilland Tiger Moths which were used by the RAF as training planes.

The second version of the news story *Women Pilots Deliver Places from Factory to RAF* was issued by British Paramount Newsreel on the following day. Unfortunately, the sound is missing from this reel. However, analysis reveals how newsreel companies would take the raw footage and style it their own way. This version shows closeups of the women in their formal uniforms standing in front of aircraft talking, before switching to them in the flight suits and undertaking flying duties. The footage of the pilot being assisted by a male colleague remains, but this time there is a second pilot who climbs into the cockpit unassisted. The same close-up shots show a couple of the pilots in their open cockpits and the airplane taking off.

Given the rapid timing of this news story, just 2 weeks after women began service in the ATA, and the fact that just eight women pilots were recruited in a separate women's section, it is arguable that the British government was attempting to measure public opinion of the initiative. This was in the early part of the war, and although the Blitz was yet to come, it had been anticipated for years that the next war would be influenced by what happened in the air.<sup>45</sup> First Officer Mary Ellis recalls the media reaction to the announcement of female ferry pilots:

When the news was finally announced that women would be flying with the Air Transport Auxiliary it brought forward a flood of reporters and photographers keen to feed their readers a heady mix of adventure, drama and glamour. These eager pressmen flocked to Hatfield in the early weeks of 1940 to capture images of the "First Eight" women pilots in their Sidcot flying suits.<sup>46</sup>

Despite this keen media interest, their employment received mixed reactions from the wider public, including from other women. Ellis recalls letters written by "various housewives and mature women" to newspapers condemning their employment, and how derogatory terms such as "Always Terrified Airwomen" were used to belittle them.<sup>47</sup> Their employment by the British Government, therefore, did not guarantee wider acceptance of their roles.

### **Ferry Air Pilots and Mr Churchill at RAF Station British Pathé 11 June 1941**

### **Transport Pilots Pool Station British Movietone 12 June 1941**

The second set of newsreels is a pair by British Pathé and British Movietone.<sup>48</sup> Although their commentaries are different, they are of a similar tone and presented by

<sup>45</sup> Brett Holman traces the anticipation of a war dominated by air attacks in Britain during the lead up to the Second World War in his book: Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air: Britain's Fear of the Bomber, 1908–1941* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> Mary Ellis and Melody Foreman, *A Spitfire Girl*, p. 45.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>48</sup> The US Paramount News archive at Sherman Grinberg Film Library includes a version of these newsreels. They contain only the sound that was recorded live, that is, the female officer instructing the pilots on which route to take to Scotland and some aircraft sounds. It is unclear if this version was also used in the United Kingdom and for that reason has been left out. The filename of the newsreel is SR005515\_09\_03.mov, <https://filmlibrary.shermangrinberg.com>

narrators with the classic Received Accent. Women continue to be presented as a novelty, as demonstrated by the following quote from the Pathé narrator:

With men of 14 different nationalities in its ranks, many of the ferry pilots hail from America and the dominions. And also helping in this important work are several women.

The Pathé clip then continues with footage of a female officer<sup>49</sup> instructing five women pilots, all in formal skirted uniform, who are about to fly aircraft up to Scotland. This short set of instructions allow the women to have a voice and demonstrates how they undertake their work; however, this is followed by the Pathé narrator who reassures us that:

The daily delivery of operational aircraft is only a man's job. Training machines and other less powerful aircraft are piloted by the women. And it's a job they're doing exceedingly well.

This frames the women as doing the minor, less important work. Although the women of the ATA had initially been restricted to flying Tiger Moths, this was beginning to be expanded. The month after these newsreels were filmed, Flight Captain Winnie Crossley would become the first woman to deliver a Hurricane, a Class II fighter plane.<sup>50</sup>

The uniforms are a point of gendered difference. Where the footage shows male pilots in their flight suits, the women are shown in their skirted uniform. The women are shown climbing into a single aircraft together, with one pilot's skirt and seamed stocking clearly on view. Reflecting social and political concerns over the imagery of women in uniforms, the women of the ATA were subjected to strict rules regarding their dress. First Officer Mary Ellis described the situation thusly:

In the early days of the ATA the chief, "Pop" d'Erlanger, wanted the women to fly in navy uniform skirts. It was a surprisingly ludicrous suggestion to come from this intelligent, charming, sophisticated man. The women's section commander, Pauline, protested quite adamantly and said that it would be jolly cold and draughty to fly in a skirt in an open cockpit, and so a compromise was reached. Pop suggested the girls change into trousers to fly and then after landing and leaving the aircraft they could change back into a skirt. But within weeks every woman in the ATA just stuck together on the issue and steadfastly wore the trousers and big furry boots — most of the time.... It was a great relief that the wearing of trousers in and around the airfields became the norm. Imagine parachuting out of an aircraft in a skirt let alone fly in one.<sup>51</sup>

Although the women may have won the battle to wear trousers on duty, Flight Captain Veronica Volkersz recalled:

The uniform was exceedingly smart: Navy blue tunic with gold stripes and wings, a forage cap, trousers for flying and skirts for off-duty wear. It was a heinous offence to be seen in London in trousers, except when returning from a job.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The British Pathé archive states that this is a female WRAF officer. Although the woman is only seen from the back, the style of the hair and the uniform suggests that it might in fact be Commander Pauline Gower.

<sup>50</sup> ATA Museum and Archive, "Women Join and Do 'A Man's Job'"; Clare Mulley, "Women with Wings," *Key Military*, 23 February 2021, <https://www.keymilitary.com/article/women-wings>. By the end of the war Crossley would be cleared to fly up to Class V aircraft. "Mrs Winifred Mary 'Winnie' Crossley," *Ferry Pilots of the ATA*, n.d., <https://www.ata-ferry-pilots.org/index.php>

<sup>51</sup> Ellis and Foreman, *A Spitfire Girl*, p. 67.

<sup>52</sup> Volkersz, *The Sky and I*, p. 38.

Thus, skirts seem to have been relegated to when the pilots were in public. If so, then the decision for the women to wear the skirts in this footage raises questions. Who made this decision and why? It suggests that there was a lingering concern over their public image. It is also surprising given the earlier footage showed women in flight suits. More broadly, trousers reflected the changing social positions British women enjoyed during the war and the lingering concerns of employing women both in the military and the workforce generally. These sentiments are reflected in Viscount Trenchard's speech to the House of Lords in November 1941:

Now it seems to me—though I hope the noble Lord can reassure me on the point—that the present trend is to use women with the men, doing all types of work as if there were no distinction between men and women. I may be old-fashioned but it does go against the grain to see women undertaking what is, or what should be, purely men's work, even in the difficult circumstances we are in to-day. Is it necessary?<sup>53</sup>

Similar views could be found in the media. The influential editor of *Aviation* magazine, C. G. Grey had responded to a letter by a reader praising the women of the ATA by writing:

There are millions of women in the country who could do useful jobs in war. But the trouble is that so many of them insist on wanting to do jobs which they are quite incapable of doing. The menace is the woman who thinks she ought to be flying a high-speed bomber when really she has not the intelligence to scrub the floor of a hospital properly.<sup>54</sup>

Despite their damning nature, John Dale Nall argues that Grey's comments "were a dramatic rarity since most perspectives towards ATA women were of initial scepticism within the ATA and RAF. These instances typically expressed surprise from ATA and RAF men after they discovered that a woman flew and landed military aircraft"<sup>55</sup>. This social tension at times interfered with the women's ability to carry out their duties. For example, some ferry pool chief officers would not allow female ATA personnel on their bases. The creation of a women's division created an artificial division within the organisation despite both men and women being able to hold the same ranks. ATA Flight Captain Veronica Volkersz recalled:

Whitchurch, an all-male pool, had refused adamantly to have any women posted there. Consequently, the men were simply furious when they heard we were coming.

Before we arrived they had said: "What? Bloody women being posted here? If they think we are going to run around carrying their parachutes, they have another thing coming."<sup>56</sup>

This suggests that newsreels were carefully staged to manage internal social relations in the ATA as well as external ones. Women pilots had to deal with whispered allegations of lesbianism and even, it is claimed in one occurrence, a male pilot sabotaging a female pilot's aeroplane.<sup>57</sup> Conversely, there were many male pilots who respected their female colleagues. Adrian Lee tells the story of Peter George who

<sup>53</sup> Hansard, *Women's War Work* (London: Lords Sitting, House of Lords, 1941), pp. 73–101.

<sup>54</sup> As cited in Adrian Lee, "Heroism of the Spitfire Girls," *Express* (London), 20 June 2012, <https://www.express.co.uk/expressyourself/327651/Heroism-of-the-spitfire-girls>; Mulley, "Women with Wings."

<sup>55</sup> John Dale Nall, *Flying with Wings of Determination: British, Soviet and American Women Pilots During World War II* (Boca Raton, FL: Florida Atlantic University, 2023), p. 35.

<sup>56</sup> Volkersz, *The Sky and I*, pp. 93–94.

<sup>57</sup> Lee, "Heroism of the Spitfire Girls."

says he viewed his female colleagues no differently than any other pilots. “They were steady”, he recalls. “Sometimes even steadier than the men”. George took the attitude that “as long as they had two eyes and a good sense of hearing, that was enough for me”.<sup>58</sup>

The Movietone version strikes a different tone. It starts with Colonel Moore Brabazon addressing a large group of pilots in the hangar, his speech underscoring the importance of aircraft to the war.<sup>59</sup> The narrator takes over:

Here at the Ferry Pool Pilots’ Station, the pilots, many of them women, leave to fly aircraft from the makers to the Royal Air Force. They’re not all women, and they’re not all British, but irrespective of sex or nationality and whatever type of plane has to be flown they’re on the spot doing invaluable work that is almost unknown to the general public.

This narration, which is overlaid on the same visuals of the formal uniformed women boarding the same plane, and showing men in flight suits, positions the women very differently. The phrasing suggests a sizeable group of the pilots are women, and there is no delineation of what kind of plane they flew.

**King and Queen Visit ATA British Movietone 12 February 1942 [no sound]**

**King and Queen with the ATA British Pathé 19 February 1942**

**Royal Visit to the Ferry Pilots Gaumont British Newsreel 19 February 1942**

The third set of newsreels features the 1942 of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth to the ATA at White Waltham. The Royal Family were by the start of the war regularly featured in newsreels, and they were integral to the propaganda during the conflict. All three newsreels use the exact same footage, instead of cutting their own versions from the original. This suggests that the royal visit footage had a tighter level of control than the other newsreels in this study. The Royal Family became a staple of British newsreels in the years leading up to the Second World War, exercising firm control over the broadcasting of their image.<sup>60</sup> During the Second World War, the family were keen demonstrate a shared identity with the public “with members of the House of Windsor emphasizing that they shared in the emotional plight experienced by their subjects in order to conjure the image of a crown and people united by the strains of war.”<sup>61</sup> This approach can be seen in these newsreels.

The footage begins with the royals arriving in their car and meeting the Commanders d’Erlanger and Gower. Here the language of the Pathé narrator is notable, with the Pauline Gower introduced as “Miss Pauline Gower, who commands the women’s branch” rather than Commander Gower. A small improvement on the previous newsreel. D’Erlanger is noted as “Commander D’Erlanger, the Chief of the service”. The narrator goes on the note the “invaluable work” of the organisation. The Queen is briefly shown to be talking to Commander Gower; however, it is hard to tell in the crowd who are pilots as the film and narrative focus on the royal visit.

<sup>58</sup> Yona Zeldis McDonough, “The Women’s RAF: In World War II Britain, a New Group of Pilots Answered the Call to Serve,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2012, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/air-space-magazine/the-womens-raf-118165440/>

<sup>59</sup> Transport Pilots Pool Station British Movietone, 12 June 1941.

<sup>60</sup> Luke McKernan, “‘The Finest Cinema Performers that We Possess’ British Royalty and the Newsreels, 1910–37,” *The Court Historian*, Vol 8, 1 (2003), pp. 59–71.

<sup>61</sup> Edward Owens, *The Family Firm: Monarchy, Mass Media and the British Public, 1932–53* (London: University of London Press, 2019), p. 200.

No one in the footage is dressed in flight suits, instead they are all in formal uniforms.

The Gaumont version provides an alternative narrative:

Some of the unsung heroes and heroines of this war are to be found in the Air Transport Auxiliary, the ferry pilots who fly the Air Force planes from factory to RAF stations. The King and Queen acknowledge the work they are doing in a visit to an ATA establishment where they met the commanding officers, including the chief of the woman's section. The ferry pilot's job is one that is likely to be overlooked because it doesn't get much of the limelight, but obviously the pilots of bomber, fighter and coastal command would waste many valuable hours if it were not for this auxiliary service. It's the boast of the ATA that they fly in any weather a plane can live in. They deliver on time, and they run the chance of meeting an occasional enemy plane without the chance to shoot back. So, when we come to add up the services that are helping to win the war, we'll give high marks to the ferry pilots.

This version focuses more on the work of the ferry pilots, highlighting the circumstances in which they work. There is a discernible shift in the way the women pilots are discussed. Although it is noted that there is a chief of the women's section in both extant audio tracks, their work is not differentiated from the men's work as it was in the earlier newsreels.

**Mrs Roosevelt & Mrs Churchill Visit England's Women at War** Gaumont British Newsreel 2 November 1942

**Mrs Roosevelt Sees for Herself** British Pathé 2 November 1942

Croucher and Hassart note that the period between late 1941 and September 1942 was a crucial time in the conscription of women in Britain. At the time of Roosevelt's visit, a similar campaign was ongoing in the United States with the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron being established in September 1942. This organisation would later be transformed into the Women Air Service Pilots. Roosevelt was very supportive of women in aviation; having presented a trophy to Jacqueline Cochran for achievements in aviation in 1938, she wrote in her diary "I was particularly happy to be able to do this, for I think there is a great future in aviation for women".<sup>62</sup> Cochran served in the ATA and was instrumental in the establishment of the WASP. As part of the American campaign to recruit women into war work, it is perhaps not surprising that it is the political wives, Eleanor Roosevelt and Clementine Churchill, who are the dignitaries at this visit. This helps to frame the female pilots participating in support work rather than military work. Throughout the newsreel, the women of the ATA appear to be dressed in skirts, even when on the tarmac with their aircraft or when shown completing a drill manoeuvre. This is underscored by the narrator who repeatedly calls the women "girls" and explains the visit as being due to Mrs Roosevelt being "particularly interested in women at war". By this time, women pilots had been cleared to deliver up to Class V aircraft, with Lettice Curtis having flown a heavy four-engined bomber just a couple of months earlier.<sup>63</sup>

**ATA Pilots Deliver Planes to the RAF/Britain's Ever Growing Air Power** Gaumont British News 8 March 1943

**Sir Stafford Cripps and the ATA** British Movietone 8 March 1943

**Sir Stafford Cripps and the ATA** British Pathé 8 March 1943

<sup>62</sup> [https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?\\_y=1938&\\_f=md054919](https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1938&_f=md054919)

<sup>63</sup> Mulley, "Women with Wings."

In this newsreel Minister Aircraft Production Stafford Cripps is visiting the ATA.<sup>64</sup> In the Gaumont version, the presenter states:

The bombers and fighters in the hands of the ATA, the Air Transport Auxiliary. The men and women who take the planes from factories and deliver them to operation stations. An essential service for the RAF, increasingly important as the volume of air production increases.

The language here positions the women as equal to the men, without the delineation of duties found in the earlier newsreels. Later in the newsreel, the narrator comments:

Ferry Command pilots must be able to handle every kind of plane from the fastest fighter to the slowest trainer. From the lightest amphibian to the heaviest bomber.

This reinforces the equal duties of the women, many of whom had by now been cleared fly Class V aircraft; in the autumn of 1942, First Officer Lettice Curtis had become the first woman to take the helm of a four-engined bomber.<sup>65</sup> In contrast to RAF pilots who typically flew one type of plane, ATA pilots were adept at flying multiple different kinds of aircraft, sometimes in numbers that seem quite staggering. Jackie Moggeridge, for example, delivered 1438 airplanes of 83 different types during her service.<sup>66</sup> As the war dragged on the women had proved themselves to be as capable as their male counterparts. This can be seen in the accompanying footage where the women are more integrated with the men than they were in the previous films showing the King and Queen, and Roosevelt and Churchill. The footage shows women standing alongside aircraft, and alongside their male colleagues instead of being a discrete part of the “women’s section”. They are also shown wearing their flight suits rather than their uniforms, including goggles, helmets, and overalls. Not a seamed stocking in sight.

The narration of the Pathé version also demonstrates a shift in tone:

Many women are among the pilots who meet the minister for Aircraft Production during his visit to Air Transport Auxiliary headquarters. Some of the pilots who have notched up 30 million miles delivering over 100 different aircraft to their bases.

The achievements of all the pilots are presented as synonymous with each other. The Movietone version goes further. The footage is quite lengthy in comparison to many of the other newsreels here, being some 11.5 min. It includes footage of Cripps stating neither sex nor age were a restriction to being an ATA pilot, an that there was a grandmother among their ranks who regularly delivered planes, and how important their work is to the war effort.

Cripps is shown in all three newsreels meeting pilots alongside their planes, with both men and women dressed in flight suits or trousered uniforms.

These newsreels represent a shift in tone as to how the women were presented. Croucher and Hassart note that the period between late 1941 and September 1942 was

<sup>64</sup> The US archives of the Paramount newsreels includes a 35-s segment of Cripps speaking to the pilots in the crowd. Only part of his speech is recorded. There is no narration or other sound. It shows some shots of the crowd including male and female pilots in formal uniform. It is unclear if this version was shown in the United Kingdom. As its content is the same as what is discussed above, it has not been included in this analysis. The newsreel file is SR005515\_09\_02.mov. <https://filmlibrary.shermangrinberg.com>

<sup>65</sup> ATA Museum and Archive, “Women Join and Do ‘A Man’s Job.’”

<sup>66</sup> Jackie’s Story,” Spitfire Girl, 2021, accessed 28 April, 2024, <https://www.jackiemoggridgespitfiregirl.com/the-story>



a crucial time in the conscription of women in Britain. These dates are “the point at which it had become clear that women were to be conscripted, and when the process was well under way”.<sup>67</sup> These newsreels date 6 months after that period and in between there was a rapid normalisation of women undertaking war work. Women within the ATA had gained several key advancements between 1940 and 1945. In July 1941 Winnie Crossley would be the first woman to fly a fighter, the Hurricane.<sup>68</sup> In the autumn of 1942, First Officer Lettice Curtis would take the helm of a four-engined bomber.<sup>69</sup> In 1943, the women of the ATA were given equal pay to their male colleagues in recognition of the equal work they were undertaking.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

It is clear that the progression of these newsreels reflects the wider social and political concerns of women conducting war work and reveals the way social acceptance shifted in a very short period of time. The wide reach of newsreels provided a tantalising avenue for the British government to deliver propagandist messages as film allows the author to frame the subjects with a preferred narrative. The early concern of ensuring the public knew that female pilots were only undertaking the lightest of work, leaving the more powerful planes to male pilots, changed rapidly as the war progressed and a wider social acceptance of women in traditional masculine occupations had occurred. Viscount Trenchard’s queries about the necessity of women undertaking “what should be, purely men’s work”<sup>71</sup> reflect how some members of society, including a small cohort of male ATA pilots, resisted this change. However, as D’Ann Campbell reminds us, “[i]t was not feminism but fear of the lack of sufficient ‘manpower’ to fight World War II, which served as the catalyst” for female pilots to be trained, adding “...necessity, once dire enough, could overcome culture”. The use of the uniforms within the newsreels reveal how the image of the women pilots was carefully managed, with early flight suits giving away to formal skirted uniforms as social anxieties were catered to. The requirements of womanpower to supplement manpower in the war effort and the wider social acceptance of wider roles for women can be seen in the depiction of women ATA pilots in the latter set of newsreels, where they are wearing trousers and flight suits. They are also shown performing the same duties, including flying the same aircraft, as the male pilots. Just how much newsreels featuring ATA pilots drove public opinion or reflected it is beyond the scope of this study; however, the accompanying rapid expansion of their flying roles and the critical success of the women pilots achieving pay parity closely follows the changing narrative found within the films. Gender roles could be quickly re-written, in war time at least.

It is speculative to imagine how far this trajectory may have continued had the war lasted beyond 1945. Would Britain have employed female pilots in combat roles? Some nations, particularly Russia, already did; the Soviet Air Force employed female pilots in three battalions, and had many female ground troops. Indeed, after the war some of the ATA women were accepted into RAF training, with five earning their

<sup>67</sup> Croucher and Houssart, “‘Send Us More Arms!’ Bringing British Women into War Production Through Films in World War Two,” p. 124.

<sup>68</sup> ATA Museum and Archive, “Women Join and Do ‘A Man’s Job.’”

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Hansard, *Women’s War Work*.

wings, before the government grounded them in the 1950s. There would be no more female military pilots in Britain until 1990.<sup>72</sup>

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The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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<sup>72</sup> Royal Air Force Museum, "Women of the Air Force: Timeline," 4 July 2024, <https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/online-exhibitions/women-of-the-air-force/timeline/>