

## Trans-Atlantic ferry ops - Women Pilots?

There is a lot on this site and others about the role of Gander in the transfer of bombers from the United States to Britain in World War II. In our mind's eye, we can clearly see the young men - and some much older - sitting bravely in their cockpits in the evening light as the props start to turn and the first puff of smoke comes out the cylinders of the mighty engines. A last-minute cockpit check, throttles full forward and another bomber races down those reassuringly long Gander runways as they fly out, with little to guide and protect them on the way, over 2000 miles of empty ocean.

All these men, the stuff of heroes!

But were there no women who ferried a bomber across the Atlantic? Scholarly and military-related sources seemed unanimous that it was an all-male operation and that women were definitely not welcome - but I wanted to find out for sure.

My interest for this question was stirred up even more by a photo I found and bought through an Internet search concerning a well known American pilot who may have done it - but the story was far from certain, especially after finding out that she had doctored her own autobiography!

But before going any further, a few definitions:

- **ATA** : the Air Transport Auxiliary was a British World War II civilian organization that basically ferried new, repaired and damaged military aircraft between UK factories, assembly plants, transatlantic delivery points and active service squadrons and airfields. It also flew service personnel on urgent duty and performed air ambulance work. In late 1939 a women's section was created. There were 166 women pilots (one in eight of the entire service) who volunteered from Britain, the Commonwealth (Canada, New Zealand and South Africa), United States, the Netherlands, Poland, and

one from Chile.

- **ATFERO** : The first step towards trans-Atlantic ferry operations was taken in July 1940 when the British Ministry of Aircraft Production arranged with the Canadian Pacific Railway Company for the operation of a ferry service between Montreal and Prestwick. Aircraft were to be delivered by civilian pilots to Dorval from the plants of U.S. aircraft manufacturers in California. The first delivery, seven Lockheed Hudsons, took place on 11 November 1940. On 15 July 1941 the ferrying operation was taken over directly by the British Ministry of Aircraft Production itself through its ATFERO (Atlantic ferrying organization), and the Canadian Pacific Railway agreement was terminated.

- **RAF Ferry Command** : ATFERO was short-lived, for on 1 August 1941 this responsibility was assumed by the Royal Air Force Ferry Command, which had been established on 20 July. ATFERO personnel were incorporated as civilian or military personnel. Ferry Command was subsumed into the new Transport Command on 25 March 1943 by being reduced to Group status as No. 45 Group.

- **WINGS FOR BRITAIN** : This was an American fund raising program to help Britain develop its aircraft related capacity, including the delivery of airplanes from the US. There is little information available but one point is of importance. John Wilson McConnell was an Anglo-Quebec businessman, newspaper publisher, humanitarian, and the most significant philanthropist in the history of the Province of Quebec. Early in World War II, fellow Canadian businessman Max Aitken, the British Minister of Aircraft Production, asked McConnell to help finance the training of pilots in the US to ferry American-built aircraft across the Atlantic. McConnell donated \$1 million for the "Wings for Britain" campaign.

- **WASP**: In the 1940s, the US found itself running out of qualified pilots. After much politicking understandable in that era, female pilots were finally allowed to fly in non-combat situations such as domestic ferrying, towing aerial targets and general transport. Two groups were created in 1942. One

was the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) and the other was the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS). In autumn 1943, they were combined as the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP).

And now enters onto the scene the exception to the all-male rule.

Her name was Jackie Cochran. The information on this lady is often contradictory and the dates are often wrong, in some cases impossible. His story is tied up with the intrigues of Washington during the stressful early war period where promises were made but not always kept. And she didn't have only friends - but those she did have were very powerful, including the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt.



She was born probably in 1906 and came from a very poor environment, so poor in fact that she invented the story she had been adopted so that no one could meet her real family. She had only a few years schooling and admitted to not wanting to be a nurse partly because of her very weak writing skills. To make a long story short, a very good-looking lass, she ended up as a hairdresser in New York where she met an excessively rich businessman, Floyd Odlum, who paid her flying lessons. (They later got married after he divorced his wife!). In 1932, she received her pilot's license after 20 days of lessons and immediately pursued advanced instruction. Cochran set three major flying records in 1937 and won the prestigious Bendix Race in 1938.

As a test pilot, she flew and tested the first turbo-supercharger ever installed on an aircraft engine in 1934. During the following two years, she became the first person to fly and test the forerunner to the Pratt & Whitney 1340 and 1535 engines. In 1938, she flew and tested the first wet wing ever installed on an aircraft. With Dr. Randolph Lovelace, she helped design the first oxygen mask, and then became the first person to fly above 20,000 feet wearing one.

In 1940, she made the first flight on the Republic P-43, and recommended a longer tail wheel installation, which was later installed on all P-47 aircraft. Between 1935 and 1942, she flew many experimental flights for Sperry Corp., testing gyro instruments.

Cochran was hooked on flying. She set three speed records, won the Clifford Burke Harmon trophy three times and set a world altitude record of 33,000 feet – in a bi-plane – all before 1940. By now she was well known and well connected. She suggested to Mrs Roosevelt and Air Force higher ups that women pilots be allowed to replace men in non combatant roles but to no success. However the chief of the Air Force, Gen Hap Arnold, suggested in early 1941 that she try to learn more about the ATA in England. Here the story and dates become slightly confused but several things seem sure (a) she wanted to fly a bomber across the Atlantic and (b) she

had no twin engine experience. By this time, with her husband's business savvy and connections, she had, from her humble hairdresser experience, also built up a cosmetics empire. Although she had never flown a twin-engined aircraft, Cochran became convinced that flying a lend-lease bomber across the Atlantic would be good publicity. With her husband's money, she chartered a Lockheed Lodestar, quite similar to a Hudson, and hired Northeast Airlines pilots to train her. After just 25 hours in the cockpit, she figured she knew as much as any Northeast Airlines pilot. The check pilots of the ATFERO did not agree, but her husband, a major contributor to Roosevelt's presidential campaign, used his political connections to induce the Ministry of Aircraft Production to insist on letting Cochran fly the Atlantic. Male pilots also charged that allowing women to fly bombers would take excellent paying work away from themselves. Someone tried to prevent Cochran's flight by holding up a required visa. She said in her bio. "In a contest of power and friends, I knew I could win, so I contacted the American consul in Montreal, who called the Passport Department in D.C. and, voilà the visa arrived sooner than someone else ever predicted."

So it looks as though she actually got on a Hudson Mark V in Dorval en route to Britain via Gander. But was she the real pilot? Or was there some compromise?

One theory is that she, with appropriate political leverage, did do exactly the same as a male pilot. Another theory is that she went along as a spare and but got written in as captain. The third theory seems piffometrically the most plausible : because she had some difficulty operating the plane's hand brake during practice flights, she was forced to turn the controls over to a male pilot on take-off and landing.

It is known that she was connected to the "Wings for Britain" program. Also Gen Arnold did recognize that women were being used successfully in England, and suggested in that Cochran take qualified women to Britain to see how the British were doing. He promised her that he would make no decision regarding women flying for the USAAF without

women she could find to come with her to Canada for training. Qualifications for these women were high – at least 300 hours of flying time, but most of the women pilots had over 1,000 hours. Their dedication was high as well, they had to foot the bill for travel from New York for an interview and to Montreal for a physical exam and flight check. Those that made it to Canada found out that the washout rate was also high. Twenty-five women passed the tests, and two months later, in March 1942, they went to Britain with Cochran to join the ATA. It is possible that some of the McConnell contribution was used to finance part of the training and testing.

While Cochran was in England ,“helping” the ATA which was already quite well organized, thank you, Gen Arnold recognized the pilot supply problem and initiated the WAFS but under the command of another lady, Nancy Love, who had also been promoting women pilots. Cochran heard of this and was back on the next possible flight for a showdown. He then created the WFTD under her command. In late 1943 she took over the WASP which combined the two.

Some say that she was much better in PR than in management, leaving her trainees out in ill-equipped camps with second rate equipment and termite ridden airplanes while she preferred Washington. But still, she recruited more than 1,000 Women's Airforce Service Pilots and supervised their training and service until they were disbanded in 1944. More than 25,000 applied for training, 1,830 were accepted and 1,074 made it through a very tough program to graduation. These women flew approximately 60 million miles for the Army Air Force with only 38 fatalities, or about 1 for every 16,000 hours flown. Cochran was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for services to her country during World War II.

But her flying career did not end there. For example:

- in 1953 she became the first woman to break the sound barrier, piloting a Canadair F-86 (with the great Chuck Yeager flying wing)

- and that year set world speed records for 15, 100, and 500km courses.
- From 1959 – 1963, she was the first woman president of the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale.
- In 1961 she continued to break her old records and set new ones, including an altitude mark of 55,253 feet (16,841 meters).
- In 1964, she flew an aircraft faster than any woman had before, setting the standing women's world speed record of 1,429 miles (2,300 km) per hour in an F-104G Super Star jet.
- In 1996, a US stamp was issued in her honour.



So yes, it looks like there was at least one bomber that was ferried over to England, at least in part, by a women pilot. And it looks like Jackie Cochran was just the right gal to do it.