

## visual arts

by Louise Aird

Quick, name a famous female pilot. Easy, Amelia Earhart. Okay, now name another. Or specifically, a Canadian. Drawing a blank? Well, believe it or not, Canada has a rich tradition of female aviators. The organizers of a new exhibit at the North Vancouver Museum and Archives hope that by sharing this important history, it may spur young women to follow in these pioneers' steps.

A travelling exhibit from the National Museum of Aviation in Ottawa, *High Flyers* illustrates the role women have played in Canada's aviation history. The exhibit, at the museum through May, celebrates this group of strong-willed pioneers and pays tribute to Canadian women in aviation history from before World War II through to today.

Through artifacts, video, and photographs, the exhibit communicates the love of aviation and flying as experienced and described by women, as well as the skill, knowledge, and dedication their work requires. Its purpose is also to encourage young women and girls to look at aviation as a field that can provide many opportunities.

The exhibit is divided into four sections: The Pioneers, World War II, Postwar, and Today. Each section contains a text panel introducing the topic, photographs of the major players of each period, plus quotations and memorabilia. The exhibit also features a slide show, an eight-minute video, and an interactive game on careers in aviation. Archival photos depict women who have been active in all areas of aviation, including pilots, flight attendants, and engineers.

The exhibit attempts to communicate the love of aviation and flying as experienced and described by women. It also deals with the issue of gender, showing how being female created some opportunities but limited many others.

# Taking Wing: *High Flyers* Celebrates Women Aviators



*The Flying Seven, Canada's first all-female flying club. Organized in Vancouver in 1936, the club was active until 1941. From left to right: Jean Pike, Tosca Trasolini, Betsy Flaherty, Alma Gilbert, Elianne Roberge, Margaret Fane, Rolie Moore. Courtesy of National Aviation Museum, Ottawa.*

There are numerous interesting characters introduced and stories told. For example, in 1919, Madge Graham, who was married to Canada's first bush pilot Stuart Graham, served as navigator on a five-day voyage in which Madge, Graham, and a mechanic flew a water-logged wooden flying boat at tree level from Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, to Grand'Mere, Quebec. The escapade led Admiral Byrd to declare: "Flying seaplanes over land is suicide, and taking a woman along is criminal."

Back then, female aviators were a novelty—the press called them "Flying Flappers," "Angels," and "Sweethearts of the Air." Normally, pilots wore heavy gear as protection from gasoline fumes, noise, and the elements. But when photographers were around, famous female aviators such as Amelia Earhart and Jacqueline Cochran wore blouses, scarves, make-up, and tailored slacks. Their worry was that figure-veiling suits would repel non-flying women, and it was believed that if a woman

looked fresh and glamorous after a flight, it would show other women that flying was safe and restful.

By the 1930s, women pilots were attracting more attention. In 1936, the Vancouver-based Flying Seven became Canada's first women's flying club. (For those who can remember that far back, it was this group that conducted the 1939 "bomplet" raid on Vancouver, dropping 100,000 pamphlets pleading for "dimes or dollars to buy our boys more planes.")

World War II should have been a boon for female aviators. Instead, the Canadian military deemed the job of pilot as inappropriate for women. One pilot, Helen Harrison, applied to the RCAF with an instructor's and seaplane rating, multi-engine and instrument endorsements, experience of flying civil and military aircraft in three countries, and 2,600 flying hours. She was turned away in favour of men with no more than 150 hours to their credit.

So women aviators worked to "back the attack." Some taught flying and navigation—until the RCAF