

VI MILSTEAD WARREN

AIR TRANSPORT AUXILIARY

WOOL MERCHANT, AIR TRANSPORT OFFICER, BUSH PILOT

Vi Milstead learned to fly in 1939, as war was breaking out in Europe. She worked in her mother's wool shop, saving her earnings until she could finance her Private and Commercial Flying Licenses. In 1940 Vi's sources of income ended when her mother sold the business, so Vi decided to buy her own wool shop and at the age of 20 became a Toronto business women.

After completing her Commercial License and Instructor Rating, Vi instructed at Barker Field until the fall of 1942 when rationing of aviation fuel ended civilian flying in Canada.

In early 1943, Vi joined the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) in England. The ATA was a civilian group of male and female pilots from several different countries whose job was to clear airplanes from factories and deliver them to maintenance units and military bases throughout Britain and to continental Europe. As Vi was trained to fly increasingly complex aircraft she was quickly promoted through the ranks from Cadet to Third, Second and finally First Officer. Her First Officer designation indicated that she was qualified to fly all single and twin-engine aircraft. At 5' 2" she usually had to sit on her parachute to see out the cockpit window. During the remainder of WWII Vi delivered 47 different types of military airplanes. Her favourites were the Spitfire and the Mosquito.

When Vi returned home after the war her parents hoped she had got flying out of her system. For a few months Vi worked downtown in an office but by spring her homing instinct took her back to Barker Field. The Chief Flight Instructor, Arnold Warren, clearly recognized a good pilot when he met her. First he hired Vi as an instructor and then they were married.

In 1947 Vi and Arnold moved to Sudbury where they worked for Nickel Belt Airways as instructors and bush pilots. As Canada's first woman bush pilot, her work included flying surveyors to inspect mining sites, or trappers returning home with supplies. She also flew men who had been recruited in beer parlours to fight local forest fires, and had to encourage the odd one to leave the comfort of the airplane and get on with fire-fighting!

Following a stint in Windsor when Vi and Arnold had been hired to reactivate the Windsor Flying Club, they moved to Indonesia. While Arnold was in charge of training Indonesian pilots, Vi, while she was issued an Indonesian pilot's license, was not allowed to instruct for the company, because she was a women.

Back in Canada, Vi and Arnold flew recreationally in their Piper Cub and then a Mooney. In 1981 Vi retired from flying but her pioneering work in aviation has not gone unacknowledged. In 1995 she was honoured by the Rusty Blakey (Bush Pilot) Heritage Group in Sudbury, in 2004 she was appointed to the Order of Canada and in 2010 she was inducted into Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame.

Vi and Arnold moved to nearby Colborne, Ontario in the early 1970s. Vi still makes her home there.

Prepared with notes from Vi Milstead's biographer, Marilyn Dickson

