

Vi Warren to receive British badge of honour

Vi Milstead Warren of Cramahe Township is to receive a badge of honour from the British government to recognize her wartime aviation contribution.

By Marilyn Dickson
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British Prime Minister Gordon Brown recently announced all surviving pilots and other men and women who served with the British civilian Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) will be awarded a badge of honour for their work during World War II. British Transport Secretary Ruth Kelly said, "This badge will be a fitting honour to commemorate the bravery of all men and women of the ATA and to ensure that those who served are remembered and given the recognition they deserve."

Five known Canadian surviving ATA pilots include one woman, Vi Milstead Warren of Cramahe Township, and four men, Jack Ball, Ernest Birman and George Phillips also of Ontario and Samuel Fong of Quebec. Also living in Canada are six others who moved here following the war, Vera Strodl Dowling (AB), Mrs. J. Edwards (BC), Mrs. Daphne Miller Rumball (BC), Mrs. Stockton (BC), Gerard Burnett (QC) and Mr. Mason (BC).

Just over 100 ATA pilots remain worldwide, about 20 of them women.

A recently published book, Spitfire Women by London Times journalist Giles Whittell inspired Scottish MP Nigel Griffiths on Jan. 22, 2008 to raise in parliament the issue of the British government honouring these pilots. Mr. Griffiths was told there were no plans but he was invited to provide further information. Within less than a month, the badge was announced. The presentation ceremony is expected to be held later this year.

In his recent letter to ATA pilots announcing the Badge of Honour, Mr. Griffiths cited British Air Minister Lord Beaverbrook's statement, "They were



PHOTO BY MARILYN DICKSON

VI MILSTEAD WARREN, following her investiture as a member of the Order of Canada in Ottawa Oct. 30, 2004.

soldiers fighting in the struggle just as completely as if they had been engaged in the battlefield."

The ATA was a civilian organization of pilots formed originally to deliver important mail, medical supplies and high ranking individuals throughout Britain during the war. Before it even began these deliveries, its role shifted to relocating aircraft. ATA pilots cleared military aircraft from factories so the planes wouldn't be destroyed if factories were bombed.

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First, they flew the planes to maintenance units where radios and armaments were installed and then delivered them to front line military airfields, usually throughout Britain but sometimes into Europe, for operational use. Occasionally the route was reversed, and pilots retrieved from military bases damaged aircraft labeled "Good for one landing only" or "Not Entirely Airworthy". The ATA freed air force pilots to concentrate on operational duties.

ATA pilot training was unique in that pilots were trained on one type of aircraft and then were expected to be able to fly other somewhat similar planes with no further instruction. Pilots progressed through six classes of aircraft, from light single-engine (Tiger Moth), advanced single-

engine (Spitfires), light twin-engine (Anson), advanced twin-engine (Mosquito), four-engine (Lancaster), and seaplanes (Catalina), based on their experience, ability and air force needs. There was less demand for example, for pilots to be trained on Class 6 aircraft.

Pilots carried a small 10 x 14 cm book with information summarized on one or two pages for most planes they would fly. Consulting this "bible" for climb, cruise, stall (to avoid) and landing speeds, as well as any other relevant information, they would climb into planes they had probably never flown before, find the taps and knobs needed for flight, take off and then do a perfect three point landing at the assigned destination.

ATA pilots often flew quite low by today's standards. Dangers included rising terrain in marginal British weather,



PHOTO COURTESY VI WARREN

Vi Milstead Warren, Salem, clad in pants climbing into the cockpit of a Harvard Trainer at St. Hubert, PQ, for an instrument check prior to her acceptance into the ATA.