

Local News

Give British badge of honour



PHOTO BY MANDY MARTIN

Author and pilot Marilyn Dickson nominated Vi Milstead Warren for the Order of Canada. Ms. Dickson accompanied Ms. Warren to the Ottawa investiture Oct. 30, 2004.

industrial smog and barrage balloons installed to deter enemy aircraft. There was also the possibility of enemy aircraft skulking above, looking for targets. Navigating around Britain using its maze of railway tracks and roads, none straight, presented another challenge. Few planes had radios and even if they did, pilots were required to maintain radio silence and not attract enemy attention.

Another potential danger involved pilots who overestimated their abilities in poor conditions. They were supposed to stay below clouds and were not to fly unless clouds were at least 800 ft above ground and visibility was at least 2,000 yards (slightly less than one nautical mile). Current Canadian weather minima are roughly double these standards in uncontrolled airspace and even higher in controlled airspace.

ATA pilots authorized their own flights. Particularly when given a chit to deliver a "High Priority" aircraft, some pressured themselves to fly in weather conditions even below these minimum requirements, though most had no training in blind (instrument) flying.

Pilots given P1W (Priority 1 Wait) chits faced a difficult decision. They knew the

airplanes were urgently required. A P1W chit indicated the pilot was to wait with the aircraft from dawn until dusk so he or she would be ready to take off without delay as soon as the weather improved and get the aircraft to its destination as soon as was humanly possible. Yet, by trying to fly in very challenging weather conditions, they would risk completely losing the plane, and possibly a well-qualified pilot.

There is a commonly held belief that ATA pilots, particularly women, ferried planes across the Atlantic. Not so! Canadian and American built aircraft were delivered to Britain by a different organization, RAF Ferry Command. On occasion, Canadian and American ATA pilots who came home on leave were able to hitch a ride back to Britain via aircraft rather than spend several days on a ship. As civilians, they were designated as Co-Pilot or Third Officer in order to legitimize their presence in military aircraft. Some took the controls for part of the flight, but no ATA pilot served as Pilot in Command of a trans-Atlantic flight.

When the ATA officially started it consisted of 42 male pilots. Within a very short time, eight women joined their ranks, amidst considerable controversy.

The women pilots soon demonstrated their capabilities. More women were welcomed into the ATA and some were promoted to flying the more advanced aircraft such as the four-engine bombers.

During the course of the war, over 1,300 pilots, including 166 women, from 22 countries served with the ATA, delivering over 308,000 aircraft of 147 types. ATA pools also included support personnel such as instructors, aircraft engineers, medical and administrative staff. Individuals serving in these capacities are also to be honoured.

According to recent articles in the British press, the ATA consisted of "old World War I pilots, injured airmen and well-to-do women who had private flying experience". Not so the Canadians! Most worked long hours to finance their flying.

Vi Milstead worked in her mother's wool shop to pay for flying lessons. After she completed Private and Commercial licenses her instructor, Pat Patterson encouraged her to become an instructor at his Barker Field flying school. Most male instructors were leaving to join the Air Force. He knew Vi would stay.

When fuel rationing brought a halt to civil aviation in late 1942, Vi had logged about 1,000 hours and taught many young men to fly, several of whom joined the RCAF. She managed to continue to fly by joining the ATA. She left the ATA in July 1945 with the rank of First Officer and over 600 hours on 46 different types of aircraft.

Following the war, Vi returned to instructing and soon became Canada's first woman bush pilot with Nickel Belt Airways in Sudbury. Vi now is retired and lives just east of Colborne.

All told, nine Canadian women, including Lois Butler from Newfoundland, and 38 Canadian men joined the ATA during World War II. It is hoped the 11 surviving pilots now living in Canada, all in their late 80s and 90s, will be able to receive this honour on behalf of all 47 Canadians who served with the ATA.

Marilyn Dickson is currently writing Vi Milstead's biography.