



Feisty Females

SOME EARLY AUSTRALIAN 'LADY PILOTS'

Unknown photographer
'Royal Aero Club SA off to the
Newcastle Pageant in Tiger
Moths', September 1949
Papers of Lady Helen
Blackburn
Manuscripts Collection
MS 9146, box 3, folder 23

CHRISTOBEL MATTINGLEY WRITES
ABOUT SOME OF THE FEISTY
WOMEN WHO TOOK TO THE SKIES

IN THE 1920S AND 1930S, WHEN A WOMAN'S place was definitely seen to be in the home, it took a feisty female to challenge society's norms, let alone learning to fly. But Australia has never been short of feisty females. So, not long after Charles Kingsford Smith and other aviators mastered the skies in their flimsy aircraft, women were not only aspiring to fly but also achieving their ambition with resounding success.

The National Library of Australia holds official documents and personal papers attesting to the exploits and successes of early Australian aviatrixes including Millicent Bryant (1878–1927), Freda Thompson (1906–1980), Maie Casey (1892–1983), Nancy Bird Walton (1915–2009) and Helen Blackburn (1918–2005).

Millicent Maude Bryant, of Vacluse, Sydney, was the first woman in the

Commonwealth to gain a pilot's licence. It was number 71, dated 8 April 1927. She had begun flying lessons at Mascot, New South Wales, in November 1926, gaining her private pilot's licence four months later. Lieutenant-Colonel Brinsmead, Controller of Civil Aviation in the Department of Defence, wrote to inform her of her successful test on 23 March 1927, adding:

I take the opportunity of congratulating you on your being the first lady member to have passed those tests in the Commonwealth.

But her flying career was cut short by her untimely death seven months later in a Sydney ferry accident.

Learning to fly did not come cheaply. Nancy Bird Walton worked in her father's shop, saving for years to accumulate money for her lessons. After gaining her commercial pilot's licence at the age of 19 in 1934, she courageously made flying her livelihood in outback Queensland and New South Wales.

Station owners chartering an aircraft were amazed when the pilot proved to be a 'lady pilot'. One startled exclamation, 'My God! It's a woman', provided the title for her second autobiography (2002). Her first, *Born To Fly* (1961), was a humorous reference to her maiden name (Bird). Realising that evacuation by air of seriously ill patients could dramatically improve their chances of survival, she later worked for a number of years with the Far West Children's Health Scheme.

For other young women with more affluent parents willing to indulge a daughter, paying for lessons was no problem. Freda Mary Thompson, educated at Melbourne's exclusive Toorak College, was adventurous and had set her heart on learning to fly. At 24, she made her first dual flight from Essendon in a Moth. With the luxury of lessons every day, she went solo six weeks later and, in 1932, won an interstate aerial trophy but, being a woman, she was not allowed to attend the presentation dinner.

However, by the end of 1933, the intrepid young pilot had become the darling of the press, accumulating a large number of cuttings (all undated) in a very big scrapbook. Usually wearing a dress, or pleated skirt and blouse, but with her 'titian locks hidden under the leather flying cap', she had recorded 281 hours in her logbook and gained her test instructor's ticket, becoming 'the Empire's first Air Instructress'.

Newspaper reports of her success in winning aerobatics competitions, and tying for first place in a forced landing competition, provoked a bachelor Member of the British House of Commons to fulminate:

Women in the air are notoriously dangerous. ... I would rather find myself flying in formation with a winged dragon than with a woman pilot.

Unfazed and ambitious, now with her own aircraft, Thompson continued her plan to attempt a solo flight from England to Australia over the same route as New Zealander Jean Batten (1909–1982), who had set the women's solo record in 1934. Could she break that record? She did not. But, in 1934, she did become the first Australian woman to fly solo from England to Australia.

Ten years later, Helen Blackburn, daughter of the Adelaide establishment Dutton family, learned to fly in the United States of America. After gaining her commercial pilot's licence there in 1945, she returned to Australia and gained commercial pilot's licence no. 2319, in 1947. In September 1950, she attended the inaugural meeting of the Australian Women Pilots' Association in Sydney with 48 others, when founder Nancy Bird Walton became its first president. In May 1951, Blackburn became a foundation member of the South Australian branch inaugurated at Parafield Aerodrome and, in 1957, she became Federal Secretary.

In 1960, she took on the editorship of the national Australian Women Pilots' Association



ABOVE
Russell Roberts (b.1904)
Portrait of Nancy Bird Walton
1930s
silver gelatin photograph
39.8 x 28.1 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an11333638

BELOW
Millicent Bryant's pilot's
licence and logbook
Papers of Millicent Bryant
Manuscripts Collection
MS 291





ABOVE LEFT
Freda Thompson collected newspaper clippings of her flying career in this scrapbook Papers of Freda Thompson Manuscripts Collection MS 7936

ABOVE RIGHT
Thompson's flying cap and goggles and a framed portrait are among her papers in the National Library Papers of Freda Thompson Manuscripts Collection MS 7936



(AWPA) newsletter, contributing many articles. She had a fluent style with a lively turn of phrase, once describing a Cessna 185 Sky Wagon on its introductory flight in Australia as 'climbing like a homesick angel'. Her piece entitled *Hints on Flying the Southern Route to WA* she subtitled *Or Keep Australia on Your Right and You Can't Go Wrong*. Small wonder that the editor who succeeded her wrote: 'Helen has raised the standard of the publication to an all time high'.

In the AWPA newsletter, Blackburn wrote:

Early [women] pilots paved the way, and by their skilled sensible approach to flying broke down any prejudice against women pilots, so that we are accepted on an equal footing with men at the Royal Aero Club of SA and elsewhere. The pre-war pilots had a lot of fun! They used to do things as routine which would make Civil's [Department of Civil Aviation] hair stand on end today.

But an application by the AWPA to the Minister for Air for the inclusion of women pilots with over 40 hours flying time to be admitted to the Royal Australian Air Force Volunteer Reserve, following the English scheme, was refused.

In 1962, Blackburn, known to her friends as Chibs, became part owner of a Cessna 172 and later wrote:

Got our own aircraft and life really began. Bravo Hotel Bravo could be described as a Holden, not big, not small, not as many refinements to go wrong as bigger, faster and much more expensive planes. [We had]

wonderful family holidays—camped beside her at Ayers Rock, flew over summit of Kosciusko. Bravo is just one of the family.

In her flying career, she logged 2301 hours over most of the continent and was endorsed to fly 18 types of aircraft in Australia, from Tiger Moths to Beech Bonanzas. She won many flying competitions and awards, 'collecting a few jugs and trays along the way'. In 1959, she won the Royal Aero Club of South Australia's forced landings and circuits competition; in 1961, the AWPA reliability trial from Adelaide to Broken Hill, based on airmanship, skill and navigation qualities; in 1962, another reliability trial from Hay to Tamworth via Coolangatta; and, in 1964, the Special Prize for the most successful Cessna all-woman crew in the Ansett Brisbane-Adelaide Air Race.

She took pride in maintaining her plane, with bucket, chamois leather and bottle of detergent part of its equipment, wryly commenting:

Washing off all those squashed insects that eat the paint away is a joy of private ownership they don't tell you about in the glossy brochures. ... Landing in a lush green paddock, in no time the Cessna was covered like a Victrola lawn mower in pureed rye grass. Me for the mown strips in future.

Blackburn enjoyed taking part in a Victorian women pilots' event 'Nylons around the Pylons', and was a frequent competitor in the Powder Puff Derby, as well as a member of the Ninety-Nines, the International Organization of Women Pilots, founded by Amelia

Earhart. But she could also hold her own with competitors of the opposite sex, winning the Royal Aero Club of South Australia's championship in 1963 against 300 male pilots. She also won the Sir Ross Smith Trophy in 1963.

Among the many cross-country flights she described in the AWPA newsletter was one retracing the route her father, H.H. Dutton, and Murray Aunger had driven 54 years previously in a Talbot car. They were the first men to cross Australia by car from south to north, 'along the arid stretches and across the sandy river beds that we had flown over so easily between Adelaide and Oodnadatta'.

In 1964, Blackburn flew to Esperance, Western Australia, following the route of explorer Edward John Eyre, with her brother, author Geoffrey Dutton, who was writing Eyre's biography. She described the experience as:

the most fascinating trip I have ever made in Australia, by land or air. ... As to the coastal scenery, I am sure no finer could be found anywhere in the world. Glorious bays, islands everywhere, white beaches, incredibly blue sea, picturesque rocky headlands and pointy hills ...

One of her favourite anecdotes concerned a trip to Mildura. In bad weather, flying at 500 feet, she heard an aircraft talking, so she called him up and asked him to transmit her position report to Mildura. 'He obliged in a pleasant voice and I thought he was an airliner'. But on reaching Mildura, she was told by the Department of Civil Aviation official that she had been talking to a Vulcan bomber at 50 000 feet!

After her husband, Richard Blackburn, was appointed a judge of the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory in 1966, Blackburn did some charter work carrying mail and stores to remote communities, and made several mercy flights. Flying from Darwin to the rugged Western Australian coast, she collected a very ill 15-year-old girl and, despite thunderstorms, delivered her to the Darwin hospital just four hours after the first call for help had been received. And, in 1968, she flew an accompanist to Elcho Island Mission so that a recording could be made of the children's choir.

Besides her passion for flying, Blackburn had a great interest in shells and collected for the Commonwealth Scientific and

Industrial Research Organisation, the University of New South Wales, and the Darwin, West Australian, Tasmanian and Australian museums.

When her husband was appointed as the second resident judge of the Supreme Court of the Australian Capital Territory in 1971, Blackburn moved with him to Canberra. Her career has been fittingly recorded in the Australian Women Pilots' book in the Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame at Longreach, Queensland, where Qantas had its beginnings.

In notes for a speech Blackburn gave in Darwin, she wrote:

Australian women pilots are members of aero clubs, flying schools, group/owner members and private owners [of aircraft]. [They] fly for pleasure and profession. In rotary and fixed wing aircraft from tiny ultra-light machines to passenger liners; and enjoy the freedom of gliding. ... [Some are] highly skilled pilots, instructors, air traffic controllers, others are housewives or combine flying with a variety of other professions. It is in the field of light aircraft that many really come into their own as instructors, crop dusters or doing charter work. They are teenagers, mothers and grandmothers.

Feisty females indeed!

CHRISTOBEL MATTINGLEY also loves flying by light aircraft and has flown on Australia Council and Arts Council lecture tours to many of the remote places that Bird, Blackburn and Thompson visited, but only as a passenger. Her husband was a World War II Lancaster pilot, whose experiences she has recounted in *Battle Order 204*

BELOW LEFT
Unknown photographer
'BHB with a DH-82 (Tiger Moth) at Parafield', 1940s
Papers of Lady Helen Blackburn
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BELOW RIGHT
Unknown photographer
The 1957 annual general meeting of the Australian Women Pilots' Association at Parafield, South Australia (Helen Blackburn, South Australian branch secretary, front row, second from left)
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