



## *Lettice Curtis – Her Autobiography*

**By Lettice Curtis**

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Reviewed by Chris Hobson

**T**he name of Miss Lettice Curtis is well known in British aviation circles. One of a small number of women pilots who joined the Air Transport Auxiliary during the Second World War,

# Books

she ferried a wide variety of aircraft throughout the United Kingdom and became the first female ATA pilot to be qualified on four-engine bombers. In 1971 she wrote *Forgotten Pilots*, the closest thing there has ever been to an official history of the ATA, and a most valuable reference book on this unique and often overlooked organisation.

Her long-awaited autobiography is a remarkable record of a very full and active life. Although best known for her years with the Air Transport Auxiliary, Lettice Curtis has had a long and very distinguished career in aviation starting with her first flying lesson in 1937. After the wartime years with the ATA, she had test flying jobs at Boscombe Down and with Fairey Aviation and also found time to take part in the light aviation scene in Britain. One of her final achievements in aviation came in 1992 when she obtained her helicopter pilot's licence. Through the pages of this book it is obvious that she has pursued this career with great determination, often in the face of male prejudice and official indifference. A lesser person might have admitted defeat or become embittered by the experience, but Lettice proved her value through her professionalism and dogged determination to become accepted as an equal. Today's female aircrew can thank Lettice Curtis and her contemporaries for blazing the way towards acceptance of the fact that women can fly aircraft just as well as men.

This book is a most enjoyable read, a story told with verve and good humour. There are some excellent anecdotes about the 'seat-of-pants' flying days of wartime ferry flying where ATA pilots sometimes had no formal training on the types they were asked to fly and were expected to become competent simply by reading the Pilot's Notes! It is amazing that the accident rate of the ATA was as low as it was and that this was the case was probably due to the experience of the pilots, many of whom were ex-Service or commercial airline pilots. The story of Lettice's only serious accident, which happened when a Typhoon's engine failed on the approach to the Hawker factory at Langley, is well worth reading for the saga of her trying to obtain medical attention after the accident (it happened on a Saturday!). The tales

of post-war tropical trials with the Miles Marathon and Fairey Gannet in East Africa and an epic delivery flight of a Lincoln bomber to Australia are also highly entertaining. Another job that Lettice had after the end of the War was to fly the Spitfire XI that belonged to the American Civil Air Attaché to Britain. This included flying the aircraft in several air races that were a popular event in the immediate post-War years.

This is one of those books that are very difficult to put down once you pick it up. It tells a great story of more than 50 years of British aviation as seen through the eyes of one very remarkable lady.

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