



One for the Girls

Contributed by Frank Parker

THE TIME between World Wars I and II is regarded as the Golden Age of Aviation. It was a time of adventure, record breaking flights, the development of the first commercially viable airliners and major advances in aeronautics, culminating in the development of the jet engine. The period transformed aviation from the curiosity of the Barnstormers in their war surplus aircraft to one of the great industries of the 20th Century.

Notable 'feats' of the period include:

1919 John Alcock and Arthur Brown fly the Atlantic in a modified Vickers Vimy bomber.

1927 Lindbergh's solo trans Atlantic flight.

1928 Kingsford-Smith's first trans Pacific flight from USA to Australia and first trans Tasman flights.

1929 Jimmy Doolittle makes the first 'blind' take-off and landing, thereby proving the viability of 'Instrument Flight'.

1930 Amy Johnson, first solo flight from England to Australia by a woman.

1931 Wiley Post (who was blind in one eye) with navigator Harold Gallely sets a 'round the world' record of 8 days, 15 hours and 51 minutes.

1932 Amelia Earhart becomes the first woman to fly the Atlantic solo from Newfoundland to Ireland.

1935 Howard Hughes sets a landplane speed record of 352 MPH, faster than contemporary military designs.

Jane Gardner Batten was born in Rotorua on the evening of 15th September 1909 to Fred and Ellen, joining two older brothers. She became known as Jean after an uncle taught her the rhyme 'bonny Jean fro Aberdeen' supposedly in a broad Scots accent. Life in Rotorua was agreeable though frugal, as was the norm for those years. At age five the family moved to Auckland, Fred volunteered

for service in the Great War and for Ellen, life in the city became a financial challenge with the family eventually drifting from one dour lodging to the next. Nonetheless she instilled in her daughter a competitive spirit to compete in a male dominated world.

Jean's early exposure to aviation as an eight year old was a visit to Kohimarama beach, base of operations of the Walsh Brothers Flying School. Along with her brothers she was invited to 'look' into the cockpit of the flying boat, an event which seems to have

triggered her imagination and perhaps affirmed her zest for the adventures to follow. Lindbergh's Atlantic flight in 1927 further inspired her yearn to fly, a yearning supported by her mother who took her to Sydney in 1929 where she flew with Kingsford-Smith. In 1930 Jean and Ellen journeyed to London, ostensibly to further Jean's study, however, Jean took the opportunity and learnt to fly at the London Aeroplane Club, achieving her 'A' licence within 12 months.

Jean set her sights on Amy Johnson's England to Australia record. Her first attempt to challenge it in a deHavilland Gypsy Moth ended in disaster following an engine failure and crash near Karachi. Charles Wakefield, head of the Castrol Oil Company

agreed to sponsor a second attempt and another Gypsy Moth was sourced for 240 pounds. This adventure stalled near Rome with another crash landing. Jean returned the aircraft to England, borrowed a set of lower wings and set out once more on the 8th of May making Darwin in 14 days 22 1/2 hours, beating Amy's record by over four days. She became a celebrity in Australia and New Zealand and following a return flight to the UK was similarly received in England.

Seeking further challenge, Jean was able to finance a Percival Gull 6 at a cost of 2000 pounds. In November 1935 she flew from

THE PERCIVAL GULL first flew in 1932. It was built by the Percival Aircraft Company which was established by Edgar Percival and EBW Leake. The aircraft was designed by Percival and was heavily influenced by the earlier 'Hendy 302', an aircraft Edgar had owned and flown. It was of classic period construction, wood frame covered with fabric and available in several variants and with several different engines. Jean Batten's aircraft G-ADRR was a Gull-6 with a 200 hp (150 KW) Gypsy 6 engine. It is displayed in the departure area of Auckland International Airport



Liz Needham (front) with Edith Robinson as co-pilot prior to the Auckland Airport flypast.



75 years later to the hour, Liz leads a formation of Harvards above Auckland Airport in commemoration of Jean Batten's historic flight from England to New Zealand.



England to South America. In Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay she was feted by Presidents and Society alike.

Following a brief period of seclusion in the English countryside she emerged for her greatest long distance flight from England to New Zealand in 11 days 45 minutes, touching down at Mangere Airfield at approximately 10 minutes past 5 on October 16th, 1936.

Jean's main accomplishments were:

- 1934** England to Australia and return.
- 1935** First woman to fly the South Atlantic.
- 1936** First flight England to New Zealand.
- 1937** Jean's last long distance flight Australia to England.

Jean had a close relationship with her mother Ellen throughout her life. Her personal life was marred with tragedy and in the late 1930's both Ellen and Jean drifted into seclusion leading a nomadic life around Europe. Ellen died at Tenerife, Spain in 1966. In the late 1960s Jean re-emerged into public life with mixed success. In 1982 she advised her publisher of a new address, her final correspondence. She died following complications from a dog bite, a result of her 'alternative' approach to medicine and was buried in a paupers grave in Majorca in 1983.

In 1977, NZ Warbirds members, Edith Robinson and Liz Needham met Jean when she flew to Auckland to open an Aviation Pioneers Hall at MOTAT.

Edith and Liz were determined that the 75th Anniversary of Jean's landing at Mangere should be recognised and so a flypast was arranged. A formation of four Harvards (which co-incidentally celebrated a 75th anniversary in 2009) led by Liz with Edith as co-pilot flew from Ardmore to Auckland City and over Auckland Airport before returning to Ardmore. While the intention was to overfly the Airport at 1710, the exigencies of air traffic control meant we were five minutes early, not at all up to Jean's navigation standards!

The golden age where individuals could afford adventure was overtaken by the pace of technical development through WW II. On October 14th 1947 Yeager broke the sound barrier in the Bell X-1, as records and exploration became the preserve of Governments – with their taxpayer support.

That is until Richard Branson appeared on the scene and decided space travel could be made affordable to all comers – but that's another story.

Cheers, frankly @xtra.co.nz.

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