

Helen Richey

ATA Girl, WASP, Aviation Pioneer

by
Cindy Weigand

Right: Helen Richey in a formal picture for the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA)

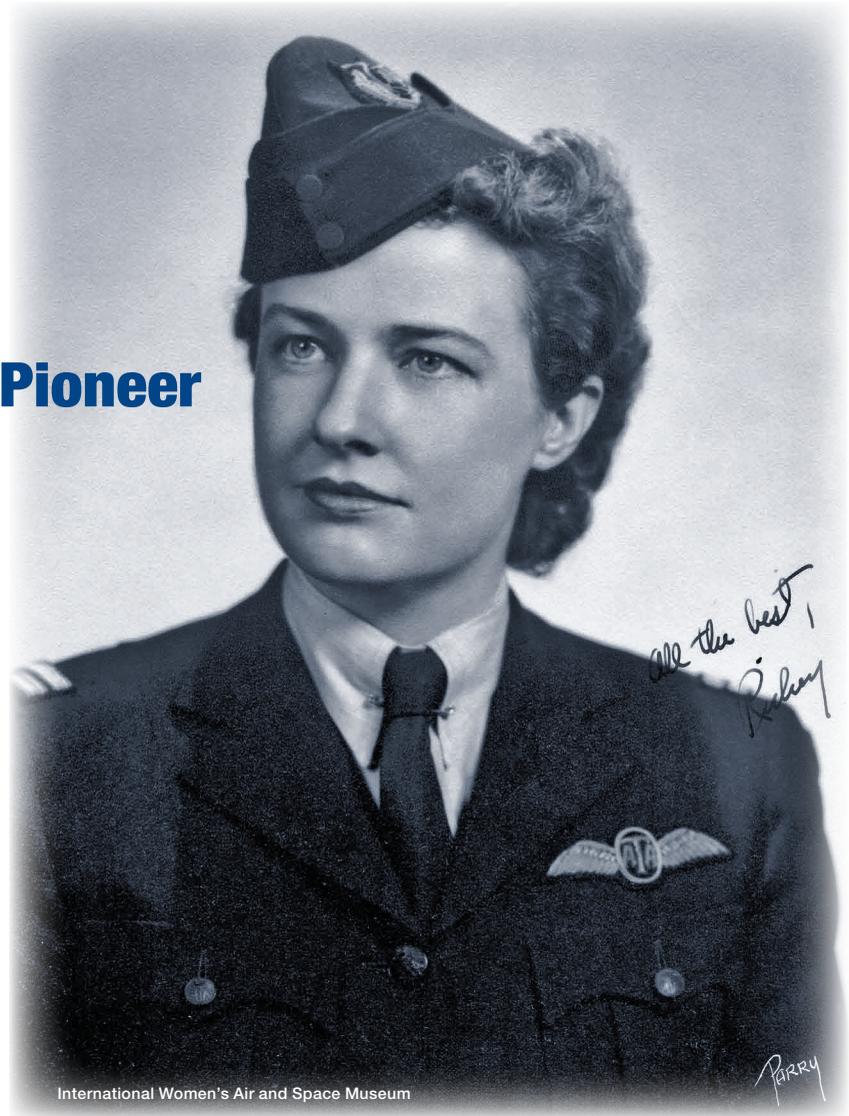
When Helen Richey applied for the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), the interview was a formality because her experience uniquely qualified her for this elite group of female aviators. In addition to extensive experience flying civilian planes, Richey had already flown 200 hours in Oxford, Blenheim, Spitfire, Wellington, and Martinet airplanes with the British Air Transport Auxiliary. Composed of both male and female pilots, the young women who flew for the group were known as “ATA Girls.”

THE EARLY YEARS

Even as an adventurous child growing up in Pennsylvania, one could not have imagined such an illustrious career as a pilot. Born on November 21, 1909, Richey was the youngest child of five of McKeesport superintendent of schools, Dr. Joseph Burdette Richey and Amy Winter Richey. Her first airplane ride was sitting on mail sacks on a 130-mile airmail flight from McKeesport to Cleveland, Ohio's Airport. After seeing famous pilots on the flight, including Ruth Elder, she decided that she wanted to fly. In her biography, *Propeller Annie*, by Glenn Kerfoot, he states that she told a friend, “I'm going to fly...I'm going to be good enough to earn money at it, too. It's what I want to do with my life.”

For a time, her father objected, but with her mother's support, he relented and Richey received her pilot's license from the United States Department of Commerce in April 1930.

While Richey flew in exhibitions, races, and other flights, she sensed that her opportunities to



fly would be limited because the actual aerobatic flying would be relegated to more experienced pilots. At an air meet at Bettis Field, McKeesport, Richey begged for a chance to fly for the crowd in August of 1930.

After a perfect takeoff in a Curtiss “Fledgling” trainer, Richey performed various stunts that included loops even though she'd received no training in stunt flying and the airplane wasn't designed for such flying.

Richey continued to fly and gain experience to qualify for a commercial license with the goal of flying the mail and passengers. In December 1930, she obtained a commercial pilot's license that permitted her to do so. On August 6, 1931, her father presented her with a four-passenger Bird airplane. For the next several years, Richey flew constantly in aerial parades, air meets, exhibitions, and races in Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, Maryland, Virginia, the District of Columbia, and other states. Some of these were for women only.



ENDURANCE FLIGHT

In December 1933, Richey participated in an endurance flight with Frances Harrell Marsalis. Their plane dubbed, “Outdoor Girl,” for the cosmetics company sponsoring the flight, took off from Miami on December 20, 1933. For ten days, the plane circled and bounced over that city with the women taking turns at the controls. Pilots Jack Loesing and Fred Fetterman provided the 83 refueling flights plus other airdrops including food, water, repair materials, suntan lotion, and rubbing alcohol for tired aching muscles.

Refueling was strenuous and potentially hazardous. To refuel, a pilot had to climb out of the overhead hatch, grab the nozzle dangling in the wind, and shove it into the opening of the gas tank. Marsalis likened this process to “...wrestling with a cobra in a hurricane...” If the nozzle became detached from the tank, the person handling the task might be sprayed with gasoline. Oiling the engine and replacing used oil often had the same result. On a refueling on the sixth day of the flight, the nozzle came loose and tore a hole in the fabric of a wing. Richey climbed out on the wing and repaired the hole with needle and thread.

After surpassing the previous endurance record, Marsalis made a perfect landing to end the flight on December 29, 1933. Officials verified that they had set a refueling endurance record staying aloft 237 hours and 42 minutes flying 23,700 miles, almost the distance around the world at the equator, consuming eight tons of gasoline.

EXHIBITIONS AND RACES

In August 1934, Richey participated in the First Women’s National Air Meet. Finishing sixth in a 20-mile race, she also signed up for the feature event, a 50-mile race over a closed course. With six miles to go, Richey was battling Edna Gardner for the lead when Marsalis tried to overtake them. Turning around a 35-foot tower, her plane side-slipped in the backwash of the other planes. The wing scraped the ground causing the plane to cartwheel a hundred feet before crashing in a field. Marsalis sustained mortal injuries and died on the way to the hospital.

Richey was declared the winner of the race, quite an accomplishment, because she had competed with the best. In November 1934, she received the coveted Fairchild Trophy. At 24 years old and flying for four years, Richey was at the top of her profession.

AIRLINE PILOT

Still with the goal to fly mail and passengers on a schedule and confident of her abilities, Richey applied for a position as co-pilot with Central Airlines on December 13, 1934. According to Kerfoot, the president of the airline wanted to capitalize on Richey’s publicity so he contacted the Department of Commerce and told them he wanted to hire her for a few weeks and then find other work for her. The Department agreed on the condition she not fly in inclement

weather because of the increased physical strain.

Assigned to a 12-passenger Ford “Tri-motor” airplane, Richey was to fly between Washington and Detroit via Pittsburgh and Cleveland with a round trip flight every other day. When she was still flying eight months later, the Department of Commerce asked for an explanation. The president of the airline explained that she was so popular with the public and publicity so extensive, that he feared the consequences of removing her from the position too soon.

As a solution, the Department of Commerce recommended that she be retained, but allowed to fly only three times per month. Frustrated by the lack of flying time, Richey resigned in August 1935.

Helen Richey as an instructor pilot.





AIR-MARKING AND INSTRUCTING

In December 1935, the Department of Commerce, through the Works Progress Administration, hired Richey, Nancy Harkness Love, Louise Thaden, Helen MacCloskey, Blanche Noyes, and Phoebe Omlie as air marking pilots.

With war raging in other parts of the world the United States decided to increase its defense program and needed flight instructors for the Army. Richey signed up for the program and on May 1, the CAA granted Richey a license to instruct others to fly and assigned her to Northeast Airport in Philadelphia. From Philadelphia, she was stationed at E.W. Wiggins Airport in Boston, Massachusetts, and then Pacific Aero College at Los Angeles Municipal Airport where she completed the assignment in November 1940.

Back in McKeesport, Richey took aerobatics training at Pittsburgh-Butler Airport and became an instructor at the Graham School of Aviation, Butler, to train experienced airline pilots to be instructors. Richey now had 1500 hours at the controls.

ATA GIRL

Richey received a letter from a friend and fellow pilot Jacqueline Cochran in January 1942 inviting her to apply for the women's section of the British Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA). Anxious to help with the war effort, Richey applied, was accepted and reported to Montreal, Quebec. After three

weeks of flight-tests in a North American trainer and medical exams, she sailed to England in a convoy in March of that year.

Assigned to White-Waltham aerodrome near Maidenhead, Berkshire, Richey started the first of four training periods and ferrying duty logging her first flight on April 11 in a Miles Magister. By the end of the month, she had flown 30 hours in Magister and Tiger Moth airplanes. Her hours totaled 90 hours by the end of June in five additional types of aircraft – Harvards, Oxfords, Masters, Hurricanes, and Albacores.

Flying Proctors and Lysanders, Richey completed 32 ferrying jobs in July and had flown 126 hours. On July 21, she flew the Spitfire for the first time, the flight ending in a crash landing. Determined to conquer the fighter, she took one aloft in August. For the rest of the month, she flew Spitfires and "...found them wonderfully easy to handle. No drag at all. In fact, a Spit in flight is like a fish going through water...."

Being asked to fly airplanes that they had never flown was not unusual for the ATA Girls for each was required to carry "Ferry Pilot's Notes." Printed on a card about the size of a postcard were concise instructions on how to fly each plane and the foibles of the aircraft. The notes also gave the layout of the cockpit of the plane plus its range, approach and safe landing speeds, working of emergency gear, and other vital information. "Sometimes," Richey recorded, "we would hurriedly skim through the pilot's operating manual to find out how to take off, then keep reading the book while in flight to find out how to land the damned thing."

In September, Cochran announced that she was returning to the United States at the request of General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold to organize a group of women pilots in the United States. Richey was left in charge of the contingent of 20 American female pilots then flying with the ATA in Great Britain.

Increasingly, Richey felt the pressure of her dual role as ferry pilot and being group commander. News that her mother was quite ill



The Museum's DeHavilland "Tiger Moth," one of the types of British aircraft that Helen Richey flew as part of the ATA.



added to the stress. In December 1943, she resigned from the ATA and ferried her last plane on January 9, 1943, having accumulated 200 hours. After one year of service, she sailed home in March 1943.

In addition to flying some of the world's most advanced airplanes, Helen met famous people such as war correspondent Ernie Pyle and pilot Jimmy Doolittle after his attack on Japan. She described her greatest thrill of her time in England was when she helped escort Mrs. Winston Churchill and Eleanor Roosevelt on an inspection of the air base.

WASP

Back in the United States, Richey quickly grew restless. She missed flying and being part of the war effort so she applied to the Women Airforce Service Pilots headed by her friend Jacqueline Cochran. Formed in September 1942, the WASP, originally called the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) performed many of the same flying assignments for the U.S. Army Air Forces as the pilots did in England. Having flown over 2,000 hours in her career, Richey was immediately accepted and started training at Avenger Field, Sweetwater, Texas, in July 1943 graduating on September 11, 1943 with the class of 43-5. She was assigned to the Second Ferrying Group of the Air Transport Command at Newcastle County Airport, Wilmington, Delaware, where she flew ten different kinds of missions.

Rarely did she mention her work with the ATA. Kerfoot quotes WASP Dorothy Henesy as saying, "Helen was well-liked by everyone at the base, but not too many knew what she had done because she was very quiet and rarely talked about herself. ...on one occasion...I happened to mention that I wanted to fly pursuit planes but was a little afraid. She said, 'Don't worry about them, Dorothy. You're going to find that they are much slower than you think. In fact, you may be disappointed, but go ahead and learn to fly them. Why not?' When I questioned her about her knowledge of them, she shrugged and admitted that she had been in the ATA and had flown Spitfires in England."

On March 31, 1944, she was transferred to the ATC base at Fairfax Field, Kansas City, Missouri, where she trained on heavy bombers and cargo planes. She returned to New Castle on September 7 where she remained until the WASP disbanded in December 1944. In the 20 months that she flew with the WASP, Richey accumulated 300 hours ferrying 27 different types of aircraft.

LAST FLIGHT

Richey returned home to McKeesport to her family. The few flying positions available went to male pilots returning from the war. Her life of flying having come to an abrupt halt, she didn't know what she was going to do. Bored, she moved to New York City. Despite encouragement and help from fellow



Helen Richey as a WASP

WASP and other friends to find employment, Richey showed little interest, preferring to stay in her apartment and read. She became increasingly despondent. On a visit to her home, her sister Lucille observed that Helen seemed unusually quiet and depressed and somewhat disconnected from reality. On January 7, 1947, Richey folded her wings by her own hand in her apartment in New York's lower Manhattan's Chelsea District, a somber conclusion for such an accomplished pilot.

In recognition of her service during World War II, Helen Richey and other WASP were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal posthumously on March 11, 2010. 🌟

[Cindy Weigand is the author of several articles on the WASP in national, state, and regional magazines. Her book, Texas Women in World War II, contains the stories of six WASP. She lives in Georgetown, Texas.]