

Key Stage 3

History Lesson Plan - Spitfire Girls

Joining the War Effort: Exploring *Spitfire Girls*

Learning Objectives:

- Students will understand the historical context of women's roles in the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) during WWII.
- Students will analyse the challenges and contributions of female ferry pilots.
- Students will evaluate the significance of the ATA and its impact on the war effort.
- Students will explore the personal experiences and motivations of the women involved.
- Students will use primary and secondary sources to develop a historical understanding of the period.
- Students will consider the themes of equality, courage, and resilience in the context of WWII.

Key Concepts:

The Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA): Understanding its role in ferrying aircraft during WWII.

Women in Wartime: Understanding the changing roles of women during WWII, including their participation in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Primary and Secondary Sources: Analysing different types of historical evidence including the play as a secondary source.

Equality and Social Change: Exploring how WWII challenged traditional gender roles.

Resources:

- White board & markers
- 'Drawing Conclusions from Evidence' sheet (attached)
- Pens
- Primary sources 1 & 2 (attached)
- Secondary sources 1 & 2 (attached)

Lesson Activities:

1. Introduction and Context (10 minutes):

THINK:

Students work with a partner to put the following events in the correct historical order:

D Day	Invasion of Poland	Winston Churchill is elected to power in the UK	Hitler is elected to power in Germany	Allied invasion of Italy
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DISCUSS:

Begin with a class discussion about life in Britain during WWII and the various roles people played. Ask students what they know about women's roles specifically before and during WWII.

EXTENSION:

How did expectations of women's role shift between 1939-1945? Why did this change happen? What were the benefits and challenges that society at the time felt as a result of this change?

2. Exploring Primary and Secondary Sources (25 minutes):

INVESTIGATE:

Introduce students to the idea of the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) and its function. Explain that the ATA was a civilian organisation that ferried military aircraft from factories to airbases. Highlight the fact that women were a significant part of the ATA and explain how the play *Spitfire Girls* brings their stories to life.

Have students form groups of four. Explain to the students that they are going to explore 4 sources now, 2 primary and 2 secondary and that they will work together afterwards to make some judgments about the impact that the war had on the way of life for British women and their role in society.

PRIMARY SOURCES:

1. Show the selection of historical images of ATA pilots and the different aircraft they flew.
2. Read the first-hand account provided from Mary Ellis (Wilkin's) autobiography.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

1. Use the historian's notes to explore the challenges faced by ATA pilots, such as lack of radios and instrument flying instruction, and the variety of aircraft they flew.
2. Provide students with Script Extract One from *Spitfire Girls*.
 - Ask students to read the script and to identify quotes which provide information about the characters and the challenges they faced. The play portrays the women as defying expectations and being pioneers.
 - Ask students to note down any other insights they gain from these extracts into the lives and working conditions of the women pilots.

In pairs or small groups, students analyse these sources and discuss the messages they portray about the experiences of the pilots. Discuss the way the play and historian's notes are a secondary source of historical information, which is based on true events, compared with the images and first-hand account of the experience which are primary sources.

3. Drawing conclusions from evidence (15 minutes):

Lead a class discussion about the challenges the women faced within the ATA, including technical issues with flying, the physical and emotional pressures of their role and issues of equality.

In their groups, students consider the significance of the ATA and the contribution of these women to the war effort. Prompt them to consider the Historical, Social and Economic factors which would have resulted from the change in women's roles at this time. As a group, students record their thoughts and discussions on the 'Drawing Conclusions from Evidence' worksheet.

Have each group share their findings with the class.

4. Reflection and Discussion (10 minutes):

Bring the class together to discuss what they have learned about the ATA and about how women's contributions to the war radically changed the way that women contributed to British society.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What does this play suggest about the contribution of women during wartime?
- How did the women challenge gender stereotypes and traditional expectations?
- What are some of the longer lasting benefits of this radical change?
- What would have been some of the challenges that were faced as a result of this change?
- How does a play like *Spitfire Girls*, which brings stories like this to life for a modern audience influence our understanding of historical moments of change?
- Why is it important that we understand the legacy of women like Bett and Dotty?

5. Homework (20 minutes):

WRITTEN REFLECTION PROMPTS:

Following on from today's lesson;

- I was able to understand that women's societal roles changed during WWII by comparing....
- The impact that this change has had in the long term is that....
- EXTENSION: Another moment that I know about in history which changed society in a fundamental way is...
- EXTENSION: What can you find out about other roles that women undertook during the war years that would traditionally have been in male-dominated fields?
- CREATIVE: Write a diary entry from the point of view of a young man or woman during the war years. Have them reflect on how their way of life has changed since before the war. Consider how they feel as well as the people in their life, and the pressures or freedom that they might be experiencing along with this new way of living.

Teacher Assessment:

Student Name:	Level:
AO1: Recall, select and communicate knowledge and understanding of history.	
AO2: Demonstrate understanding of the past through explanation and analysis of: • key concepts: causation, consequence, continuity, change, similarity, difference and significance within an historical context • key features and characteristics of the periods studied and the relationships between them.	
AO3: Understand, analyse and make valid historical claims from: • a range of source material, including written historical sources whose precise provenance is given, as part of an historical enquiry • a range of representations and interpretations of the past as part of an historical enquiry.	

This lesson aims to be engaging and practical, encouraging students to explore the historical context and human stories within Spitfire Girls through active participation in historical investigation. The lesson could be adapted to suit a variety of class sizes and learning environments.

Primary Source One

Images from the ATA shared with permission by Maidenhead Heritage Museum



Primary Source Two

“SO OFF WE ALL WENT, PLEASED AND PROUD - US WOMEN PILOTS OF THE AIR TRANSPORT AUXILIARY WEARING OUR DARK BLUE NAVY TUNICS, TROUSERS AND FUR-LINED BOOTS, AND PARACHUTES STRUNG HAPHAZARDLY OVER OUR SHOULDERS” - MARY ELLIS IN ‘A SPITFIRE GIRL’

My First Spitfires (From A Spitfire Girl, by Mary Ellis & Melody Foreman)

Air Transport Auxiliary Ferry Pool No.15 - The Operations Room

As I arrived for work one brisk autumn morning I parked my old black ford car in a space near the Ops Block as usual and noted that the weather was calm and offered up the use of a pale, clear sky in which to fly my quota of aircraft deliveries for the day. As usual none of us girls ever knew what was on the agenda, so there was often a crackle of excitement in the air. That particular morning, I picked up the chitty with my name on it as usual and looked at the information outlining my aircraft deliveries for the day. Then I spotted such a longed-for word - “Spitfires”.

All I could do was stand silent and stunned as I revelled in a quiet, surreal ecstasy. My eyes had seen the instruction but my brain was in a swirl as I had not just one but two of these beautiful fighter aeroplanes waiting patiently for me to fly to the RAF boys who urgently needed them. My first ever Spitfires! Finally, I had my chance to pilot the aircraft everyone raved about and loved. Along with the trusty Hawker Hurricane the graceful and super-fast Supermarine Spitfire had played a seminal role in winning the Battle of Britain in 1940, and now I was to fly one. I’ll never forget the rush of adrenaline that hit me that morning - the excitement was overwhelming and I might have even let out a small scream when I finally realised my dream had come true. I checked my name on the chitty again... yes sure enough it said “Mary Wilkins”.

...

Within a few seconds my excitement had calmed into a steady concentration and I realised I was really quite snug and extremely comfortable in the cockpit. I looked over the instrument panel which did indeed tally with the illustrations in my Ferry Pilots Notes . I also thought about my training and noted the sleek black coated dials which housed, behind circles of glass, such bright white numbers and indicators which were impossible not to notice. There were among forty controls to watch and be aware of including the various knobs and switches. I went through them all in my mind. They were easy to reach and to handle. I noted the red metal crowbar fixed to the side of the cockpit door on my left. It was a stark reminder of a potential emergency and I averted my eyes from it as I was determined I would never need use of it to break open the canopy. Yes, all seemed above board and so far, so good. It was strange how it took only a few seconds for me to feel completely at home in this beautiful aircraft. Everything sort of fell into place. It was wonderful. I breathed deeply and closed the canopy over my head. I saw my blonde curls faintly reflected in its Perspex.

Foreman, M. (2020). *A spitfire girl: The autobiography of a pioneer female aviator*. The History Press.

Secondary Source One

Historian's notes by Mark Green

During World War Two the Air Transport Auxiliary was an integral part of the war effort. 1250 pilots from 25 countries ferried a total of 309,000 aircraft of 147 different types, without radios, with no instrument flying instruction and at the mercy of the British weather. Often, they were presented with a type of aeroplane they had never seen before.

Of these 1250 pilots, 168 were women. These women risked their lives to transport military aeroplanes from one location to another, ensuring that the Royal Air Force had the aeroplanes they needed to defend the country.

Spitfire Girls follows the trials and tribulations of two sisters who joined the ATA in 1943 escaping their lives working for their father on the family pig farm. *Spitfire Girls* highlights the vital role that women played during the war and examines several key themes through their experiences flying for the ATA and highlights their contributions to the war effort and authentically recreates the ways in which they challenged traditional gender roles. While the women of the ATA were not on the front lines of the war, they were still exposed to danger and trauma on a daily basis and *Spitfire Girls* explores the long-term effects of their experiences on their mental health, as well as the ways in which they coped with their trauma.

Despite the prevailing attitudes of the time, which often saw women as second-class citizens, these women proved that they were just as capable as their male counterparts; this was rewarded in 1943 when the women were awarded equal pay to their male colleagues, making the ATA one of the first Equal Opportunities Employers. An editorial of the *Aeroplane* magazine shows the level of animosity that needed to be overcome when it wrote 'The menace is the woman who thinks that she ought to be flying a high-speed bomber when she really has not the intelligence to scrub the floor of a hospital properly.' By showcasing the bravery, determination and skill of these women *Spitfire Girls* provides an inspiring example of female empowerment.

Differentiated:

- The ATA employed women pilots from 25 different countries during World War II.
- A total of 168 women served as pilots in the ATA
- The ATA was formed in 1939, to address the shortage of qualified pilots needed to ferry aircraft during the war.
- The women pilots of the ATA ferried a remarkable variety of aircraft, totalling 147 different types. They transported these aircraft between factories, maintenance facilities, and airfields across the country. The women of the ATA were not allowed to fly in combat missions.
- They faced significant risks, including flying without radios or instrument training. They also contended with the unpredictable and often treacherous British weather.
- Despite these challenges, the women of the ATA flew over 309,000 aircraft during the war, playing a vital role in the Allied victory.
- The women of the ATA challenged traditional gender roles, proving their competence and skill in a male-dominated field. They faced prejudice and discrimination, including negative press coverage and dismissive comments from some members of the public.
- In 1943, the women of the ATA achieved equal pay to their male counterparts, a landmark victory for gender equality. This made the ATA one of the first organisations in Britain to implement equal pay.

Secondary Source Two

Scene 4 - Spitfire Girls

CAST: DOTTY
BETT
DAD

1943. A couple of weeks later. The kitchen. **DOTTY** enters carrying a letter.

DOTTY BETT! BETT! Where the bloody hell is she? Bett?!

BETT (off) What?!

DOTTY BETT!

BETT (Off) What?!

DOTTY Where are you?!

BETT (Off) I'm on the bleedin' lav!

DOTTY Well, can you hurry it up?!

BETT (Off) Not really, no!

DOTTY Alright then, I'll come to you!

BETT (Off) Nooo! I'm coming! (entering whilst fixing herself) Blimey O'Reilly. What is it that can't wait for me to finish the most basic of tasks?

DOTTY Uh. Excuse me, did you wash your hands, young lady?

BETT Well, I thought the Germans had arrived so didn't think it necessary.

She wipes her hand down Dotty's cheek.

DOTTY You're so immature.

BETT I do try. So? What had to wreck my one moment of solitude?

DOTTY (revealing the letter) I got in. I only bloody got in!

BETT Oh.

DOTTY Did you...?

BETT I've not heard.

DOTTY Oh. Really?

BETT Not a dicky bird.

DOTTY Why? I wonder why?

BETT Too short?

DOTTY Hmm....

BETT Too old?

DOTTY Oh, Bett...

***BETT** smiles.*

You're pulling my leg, aren't you?

***BETT** nods.*

DOTTY You little-

BETT I'm sorry but your face was a picture.

DOTTY We're in. We did it.

BETT We bloody did it!

DOTTY We're heading for the sky...

They hug.

Let me see then. Where's your letter?

DAD *(Bellowing)* BETT!

BETT Oh god.

DAD BETT!

BETT I think I left it on the sideboard...

***DAD** enters.*

DAD Bett.

DOTTY Dad-

DAD Dorothy, I am having this conversation with Bett, not you.

DOTTY I know, Daddy but-

DAD Dorothy, will you please stay out of it?

BETT Dad.

DAD I tell you, Elizabeth. You've done it this time.

DOTTY (*whispers to BETT pointedly*) Elizabeth...

DAD I know you think you're wise and worldly but answering this ad was perhaps the most foolish thing you have ever done.

BETT Here we go

DOTTY Dad

BETT Just my luck, eh Dot?

DAD You will need that and much more if you get up in a bloody aeroplane whilst our skies are littered with enemies waiting to shoot you down.

BETT They are the very reason I want to get up in a bloody aeroplane-

DAD You talk as though you'll be fighting them yourself.

BETT I know I won't be

DAD You're willing to risk your life, to be a bloody delivery driver!

BETT I know I won't be on the frontline.

DAD You are not doing it.

BETT I'm sorry, but I am.

DAD You've never even stepped inside an aeroplane let alone flown one.

BETT I know! Exciting, isn't it?

DAD You certainly have no understanding of the power of an aircraft.

BETT You only have yourself to blame for that.

DAD You have not the first idea about flying.

BETT That doesn't matter. "Ab initio," the ad said.

Beat

DOTTY Which means "From the beginning"

DAD Yes, yes I know what it bloody means, thank you.

DOTTY Right-o. Good, good.

DAD Do you realise the state that our Royal Air Force is in?
Why do you think the ATA is calling on young women, like you?

BETT To fix the mess?

DAD Because all the healthy young men are in fighter aircrafts being shot from the sky left, right and bloody centre. You're behind the men who are missing limbs and eyes. They're bloody desperate.

BETT Exactly, they need us-

DAD They need any bloody one with a beating heart!

BETT (*your turn*) Don't they, Dot?

Beat

DOTTY What?

DAD What?

DOTTY What?

DAD Dot.

DOTTY Now don't be cross...

DAD No, Dorothy. Please, not you.

BETT What does he mean by that?

DOTTY I'm sorry Daddy.

DAD Absolutely not.

DOTTY We can look out for each other

DAD No, no

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DOTTY If we both go.

DAD What do you think this is, Dorothy? A bloody jolly?

BETT That's what I said.

DOTTY Whose side are you on?

DAD It's war, Dorothy. A bloody war. Not even your brilliant imagination could conjure up what these men are facing. The sky looks very different from the seat of a war aircraft. It's like nothing you've ever known.

DOTTY Then tell me.

DAD You cannot begin to imagine the things that I've seen. The things I see.

DOTTY It's not for the want of trying. We've tried, Daddy. We all tried.

DAD You will never understand. *(To BETT)* This was your idea, I take it?

BETT I told her not to post it.

DOTTY You two are incredible.

DAD You are not going, Dorothy.

DOTTY Please-

DAD I won't allow it.

DOTTY Please-

DAD And that's the end of it.

DOTTY I'm not your little girl anymore.

Beat

Try to understand why I need to do this.

DAD I cannot fathom for one moment.

DOTTY Because she would have done it.

Beat.

DAD She would
She would absolutely not agree to this.

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BETT and DOTTY look at DAD. They don't know what else to say.

If you disobey me...

Beat.

Please. Dorothy. Elizabeth.

DAD looks at both of them. He is spent. He carefully folds BETT's letter back together and places it on the table and leaves. DOTTY and BETT look at each other. They hold hands.

END SCENE

WORKSHEET:

Drawing Conclusions from Evidence

The Big Question: In what ways did women who flew planes for the ATA defy the expectations of their gender for the time, and how do you know?

Ways in which they challenged expectations:	How we know: (Evidence from sources)

The Big Question: What factors would have affected the women and made their jobs more difficult?

Factors	How we know: (Evidence from sources)
Social factors	
Economic factors	
Historic factors	

EXTENSION: Despite the challenges they faced, the women's reports of their time in the skies seemed relatively joyous, and they certainly seemed excited to get started. What factors do you think led to their enthusiasm and excitement?
