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## Women serving in the Royal Air Force (1938–1944)

*During World War II not only men served in the Royal Air Force. Sir Kingsley Wood, the Air Minister, formed the Civil Air Guard for supporting the Royal Air Force. Until July 1939 between three and four thousand people got their pilot's licence, and there were a further ten thousand undergoing training. Nine hundred of them were women.*

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### 1. Structure of the Royal Air Force (RAF)

The Royal Air Force was treated primarily as an independent force, as it was – like the Navy – the main offensive force of Britain. In 1936, the following organisations within RAF were established:

- Bomber Command – the core of the Air Force and main offensive element;
- Fighter Command – responsible for air defence;
- Coastal Command – responsible for supporting the navy and protecting shipping;
- and
- Training Command – to perform training tasks.

In 1937, the RAF handed a portion of its naval aircraft over to the Admiralty. A Maintenance Command was established to carry out procurement and supply tasks. Civil aviation and volunteers were also subject to Reserve Command, as well as Balloon Command. The basic unit of the RAF was the squadron. Before the war, it consisted of 12 single-engine machines or 10 twin-engined machines. 2–3 squadrons formed a wing, and several wings were organised into a group [4].

### 2. Air Transportation Auxiliary – ATA

Sir Kingsley Wood, Minister of Aviation, established the Civil Air Guard on July 23, 1938 to assist in the duties of the Royal Air Force. It was open to anyone between the ages of 18 and 50 who was a member of a flying club, regardless of gender. By July 1939, the number of licensees was between three and four thousand, and an additional 10,000 pilots were in training (900 of whom were women). Gerard d'Erlanger, then director of British Airways, predicted that there would be pilots who would not be fit for combat service in the RAF due

to their age, but they could still perform other transportation and support tasks. Its initiative was immediately adopted, creating the Air Transportation Auxiliary (ATA) [2], [14].

In 1939, the conditions for admission to the ATA were as follows: minimum 'A' type private pilot license, a few hundred hours flown, age between 28–50 years for men (as men under 28 were conscripted), and age of at least 22 years for women. The female pilots, unlike in the other service branches, were on an equal footing with the men; they wore the same uniforms, and had the same qualifications and tasks. The ranks were decided by the level of training the pilots had completed. The newly introduced pilot candidates were called cadets. After obtaining a single-engine pilot's licence, they received the rank of Third Officer, which corresponded to Pilot Officer in the Royal Air Force and Flight Officer in Hungarian. After the appointment of the First Officer, those who had administrative duties or teams were able to advance through the ranks. The pay gap between male and female pilots was initially quite extreme, but this was completely eliminated by June 1943 [14].

ATA transport pilots received specific training, the main focus of which were: provision of qualification according to airplane type and classification, experience and navigation training, and preparation and classification of the transport service, taking into account individual abilities. Not included in the training was instrument flight, aerobatic training, formation flight and radio use. The reason for this was very simple: Planes ferried by ATA pilots were not yet equipped with a radio. Airplanes were classified into six classes according to their type. Some examples of well-known aircraft deployed during World War II were the Hurricane, Spitfire, Typhoon in class II, while the Halifax, Lancaster and similar heavy bombers belonged to class V [14].

After passing the aircraft-specific type examination, the pilots would perform ferry flights of aircraft in that category until they qualified for the next class. They could only become professional transport pilots once they had qualified in Class III.

June Farquhar wrote about the training: 'What a great training and how confident it made us all. I still admire the fact that we were able to climb into a completely unknown aircraft, flip through the Pilot's Operations Manual, spend time getting to know the aircraft, and... then into the great blueness!' [9], [14].

The work of the ATA pilots was very hard. They flew seven out of seven days, never being given rest and recreation periods (as opposed to RAF pilots). Nor were their flights completely safe. As mentioned earlier, the planes flew without radio connection, so there was always a danger that they might be perceived as enemy aircraft as they flew over battlefields, supplying aircraft to frontline units in the combat zone [14].

### 3. Women's Auxiliary Air Force – WAAF

The Women's Auxiliary Air Force was founded on June 28, 1939. Here, the list of tasks for women serving was extensive, ranging from cooking to publishing meteorological data, from administrative duties to aircraft installation/maintenance. The women were, however, not allowed to fly aircraft. Their priority was to monitor the radars and to serve in the operations rooms during the Battle of Britain [3], [10].

Many of the WAAF members received special training for service outside WAAF through the recruitment of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), referred to as Churchill's secret army.

## 4. Polish Women's Auxiliary Air Force (Pomocnicza Lotnicza Służba Kobiet – PLSK) in the RAF

After the occupation of Poland in 1939, the Polish government moved its headquarters first to Romania and then to Paris. On September 30, 1939, Emigrant President Władysław Raczkiewicz commissioned General Władysław Sikorski to form a new Polish government. The government was based in Paris until the summer of 1940 and, after the collapse of France and on Prime Minister Winston Churchill's invitation, moved to London [15].

When the Soviet-German war began in 1941, the Soviet Union's new international status enabled them to seek help from other countries hostile to Germany. On July 5, 1941, Anthony Eden, a diplomat from the British Foreign Office, and General Sikorski began negotiations with the Soviet Ambassador, Ivan Majski, in London, thus beginning to re-establish diplomatic relations between Poland and the Soviet Union [10].

Stalin agreed to annul all previous pacts with Nazi Germany, destroying the September 1939 Soviet-German partition of Poland. Under an agreement between the Polish government and Stalin, on August 12, 1941, the Soviets granted Polish citizens 'Amnesty', including 40,000 members of the Polish armed forces serving with the Red Army (later known as General Anders Army after General Władysław Anders). At the initiative of General Władysław Anders, the Polish Women's Auxiliary Air Force was established in September 1941 [12].

Between March and July 1940, General Stanisław Ujejski, Deputy Commander of the Polish Air Force, proposed to General Marian Kukieł, then Deputy Minister of Defence of the Polish Government in exile, as an observer, that he recruit about 1,500 volunteers to a Polish Women's Auxiliary Air Force. As a result, on December 2, 1942, General Kukieł issued a decree calling on Polish women living in the United Kingdom to join the PLSK. In April 1943, 36 women were selected as instructors for additional volunteers. Among them was Helena Paszkiewicz, who left the British Women's Auxiliary Air Force to join the PLSK. They were sent to Scotland for a Polish admission course, which ran from May 1 to June 10. On June 17, they became members of the WAAF and were sent on a British WAAF course to Wilmslow. At Faldingworth Airport, several Polish women worked with Polish mechanics on the Lancaster with the No. 300 (Bomber) Squadron. Members of the Polish Women's Auxiliary Air Force were eventually deployed at 26 airports. The volunteers worked mainly in Polish units, but also on English stations. The female officers worked in eight areas: RAF and WAAF administration, secret service, accounting, warehousing and material supply, food supply, cryptography and education. Volunteers, as well as non-commissioned officers and private officials, worked in 45 fields, including administration, waitresses, cooks, air traffic controllers, air traffic control, meteorological services, radio transmitters, and telegraph operators, clerks, drivers, help in warehouses, suppliers, mechanics and technicians. Graduates of the Polish technical school were assigned to the latter areas.

From June 1943 to June 1945, 1,436 Polish women, aged 17 to 43, joined the Polish Women's Auxiliary Air Force; 52 of them became officers and 110 non-commissioned officers. On 8 May 1945, 1137 served in the British Women's Auxiliary Air Force [13].

After the war, most volunteers did not return to Poland. Many because their families moved to the Soviet Union, due to the rearrangement of borders, or they were just married in Britain. Many remained with the Women's Auxiliary Air Force in the UK, which meant an additional two years of service. In the meantime, they could further train for various civic

jobs, seek employment or receive scholarships to various English universities and educational institutions. Additional organisations were formed in North America and Great Britain: in 1972 the PLSK-WAAF Section was established in Toronto under the leadership of Anna Ejbich, and in 1977, the Nottingham section was established and led by Zofia Bojko- Białkowska. In 2004, at the XXX. PLSK Congress, the Polish Women's Auxiliary Air Force was abolished [13], [14].

## 5. The most outstanding

### Joan Lily Amelia Hughes (1918–1993)

She was one of the first eight female pilots to join the Air Transport Reserve Air Force. By the end of the war, she had become one of the most experienced pilots with a license for all types of military aircraft. She flew almost 600 hours while serving in the ATA [5].

### Ruth Helen Kerly (1916–1992)

One of the two women who received praise during their service at the ATA. On June 25, 1944, a technical error occurred while flying a Spitfire, but she successfully landed in a field. There was minimal damage to the machine [1].

### Margaret Fairweather (1901–1944)

She was one of the top eight female ATA pilots, as well as the first woman to perform aerial activity on Spitfire aircraft. She had held a pilot's licence since 1931 and served as an instructor as a member of the Scottish Aviation Club. On April 3, 1944, she died in a plane crash [18].

### Wanda Szuwalska (1923–)

In 1943, she volunteered for the Air Force. In 1944 she was assigned to the Polish Women's Auxiliary Air Force. After completing the two-month training course, she served with the No. 300 (Bomber) Squadron at Faldingworth in the air traffic control tower. Her responsibilities included informing Polish personnel returning from combat flights of wind directions and the number of runways and parking spaces for Poles serving on four-engined Lancaster bombers. The office she was part of was tasked with preparing various reports. In November 1944, she was transferred to the Fighter Flight Command near London, where she was entrusted with the administration of the training and deployment flights of Polish fighter pilots and the control of the pilots' flight log [6], [16].

### Wanda Vrabetz (1924–2016)

On July 13, 1944, she joined the Polish Women's Auxiliary Air Force. On the same day, she began her two-month training to become a member of the British WAAF. After training, in September 1944, due to her previous studies (she studied pioneering), she was assigned to the Air Force Command of the Design Office of the Airport Construction Directorate.

She made technical drawings which were included in the instructions for the construction of airports and runways. After several months of service, she asked to attend a graduation preparation course. After graduating, she moved to Dunholme Lodge Air Base in 1946 and then to Framlingham in 1947. Here she waited for the formation of the Polish Air Force. She received the Air Medal award [17].

### Jadwiga Piłsudska- Jaraczewska (February 28, 1920 – November 16, 2014)

Jadwiga Piłsudska was born on February 28, 1920 in Warsaw as the younger daughter of Polish statesman and first Marshal of Poland, Józef Piłsudski. She was a fan of flying since childhood, obtaining her glider licence in 1937 and then continued her pilot training. In September 1939, she wanted to begin her studies in aeronautical engineering at the University of Warsaw, but the German invasion intervened. In Britain, she began her studies in architecture at the University of Cambridge. Meanwhile, she applied to the Air Transport Reserve Air Force, which she was only able to join in 1942, leaving her studies.

After receiving training in small aircraft, she was able to switch to fighter aircraft, such as Hurricane and Spitfire. Shortly afterwards, she was appointed Second Officer (equivalent to Flying Officer in the RAF), which allowed her to ferry Class IV bombers in areas of operations [7], [8].



Figure 1  
*Jadwiga Piłsudska with ATA officers [8]*

She left the Air Force in 1944 and began her studies at the Polish School of Architecture at the University of Liverpool, where she graduated in 1946 with a degree in architecture. She never applied for British citizenship, traveling with a so-called Nansen passport, with which she could go everywhere except to Poland. She returned home to Warsaw in 1990 with her husband, Andrzej Jaraczewski [8].

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## Nők a Brit Királyi Légierő kötelékében

*A II. világháború során nem csak férfiak szolgáltak a Brit Királyi Légierő kötelékében. Sir Kingsley Wood, légügyi miniszter létrehozta 1938-ban a Polgári Légi Őrséget (Civil Air Guard) a Brit Királyi Légierő feladatainak segítésére. 1939 júliusára a licencet szerzettek száma három- és négyezer közé tehető, valamint további tízezer pilóta állt kiképzés alatt (ebből 900 nő)*

**Kulcsszavak:** II. világháború, RAF, lengyel pilóták, nők

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