Home Front Transcript Episode 4: Anything-to-Anywhere

Theme in and under

Emily: Welcome to Home Front, a production of AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum sponsored by Lockheed Martin, I'm Emily.

In this four part series we're bringing you stories of civilian contributions to aviation during WWII. Today we're going 'across the pond' to learn about the Air Transport Auxiliary. A group of civilians, men and women from many different countries who served as ferry pilots in Britain during the War.

Theme slowly fades out

Emily: As we've heard in the American stories we've covered so far in this series, the U.S. officially entered the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The British entered the war much earlier than that, on September 3rd 1939.

Neville Chamberlain speech announcing declaration of war[1]*:*
"This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by 11 o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany."

Emily: With that declaration from Britain's prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, many Brits jumped to find ways they could contribute to the fight.

We spoke with two experts to learn the history of the Air Transport Auxiliary, the first is Richard Poad,

Richard: *"My name is Richard Poad. I'm speaking to you from Maidenhead Heritage Centre, which is home to an Air Transport Auxiliary museum with a huge collection, which I actually established in the middle 1990s with help from an American Lady Pilot."*

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1 https://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2022/02/recording-of-the-week-neville-chamberlain-and-king-george-vis-broadcasts-regarding-britain-declaring.html

Emily: The ATA actually started just before Britain declared war[2], with a few people who were already licensed to fly *and* owned their own planes.

Richard: *"One of these, uh, well off men, uh, who had his own aeroplane. In fact, in little airline of his own, he lobbied the powers that be and said, we, there are people like me who know how to fly aeroplanes.*

We're too old for the Royal Air Force, for the military, at over 25. Or we're unfit. Wear glasses, for instance. Or in one case only had one arm, or in another case only had one arm and only had one eye. But we do know how to fly aeroplanes. There must be something that we can do to contribute to the war effort when it happens.

And the authorities sat on this idea for a while, and then in the beginning of 1939, they suddenly woke up to the fact that there was gonna be a war. And actually they didn't have enough pilots in the RAF or the ones that they did have, they were going to need for combat flying rather than routine aviation flights.

And right at the end of August, uh, just before war broke out, literally days before, they decided to establish a new organization. The most important thing about it was that it was going to be a civilian organization, but it was going to support the military by carrying out routine communications flights, using, uh, volunteer private pilots and requisitioned light aeroplanes, which nowadays would be little Cessnas and little Pipers, uh, and whatever to move, uh, spare parts, medicines, military bigwigs around the country to wherever it need to go, and therefore release the military's own pilots for combat duties."

Emily: The ATA came together in just a few weeks at the end of August and beginning of September in 1939. Letters were sent to any man who had a private pilots license and at least 250 hours of flight time. That was about a thousand men[3].

Richard: *"On the 11th of September, they actually had interviewed, flight tested, and signed contracts with 29 of them. So they're moving fast. But they were all, they were certainly all over 40, and some of them were older than that. And, uh, the boss, uh, Mr. d'Erlanger, joked that ATA stood for Ancient and Tattered Airmen."*

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[2] https://atamuseum.org/
[3] British men at this point

Becky: *"The ATA was kind of a seat-of-the-pants operation. It was started very quickly."*

Emily: That's Becky Aikman,

Becky: *"I'm the author of Spitfires[4], the Story of the American Women Who Flew for Great Britain during World War II."*

"Great Britain realized that it had a real shortage of aircraft and a shortage of pilots. They were really desperate for help with both. They realized they would have to tap into pilots who weren't necessarily qualified for the Royal Air Force."

Emily: The Air Transport Auxiliary started by using civilian pilots and civilian aircraft for transporting important people and goods, surveying, and medical flights, but it was quickly clear that the real need came in ferrying military aircraft. And ATA began to stand for Anything-to-Anywhere.

Richard: *"Almost immediately they started doing some training on RAF aeroplanes. And then beginning to help move those around the country from one air base to another."*

Emily: It was also very quickly clear that the ancient and tattered pilots of Britain were going to need more reinforcements,[5] eight British women joined the ATA on January first 1940, a mere three months after the first men were contacted.

At that point, some of the ATA was fondly referred to as, the Atta-girls.

Becky: *"The first women to fly for the ATA were eight British women who started in early 1940, and they had to prove themselves because there was a lot of skepticism about whether women could do the job. They flew the lightest, most basic aircraft that were open cockpits in the middle of winter from the south into the north of Scotland.*

It was a brutal job. Then they had to take the train back overnight, sleeping in the aisles on their parachutes. And turn around and do it the next day. They knew they were being judged and they knew that only perfection would do. So perfection is what they gave the ATA."

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[4] https://www.beckyaikman.com/

[5] https://www.ata-ferry-pilots.org/index.php/tag-list-women-pilots There were 168 total women pilots in the ATA, most of which were English.

Emily: Word of those eight women quickly spread and many more British women would join, along with pilots from 25 other countries[6] including 24 American women[7] who were led, at least in the beginning, by famed aviator Jackie Cochran.

Jackie hoped American women flying for the Brits would prove to the American Army that women could fly military aircraft in the United States.

One of the American pilots was Roberta Sandoz, who recalled in a 2000 oral history[8][9] for NASA that Jackie first heard of the women of the Air Transport Auxiliary in a speech

Roberta: *And the sentence that really turned Jackie on was, "We are so desperate for pilots, we are even trying an experimental group of women." British women were flying trainers at that time.*

So she got herself to England and made arrangements to bring, it was some grand number like fifty qualified pilots, and, of course, there weren't that many. But I was one of that group. The British sent a check pilot to Montreal, and we went to Montreal. And some of the most qualified people, I think, didn't go to England, which is a shame. But those were openly chauvinist days, and if you argued with a check pilot, that was considered inability to fly, I guess."

Emily: A check pilot is like the examiner that rides with you in the car when you take your driving test, but in a plane. To see if you're up to their flying standards. Another woman summoned to Montreal was Ann Wood, heard here in a 1997 oral history from the archives of Texas Women's University[10].

Ann: *"And, uh, in January I do get this marvelous three footer telegram from Jackie Cochran. And, um, basically she says, you know, you, I believe she sent it to every person in the then Civil Aviation Administration who had a minimum of 350 hours, every woman. And then she had this very elaborate system of interviewing and everything Jackie did*

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[6] https://www.ata-ferry-pilots.org/index.php/pilots-by-country
[7] More than 200 American Men also served in the ATA over the course of the war
[8] https://historycollection.jsc.nasa.gov/JSCHistoryPortal/history/oral_histories/NASA_HQ/Aviatrix/LeveauxRBS/LeveauxRBS_3-25-00.htm
[9] More oral histories from ATA pilots can be found here https://archive.atamuseum.org/audio.php
[10] More of Ann's papers can be viewed here https://twudigital.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16283coll4/id/2/

she did to the nines so that I was told initially that I could be interviewed, but I might have to wait a while because there were many more qualified."

Emily: Ann was working as a flying instructor at the time, having done most of her pilot training through the Civilian Pilot Training Program. Roberta had less experience and had to work a little harder for her telegram.

Roberta: *Having grown up on the Canadian border, I was very impressed with English people in Canada. You know, starry-eyed teenager, I thought, "Oh, aren't they wonderful. Don't they sound terrific." So I wanted to go help England fight their war, win their war, which started, if you remem—you won't remember, but it started in September '39. So I made myself ridiculous by writing to the British Air Ministry and the RAF, and really didn't get any response until one from Canada, who told me to get in touch with Jacqueline Cochran. That would have been about October November '41.*

Eventually, I got a telegram from her. Those were the days when you received a telegram, you sat down before you opened it. You know, telegrams were a couple of lines, usually bad news. Well, in Cochran style, this was a page and a half. [Laughter] And the stuff that really thrilled you, and there was the word "secret" in there and "Do not contact the press." (whispers) Really undercover stuff.

Emily: Once the American women had passed their check flight in Montreal, they were shipped in small groups across the Atlantic. At the time German submarines were preying on any Allied ships on the crossing so pilots were assigned four or five to a convoy to avoid losing all of the pilots in one sinking.

Once they got to England the pilots started training. First, navigation.

Ann: *And the training consisted of flying around in a Miles Magister, which was a, a little single engine, underpowered little fella.*

And, uh, our missions were strictly, uh, navigational to go to sites from which we would be taking aircraft or delivering aircraft. And, uh, the whole navigational system in England was so entirely different than America, uh, in scale. That we had to learn and we had no aids, you know, there were no navigational facilities and no radio, so you had to be very good at your map reading. And their maps were absolutely superb. They would

de--delineate a forest so clearly that you would know that you were over that forest if you were, 'cause it was all squared up or just the image that it made.

Emily: Once the pilots learned to navigate Britain, they started to ferry airplanes. First training airplanes then more and more complex aircraft

Richard: *There is a, a, a myth that ATA pilots never had any training. That's absolute rubbish. They did, it was very comprehensive. It's important to realize that they were not thrown in at the deep end when they first joined and asked to go and fly 70 different sorts of aeroplane. You started at the bottom with a simple trainer aeroplane. You know, it's got one engine, it flies slowly. And then when they'd done a certain number of hours.*

Then they'd move up to group two, which was the biggest group of the whole lot. That was the single engine fighters, which included American fighters like the P51 Mustang, uh, and, um, naval aircraft like the Corsair, which had, uh folding wings, uh, and so on. And in each group there was a generic aeroplane the did as the fighter. So for the group one fighter cohort of aeroplanes, they used a North American trainer, the North American Harvard, the Brits called it and that did for everything. So it's experience that takes you up the ladder.

The next stage up was twin engine aeroplanes, which were just air taxis as it were. And then there's the operational twins, which included American bombers like the Mitchell and the DB7-- the Boston, and the Havoc, which is group four. And then there's a group five, which is four engine bombers, uh, including American bombers like the Fortress and the Liberator and so on. And there's a class six, which is flying boats."

Emily: Once a pilot passed a check flight in one airplane in a class they could fly all the airplanes in that class.

It's kind of like how a regular driver's license allows you to drive a car or a pick up truck, but you need a Commercial Driver's License to drive a school bus or a 16-wheeler.

This means that if a pilot checked out in a Spitfire, a class two airplane, they could ferry Corsairs and Mustangs and other small fighter planes too. Even if they hadn't flown every airplane in that class before. Once they were comfortable in class two, they could try for a check flight in class three all the way up to class six.

Jackie Cochran didn't make it past training before she returned to the United States to establish the WASP, the Women's Airforce Service Pilots

The pilots who did make it in the Air Transport Auxiliary would often fly a type of airplane they'd never flown before with the help of a handy little booklet that told them specifics on each airplane.

Becky: *"Every morning they would be assigned aircraft to fly. And another crazy dangerous thing about this job was that they were required to fly up to 147 different models of aircraft.*

They carried around a little booklet that fit in their pocket with one page on each aircraft that sort of explained the basics. Here's how you take off. Here's how you land. Here's how fast it goes. They would often study this in the cockpit for a few minutes before they would strap in and take off. So it took people with a lot of nerve and a lot of confidence to do this work."

Roberta: *"We were given a marvelous little book called Pilots Handling Notes, which would clamp on your thigh, page for each aircraft. It gave you the maximums and minimums of temperature, speed, pressure, everything you really needed to know to take off and land without killing yourself. If you kept within the guideline."*

Emily: And that's how it would go, every day. Pilots got two days off about every two weeks. Often they were grounded by weather. Since each pilot was responsible for themselves and the airplanes they ferried, it was their call to fly or not, in bad weather.

But a regular day for the ATA looked like waking up in their billet, which was usually a local family's spare room, reporting to the airfield and receiving their assignment which would say what airplane they were taking and where.

Roberta: *I went to a pool called—it was No. 15 at Hamble[11] near Southampton. We were at a Spitfire factory, and as soon as the test pilot hopped out of a new machine, we got in and took it away, because it was just before radar became really operative and it was possible for a German sneak raider to come in at sea level and shoot up a line of new aircraft very easily with one torpedo. So we moved very quickly. We took them to a*

[11] Hamble was a women-only pool. All the pilots flying out of there were women from all different countries.

squadron, and quite often picked up a damaged aircraft to take inland to a maintenance unit to be repaired. A few weeks later, brought the repaired aircraft back to the squadron.

It was fun with new airplanes, brand-new ones, and frequently hairy with the damaged ones."

Emily: There were Air Transport Auxiliary ferry pools from Southampton at the far southern edge of England, just across the channel from France and all the way up to Lossiemouth near Inverness in the Scottish Highlands.

Pilots would take up to five or six flights a day in good weather and then if they could they'd often return to their home base on a train and get up and do it all over again.

If the weather was bad or they had long flights they might end up staying overnight at a different ferry pool[12].

It was dangerous work. Many of the airplanes had seen combat and were being ferried to and from factories for repairs. Even new planes were not always built perfectly, or they were incomplete. Some new airplanes didn't get all their equipment until after they'd been delivered.

An ATA ferry flight was often an airplane's first or longest test flight. There were a lot of crashes and near misses due to faulty aircraft.

Becky: *"The aircraft were being turned out of factories very quickly, so a lot of them had fatal flaws and often failed in the air resulting in crashes. The aircraft coming back from the front were shot full of bullet holes. They had parts taped together. They had doors missing. Often the pilots had no idea what could go wrong until they were high in the sky, and they also had to fly without instruments because often the instruments weren't installed yet.*

But the ATA had a policy that they should fly visually[13]. This resulted in many pilots cracking into mountains or church steeples or missing the airfield running outta fuel. One in seven pilots who served in the ATA died in the course of their work."

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[12] This could be challenging for the women as there weren't always women's quarters for them to stay in

[13] In practice, if a pilot could fly on instruments that could save their lives. Strictly speaking they weren't supposed to but any skill you had that could keep you and your plane safe would be used (see *Spitfires, by Becky Aikman)*

Emily: One incident Roberta was a part of could have ended in catastrophe if not for her quick thinking and training.

Becky: *"A fairly typical situation that she encountered was that she took off in a Spitfire fighter and the engine was over revving, so it was going too high and couldn't be lowered because it was yet another defective aircraft.*

Um, she knew that the aircraft would catch fire or explode if this continued. So she realized she had to shut down all the power and glide into a landing, which fortunately she had learned to do in California. She, her first instructor, often would switch off the engine unexpectedly and expect her to get the aircraft down.

That training was really helpful and she did manage to land. That was a really typical kind of experience. They all faced many dire situations where they could have been killed if they didn't act quickly and come up with a good option for getting outta trouble."

Emily: If a pilot did get injured or die because of their work, they were given full honors and their families were compensated. Which was much better than if the same happened to you while you were serving as a WASP or in the Civil Air Patrol back in the states.

As a WASP[14] or CAP pilot, you were considered civilian, and as such, not entitled to any government benefits. If you died or you were injured serving with them, your family received no support or compensation.

The danger was a part of the service with all the civilian pilots. And the American Women of the ATA learned to take it with the British stiff upper lip.

Interviewer: *Did you ever feel you were in danger?*

Roberta: *I was scared to death all the time, (laughs) mostly because I was flying over my head.*

[14] Notably when WASP pilots were killed in service their colleagues had to take up a collection to ship their bodies home to their families for burial (see *The Women with Silver Wings* by Kate Landdeck)

Emily: And through all of the danger and fear, the women of the ATA gained something that wouldn't be seen again for decades, a legal right to equal pay[15].

Becky: *"When the United States women arrived in 1942, they were paid 20% less than men. Frankly the Americans were pretty excited about that. It was a lot better than anything they could get back home, and they considered it very good pay.*

By, um, 1943, the, uh, head of the women's division of the ATA lobbied Parliament to grant equal pay to these pilots saying they were doing the exact same work as men. The British public was very grateful to these pilots who did this very dangerous work.

And so that law passed and it became the first equal pay law in Great Britain allowing women to have this benefit. And it was many, many years before anything else of its kind passed."

Emily: For the most part the pilots, men and women- young and old were respected by the British public.

Roberta: *"It's hard to explain in the year 2000[16] how wonderful it was to be considered valuable and useful for things other than housewifery and motherhood. Anyone in uniform was treated with the greatest deference.*

At one time we had a rush order to get aircraft to Scotland and for, oh, it seemed forever, but probably only a couple of weeks, we'd take an aircraft up, come back on the night train, and we could usually sleep in the baggage car, but not always. And people would move over and sit in the aisles so we could lie down. One time I slept in the aisle with my head on my parachute. When I woke up there was a blanket over me, which was very nice."

Becky: *"All of the women flew because they absolutely loved to fly. They loved that feeling of freedom. They loved that feeling of control. They loved that it was challenging. They loved being in the war because they could use that skill that they had to do good for the world.*

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[15] https://atamuseum.org/women-join-and-do-a-mans-job/ the next UK law requiring equal pay for equal work was passed in 1970 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1970/41/enacted

[16] This interview was recorded in 2000

The ATA was formed because they really needed help. They would accept all nationalities. They would accept all races. They would accept women. And there was very little evidence that any of them were treated poorly. Uh, it was really merit based. People who could do the work, did the work, and they were well paid for it and well respected for it. For the most part.

Nothing's perfect, of course. I mean, occasionally these pilots would land somewhere and people would say, 'what's a little lady like you doing flying this aircraft?' And one of the British women[17] had a wonderful answer for that when she was flying a Sterling Bomber, one of the largest aircraft in the world at the time.

She said, 'the idea is for the plane to lift me, not for me to lift the plane.'"

[Music button]

Emily: In the spring of 1943 the pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary knew something big was coming

Becky: *"Everyone knew it was coming and everyone could see the preparations. In particular the ATA pilots, because in the weeks up to D-Day, they were suddenly flying a whole different range of new aircraft they had never seen before: troop transport aircraft, uh, typhoon fighters, which were used for close in fighting to support troops on the ground, not from up high, uh, uh, amphibious, uh, aircraft. They knew something big was happening. One of the Americans named Nancy Miller wrote that she flew 18 different brand new types of aircraft in the few weeks just before D-Day.*

So they saw it coming and on D-Day itself, they could hear this tremendous drone. Of the bombers going over on their way. They had seen in the days before the men lining the roads with their vehicles getting ready to go. So they suddenly realized, this is it, it's happening. And they expected, wow, this will be a busy day.

In fact, there was almost nothing for them to do. They had done their job in advance. All the aircraft were where they needed to be. And the air support for D-Day made a tremendous difference. The allies really owned the skies that day because of the advance

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[17] This quote is attributed to Joan Hughes, the youngest (and shortest) of the original eight British Women ATA pilots https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/online-exhibitions/air-transport-auxiliary/joan-hughes/

work they had done. Um, and that had to help in what was, of course, a, a brutal and difficult battle, but one that the allies wound up the victors."

Emily: And although in hindsight it may seem like D-Day was the beginning of the end, it was anything but for the pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary.

Becky: *"The work for the ATA only got more intense over time and there was a certain amount of it, uh, geared towards specific battles, for example, The Battle of the Bulge was when Germany turned the tables and started to push back. It was during very bad weather over the, uh, end of year holidays and the ATA couldn't get aircraft where they were needed to be. They were all on notice to be ready to go at any moment. If there was any clearing in the air, they would take off then.*

They were. Flying, flying, flying whenever they could to try to get the, uh, air support into the skies over the Battle of the Bulge. And one reason it went so poorly at first for the Allies was that they couldn't get the air support. Ultimately, when they did again, that turned the tide again. So there was still a lot of really important and urgent work to be done, and the ATA kept growing during this time."

Emily: Finally in 1945 when the war was over, the work of the Air Transport Auxiliary could be tallied up and their contribution counted.

Richard: *"The Spitfire, for instance, they ferried 57,286 times. Wow. Absolutely. Wow. Remember, each aeroplane was, new aeroplane was flown twice before it got to the RAF.*

Uh, but there are, there are figures like, here, let me find the figure for the Mustang, the P51 fighter, which they all loved 4,000… just under 5,000 ferried and that didn't arrive until the middle of the war. Um, the bombers, the Wellington Bomber I mentioned was, uh, the, the highest number of all the bombers. And that was around about 15,000, something like that. And at the other end of the scale, they flew some flying boats, but the total number was only 966.

So the, the ferrying job was absolutely critical. And it went on after the end of the war in Europe, and in fact on after the end of the war in Japan too. Because the RAF knew it was gonna shrink and they'd got thousands of aeroplanes they didn't need anymore. So what did they do with them? Well, they took them to graveyards. Um, aircraft like there are, I believe in the Mojave Desert in California for dead airliners, you know"

Emily: By the end of the war, Roberta had already left the ATA though she happily remained in England,

Interviewer: *How long were you in England?*

Roberta: *Eight years.*

Interviewer: *Goodness.*

Roberta: *I married an Englishman and my first two children were born there.*

Interviewer: *And how did you meet your husband?*

Roberta: *I'm a little ashamed to admit I was a pick-up. [Laughter] We were in Shepherds, which is a pub but it's in Mayfair, a very high-class pub. I was with someone else who outranked my husband considerably. But I had "U.S.A." on my shoulder. And Peter simply came over and introduced himself and said he knew America well. And I said, "Fine." It turned out, I found out later, he had been a boy at camp in Upstate New York one season. [Laughter]*

Emily: But the marriage led to an unexpected pregnancy

Interviewer: *And you mentioned you were there for eight years, and were you flying the whole time that you were there?*

Roberta: *Oh, no.*

Interviewer: *At what point did you stop?*

Roberta: *When I learned I was pregnant. It was not quite as possible to plan your family in those days. I didn't expect to be pregnant. But our first child is an M.D., and fifty-five. I think that's right.*

Interviewer: *Did you miss flying the airplanes after?*

Roberta*: Yes, missed terribly. I did some volunteering with ATA. I miss it a lot."*

Emily: Ann Wood flew on to the end of the war and afterward, helping to lay the airplanes to rest.

Becky: *"Ann Wood flew a final flight on, um, one of the largest aircrafts in the world, uh, an amphibious aircraft being flown to Scotland to be either towed out to sea and dumped or just left on a beach somewhere. It was one of the last flights she did, and I'm sure it reminded her of how she was concerned that she would now not be useful anymore after the war."*

Emily: Ann tried to leverage her experience and connections into a diplomatic flying job[18] but that never panned out. She came back to the United States and began to work in the airlines

Becky: *"Eventually after the war, it all finally did pay off as she became the first woman vice president of a United States Airline, Pan-Am. And had a, an excellent career that way, and she owned her own plane and continued to fly.*

I will tell you as I read her letters, she was always so cool and collected and she had had a wonderful career with the ATA, flown everything that moved was so respected by everyone got to stay on when others were let go as the war ended. But in those months reading her letters and her diaries and her increasing desperation, would she be able to find work that meant something to her. It wasn't easy, and it took a while after the war, before she got settled."

Emily: Ann's experience was very common, even though the women had proved they could do very hard and dangerous work they were left out of the post-war aviation economy. Some of them started their own aviation businesses[19], but it would take decades for women to be allowed to fly in military or commercial settings again.

The pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary were largely forgotten after the war. Swallowed up in all the history, heroics and sacrifice of the period.

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[18] She was going to be a flying assistant for a diplomat but the U.S. wouldn't approve it in part because she was more qualified than the diplomat

[19] Several of them also flew in the movies

Today, people like Richard at the Maidenhead Heritage Centre, Becky with her book, and others, have written and spoken about all the ATA accomplished during the war. They keep the memories alive.

There are many, *many* resources[20] to learn more about the stories, the people, and the contribution made by the amazing pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary.

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This is the final episode of Home Front, an AirSpace limited series. To learn more about the Civilian Pilot Training Program, the war workers, and the Civil Air Patrol go back and listen to the earlier episodes in this series.

We'll be back in November with brand new episodes of AirSpace.

---Credits---
Home Front is a production of AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

Home Front is produced by Jennifer Weingart and mixed by Tarek Fouda. Narrated by Dr. Emily Martin. Our Managing Producer is Erika Novak, our production coordinator is Joe Gurr and our Social Media Manager is Amy Stamm.

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Additional thanks to the late Lettice Curtis and her book The Forgotten Pilots,

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[20] See all the links in this transcript :)