

Eleanor Lettice Curtis

“That Magnificent Woman in her Flying Machines”

By Lyn Tyler



Eleanor Lettice Curtis was born in Devon in 1915. She came from a wealthy, privileged background. After studying Mathematics at St Hilda's College, Oxford, one of the few women to do so, she decided to learn how to fly which she described as being “infinitely more preferable than sitting behind a desk.”

In 1937, she joined Yapton Flying Club in Ford, West Sussex, and obtained her pilot's license in the same year! She also gained her commercial pilot's license with her first commercial job being with CL Air Services where she took aerial photographs for mapping purposes. She then moved on to working in the Ordnance Survey Research Department.

Having purchased her own aircraft, in her spare time she took part in various air races which were popular at the time. However, Lettice, as she preferred to be called, was living through dangerous times. It was clear by the late 1930s that war with Germany was probable.

Incredible developments had been made in aviation since the First World War and it was obvious that air warfare would be crucial in any future conflict. The civilian population would also be targeted and airfields were therefore quickly constructed throughout the country.

In Lichfield, construction began in 1938 at Fradley, just a few miles from the centre of the city. Always referred to locally as Fradley Aerodrome, it became officially known as RAF Lichfield and was no ordinary airbase. It was to become the busiest and most important one in the whole of the West Midlands. Initially, the site of a maintenance unit (MU 51) it also became an Operational Training Unit (27 OTU) where young men came from all corners of the Commonwealth to learn to fly together as bomber crews, with the majority of them coming from Australia.

In 1941, Lettice also became directly involved in the war when she joined the Air Transport Auxiliary. It was a civilian organisation and initially only male pilots were asked to join. They were usually men who had flown during the First World War but who were now too old for military service. They acted as ferry pilots delivering battle damaged aircraft from squadrons to maintenance units to be quickly repaired and flown back, battle ready. They also collected new aircraft to be checked and fitted out internally, before being flown on to squadrons around the country. The problem was there were not enough pilots to meet the demands. So, after much deliberation on the part of the government, women were asked to join as well.

They responded enthusiastically and 163 female pilots were recruited. It was extremely dangerous. They flew in all weathers, were unarmed and would have been an easy target for enemy aircraft. They had no radios and often had to find their way from the identification of

landmarks, or by following rivers or railway lines, which in bad weather often proved to be almost impossible. They had to learn to fly different types of aircraft, the only guidance being a small booklet entitled “Ferry Pilots Notes”.

Lettice began by delivering smaller aircraft, such as Tiger Moths, which were used for training purposes, but such were her flying skills that she quickly graduated to flying all categories and was the first woman to qualify to fly the four engine heavy bombers like the Halifax and Lancasters.



Whilst she was a frequent visitor to RAF Lichfield, it was still considered unusual for a woman to fly. Lettice often told the story of landing a damaged Wellington bomber at one particular airfield and, on climbing out of the aircraft, she saw the shock on the faces of the ground crew, who asked where the pilot was. When she explained that she was flying solo, they would not believe her and insisted on looking inside the bomber just to check!

After the war, she had a very successful career as an Aeronautical Engineer, which was a spectacular achievement for a woman at that time. She worked as a technician and flight test observer, at the military establishment at Boscombe Down. She then moved to Fairey Aviation, where she held the post of Senior Flight Engineer.

Lettice was a founder member of the British Women Pilots Association and took an active part in air races, establishing a new international women's record for 100 kilometres on a closed circuit, doing 313.07 mph. In October 1992, she even qualified to fly helicopters and continued flying in her retirement. However, at the age of 81, she voluntarily grounded herself and gave up flying. She died in July 2014 at the age of 99.

She was a pioneering female pilot, aeronautical engineer, and arguably, the most talented female pilot of the Second World War.