

Jean Lennox Bird – a vital link in women’s aviation history.

This short web article is to mark 29th April 2017, the 60th anniversary of the death of Jean Lennox Bird. She was one of the British Women Pilots’ Association’s (BWPA’s) first thirty founding members and an important personality in the post-war aviation world as it developed, especially in its approach to women in the aviation industry.

Jean Lennox Bird was born in 1912. She learnt to fly at Hamble, in 1930, so that she was an experienced pilot by the outbreak of war in 1939. Initially she was commissioned in the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force, 1940-41 and resigned her commission to become an Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) First Officer on 1st August 1941. She then flew ferrying aircraft until disbandment of the ATA on 30th November 1945. She and good number of her ATA colleagues, along with a mix of other women pilots and *ab initios*, joined the Women’s Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (WRAFVR), which at the time (1947) was at least part-fulfilling the RAF’s promise to train women aircrew, a whole different story. Jean was the first of these highly-experienced women pilots to qualify for their RAF Wings, that were awarded in her case on 20th September 1952 at Redhill Aerodrome.



National Portrait Gallery Image of Pilot Officer Jean Bird WRAFVR

In parallel with her reserves service Jean was flying commercially on photographic survey work for Meridian Air Maps. It was on 29th April 1957, 60 years ago, she was killed in the crash of a Miles Aerovan G-AISF, that she was piloting from Manchester (Ringway) Airport. She was surveying the proposed route of a new road at the time that she was killed.

Miles Aerovan 4, G-AISF, shown in 1955, in which Jean Lennox Bird was killed in 1957.



By the date of her death Jean Lennox Bird was a very experienced British women pilot. She had about 3,100 hours, in close to 90 different aircraft types, including high performance military aircraft as she qualified for her RAF wings in the reserves. She held a senior commercial licence, an instructor's rating and many other licences. In the world of private aviation, she was known as a part-time instructor at Croydon, with Surrey Flying Club. She competed in air races and held her Silver C gliding certificate.

The death of one of the newly formed BWPA's experienced, unselfish, founder members in a flying accident, plainly shook the BWPA membership, as well as wider the flying world, where she was known. Jean Lennox Bird shared her experience willingly at early BWPA flying and social events, so in early 1958 the BWPA set up a fund in her memory – the letter asking BWPA Members:

“ After a great deal of thought, the British Women Plots' Association, amongst whose members are many of her friends, felt that a trophy would be a way of expressing gratitude to Jean and of remembering the ever enthusiastic help she gave to young pilots – the trophy to be awarded to a British woman pilot who has achieved a noteworthy performance in aviation.”



The jade vase purchased in her memory, as the BWPA's Jean Lennox Bird Trophy, is shown left on its award in 1987 to Iris Goodyer.

It was awarded with a pendant that could be worn by the recipient, box in the picture

More later, about what happened with the BWPA's first and most prestigious trophy next, in a few months ready for the 60th Anniversary of its first award. As the BWPA's first award, it has a long line of significant women aviator recipients.

Most on-line information about Jean Lennox Bird is in association with her service in the RAF reserves. The BWPA holds documentary records of Jean's, and other women pilots', wider flying activity at a time when women aircrew were establishing their place in the rapidly changing aviation world.