



Freydis Sharland, 87, is one of the unsung heroines of World War Two. Here, she shares memories of her amazing life with Helen Etheridge

ORDINARY PEOPLE

Extraordinary LIVES

■ Few have heard of the secret squadron of female pilots who delivered fighter planes around bases during World War Two. Part of the Air Transport Auxiliary, they were unarmed, had no instruments or radios to guide them and were at constant risk of enemy attack. They were pioneers and without them we may never have won the war. Freydis Sharland (above with husband Tim), a First Officer with the ATA, was one of these women.



Halcyon days

◆ I was born and brought up in Cambridge with my two brothers; Derek, two years older, and Robin, ten years younger. We had an idyllic childhood in the countryside playing in the fields. This photo shows me with Robin at our grandparents' house in Surrey, I think I was about 17.



My father, the champion

◆ This is my father, Charles Simmonds Leaf, a keen sailor. As a teenager, I travelled with my family to Kiel, Germany, for the 1936 Olympics, where my father competed in the sailing events. The picture shows him and his fellow team mates on their boat, Lalage.



Propaganda rally

◆ While we were there, two new U-boats (military submarines) were launched, which I thought was odd in the middle of the Olympics. Hitler came to host a rally and we were in the crowd. Everybody was shouting "Heil Hitler" and the atmosphere made me want to shout it too, but my mother looked at me in fury so I didn't. My father hated Hitler so much that although he won the gold in the six-metre class, he refused to go to Berlin to collect his medal.



Learning to fly

◆ My father and brother, Derek, learned to fly at Marshall's Flying School on the outskirts of Cambridge. I'd always had a sense of adventure and begged my father to let me learn too, but at first he refused. However, I pestered him so much he finally agreed. This is Derek and I at the flying school in 1938. I had 12 hours of training before I flew solo for the first time.

First Officer Leaf

◆ When the war started in 1939, Derek went off to fight and I joined the Air Transport Auxiliary. I was posted to RAF Cosford, near Birmingham, where I was a member of No 12 Ferry Pilots' Pool, one of only two such pools staffed entirely by women. My first job was to ferry a Tiger Moth up to a base in Shropshire, but unfortunately I went the wrong way. I got there in the end!

Here I am in my first officer uniform, which meant I'd qualified to fly all types of planes except four-engined bombers. The second picture shows my pilot's log book. During the war I flew some 1,500 hours on a great variety of plane operations.



Flying solo

◆ Here I am in the cockpit of a Fairchild Argus, although my favourite aeroplane was the Spitfire as it was so quick. During all my years with the ATA I was lucky not to encounter any Germans. Our greatest enemy was the weather. Lots of my friends lost their lives by crashing into hills in poor conditions. The next morning their names would be scrubbed off the board in the office, and the place would be horribly quiet. By the end of the war, I'd lost not only friends but my brother Derek and seven cousins. Despite this, part of me was sorry the adventure was over.



Married life

◆ This pair shows me on our honeymoon on Mozambique, and Tim on our farm in Zambia – then called Northern Rhodesia – where we lived afterwards. We had sheep, cows and lots of fruit. Luckily, Tim didn't mind me flying, so I renewed my licence and took several trips across Africa until I fell pregnant with our first child, Virginia, now 51. Eventually we returned to the UK where we bought a small farm in Buckinghamshire and our second daughter, Angela 48, was born, followed by our son, Charley, 47.

John Lawrence, Rex Features

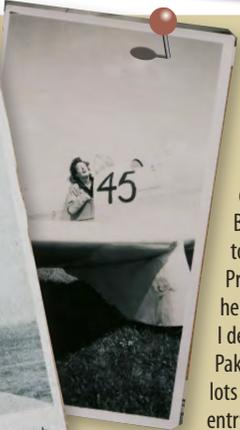
A full-time mum

◆ Here we all are at Tim's nephew's wedding in 1965. I gave up flying until Virginia was 17. I think Tim was worried I was going to get killed and leave them to look after themselves! But as soon as I could, I went back to the air and returned to working with the female cadets. I retired at 60, but bought a microlight, and kept flying until I was 72!



The queen of speed

◆ After the war, I became a trainer with the Women's Junior Air Corps, teaching young girls to fly. Around 1952, I began racing planes. I painted 45 – my racing number – on the side of this plane myself. In 1954, I became the British Air Racing Champion – the first woman to hold the title. I was awarded my cup by John Profumo, before the scandal about him broke – he seemed very nice! Around the same time, I delivered a Tempest aircraft single-handedly to Pakistan. The flight took a fortnight and included lots of stopovers. When I got there, I was refused entry into the officers' mess because I was a woman.



CONGRATULATIONS.—From South Africa we hear with pleasure of the engagement of Miss Freydis Leaf. She will marry Mr. T. H. A. Sharland on New Year's Eve at St. Agnes', Kloof, Natal. Miss Leaf, who was Air Racing Champion for 1954 hopes to continue her interest in aviation.

A South African wedding

◆ The following year, in September 1955, I was travelling to South Africa by ship to visit my brother, Robin, when I met Tim Sharland. He was a lieutenant with the British Army, but had left to farm in Africa. We got on extremely well and married just a few months later on New Year's Eve 1955 near Durban.



Row, row, rowing our boat

◆ In 1989, our daughter, Virginia moved to Australia with her husband Michael. We've been out to visit them six times. We love travelling anywhere in fact. Here we are on a little boat we built to sail along the Thames near our home in Oxfordshire.

50 fabulous years!

◆ This is Tim and I at our 50th wedding anniversary party last year. It was a wonderful occasion. We celebrated our marriage, our three children and our nine grandchildren. Although we are quite different people, Tim and I still get on very well after all these years. The cottage where we live now lies in the shadow of an aerodrome and our days are punctuated by the noise of planes. I love the sound, it takes me back to days gone by.



Did you have wartime memories to share? Email editorial@candis.co.uk