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Lives Lived

PHILIPPA ROWE GRAY

Pilot, aircraft engineer and draftswoman. Born in Devonshire, England, Aug. 4, 1905; died in Ottawa, Nov. 15, 1997, of heart failure, aged 92.

SHE was a proper English lady who did whatever was necessary out of her keen sense of duty. And if that meant jumping off the wing of a biplane over Belgium for a flying circus, then that's what Philippa Gray would do. It made no difference to her that she was filling in for a man who had just been killed performing the same feat.

Perhaps a long line of eccentric ancestors spurred this young woman to pursue aviation. Her family tree included Edward III and his wife, Philippa of Hainault; her grandfather was Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould, a well-known collector of folklore, perhaps best known for writing the lyrics to the hymn *Onward Christian Soldiers*. He and his wife, Grace, whose Yorkshire accent he expunged, were said to have inspired G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Philippa's father, Philip Rowe, was a Devonshire landowner.

She came of age in the 1920s, the flapper era, when women were becoming more assertive. It was also the Wild West of civil aviation, a time of aerial barnstorming, invented by pilots determined to support themselves and their passion for flying by travelling across the countryside in groups or solo, offering both rides and displays of stunt flying.

In 1919, when the Avro aircraft company was travelling around Britain promoting aviation, Philippa and a cousin dared each other to take a flight. She was 14 and the ride cost five shillings. Ten years later, she was flying the same airplane, an Avro 504K, as a licenced pilot, one of hundreds of women pilots in Britain.

Getting a pilot's licence in the 1920s only required about 15 hours of flight time, but the pilot also had to have a working knowledge of the engine. So Philippa (known as Flip) started earning her ground engineer's certificate as well, which took her to Blackfriars, for a six-month apprenticeship that involved racing aircraft. She didn't graduate from the course: She married her flying instructor, James Gray, instead. She then joined his flying circus as a pilot and engine mechanic and, as luck would have it, a parachutist.

Contracted by the Belgian government to perform barnstorming stunts as a way to promote aviation in that country, the Grays performed in France and Germany as well. During one stunt in Belgium with King Leopold in attendance, a parachutist plunged to his death. Without blinking an eye, Mrs. Gray volunteered to take his place, even though she had never trained to do the stunt. She continued to be a parachutist until a man was found to replace her. She performed her last jump when she was five months pregnant with her oldest child, Anne. But after her daughter was born, she couldn't see "compromising my family for my silly whims."

In the early 1930s, James, Philippa and Anne moved to Canada. (The couple's daughter Fiona and their son, Malcolm, were born in Canada.) They opened The Aviation Shop in Toronto, where they sold navigation equipment and clothing, with a women's department that Philippa directed. They also acted as a sales agent for the Bulte aircraft and Renard aero engines.

Tall, long-legged, with carrot-red hair and blue eyes, Mrs. Gray didn't possess the fiery temper associated with redheads. "She was a gentle woman with a will of iron," her son Malcolm said, and she used that will to get the jobs she wanted. For instance, she wasn't a trained draftsman, yet she talked her way into a job at Orenda Engines Inc., in Malton, Ont., where she ended up a draftsman for such engines as the Iroquois, which powered the Avro Arrow, thought to be the world's fastest interceptor/fighter in the mid-1950s.

When the Avro Arrow project, Canada's magnificent opportunity to become a leader in aviation design, was abruptly closed by John Diefenbaker's Conservative government in 1959, Mrs. Gray continued her work as a draftsman in non-aviation fields.

In her later years, she didn't dwell on or live in the past. She faced life straight on and continued to do whatever was required of her. While driving in Toronto one day, she came upon a car accident in which she found a little girl who had stopped breathing. Mrs. Gray reached into her purse, pulled out a comb and cut into the girl's throat. The makeshift tracheotomy enabled the girl to breathe and saved her life.

Philippa Gray may have had her head in the clouds but her feet were firmly planted on the ground.

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Philippa Gray in 1921.