

Diana Barnato -Walker
The Powder Compact Incident

Born in 1918 Diana Barnato was the daughter of playboy “Bentley Boy” racing driver Woolf Barnato and his wife Dorothy. The Barnato family, who were extremely wealthy, had made their considerable fortune in the diamond mines of South Africa. Consequently, Diana had something of a gilded upbringing being a debutante and had the means to learn to fly privately before the Second World War broke out. She was an extremely attractive young woman and this contributed to her persona.

Wanting to do her bit, Diana was an early applicant in a bid to fly aircraft for the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA), formed in February 1940. This organisations duties were to oversee the ferrying of mostly military aircraft from manufacturing, maintenance, repair and other centres to RAF operational stations. Diana was one of the first female pilots to be accepted into the ATA.

There is a perception, foisted particularly by the media, to represent the ATA as an all female organisation. This of course is manifestly untrue and a gross distortion of history. The vast majority of the ATA comprised male pilots and female pilots only ever represented a small proportion (less than 15%)of the entire ATA organisation. However, this in no way diminishes the tremendous contribution made by female ATA pilots during the war, several of them losing their lives in the process, including the famous aviatrix Amy Johnson. Far more books have been written about and by female pilots of the ATA, and almost nothing about the vast majority of men who also risked their lives ferrying aircraft. Glamour rather than the grim reality of the wartime ATA has distorted the facts. As can probably be discerned the author feels quite strongly on this issue.

In her autobiography, *Spreading My Wings*, Diana relates the the incident of the Powder Compact, which is very much a story told against herself. One day Diana was detailed to fly a particular Spitfire from a centre to an RAF station. All machines ferried by the ATA lacked radios, armament and ammunition. It also was strictly forbidden for ATA pilots to indulge in aerobatics. Diana, however, decided to indulge in some fun with her delivery Spitfire!

Diana decided to roll or invert the Spitfire, and having got it on its back could not bring it back to a normal flying attitude! Whilst the aircraft was inverted the powder compact tucked into the top pocket of her flying suit slipped out and decided to roll around the inside of the canopy; in the process opening and cascading its contents upon her and into the cockpit. When she did finally get the machine to its designated RAF station she landed and slid back the canopy preparing to alight from the aircraft. Before she could do this a “glittering officer” jumped upon the wing and said something to her along the lines, “I was told a very beautiful young lady was delivering this Spitfire today, but all I can see before me is a clown”. This must have been the biggest put-down that Diana ever experienced in her entire life!

There was actually a potentially far more serious downside to this story. The Spitfire, unlike German and some other aircraft, did not have a cockpit floor as such, and if the powder compact had fallen and wedged in the control rods or cables under her feet the story might have had a very different ending!

In May 1944 Diana married Wing Commander Derek Ronald Walker, who was subsequently killed in November 1945 flying a North American Mustang. She never remarried. In 1963 she became the first British woman to fly in an aircraft at more than one thousand miles an hour. The aircraft was an English Electric Lightning and the speed achieved was 1.6 Mach.

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Diana subsequently survived two bouts of cancer and lived to be 90 years of age. A beautiful and truly remarkable woman.