



A big surprise was expecting air modellers in Mesolongi airport on last Sunday 15th December. Three ladies landed next to them. One was the pilot (Tracey Kurtis-Taylor), the other was the director (Annette Porter) and the third was a Boeing Stearman biplane.

But what about that plane and why those two ladies were flying over Mesolongi airport after all?

Mary Heath : The Inspiration

Something less than 100 years ago Mary Heath was one of the most famous women in the world, whose life was a succession of pioneering firsts. Having spent two years as a dispatch rider and an ambulance driver during the First World War, Heath pioneered women's athletics in Britain (setting records in the javelin and the high jump in the process) and helped introduce women's track and field to the Olympics. Switching her attention to flying, she became the first woman in Britain to receive a commercial pilot's licence; the first woman in the world to parachute from a plane and to become an airline pilot; and, in 1928, the first person male or female to fly solo from South Africa to the UK.

'When we are very young, we look for adventure and long for it, but it is generally only when we are grown up that we are able to have it, and often then do not make use of our opportunities' Mary Heath used to say and she became the inspiration for a journey from Cape Town (S.Africa) to Goodwood (UK).



Tracey Kurtis-Taylor : The pilot

Tracey Kurtis-Taylor, born in the UK, spent her early childhood in Canada before moving to New Zealand in her early 20's. Here she began to fly in earnest, completing her private license and going on to acquire to a commercial license and instructor rating. Tracey spent three years working as a flying instructor, before going to work for an aerial photography and surveying company in 1991. She spent the next six years providing government agencies with digital imagery and mapping data. During this period she also joined up with the NZ Warbirds and started to fly old aeroplanes with a host of ex-military pilots. Returning permanently to the UK in 1997, Tracey became the first female pilot to be based at the historic Shuttleworth Collection, at Biggleswade in Bedfordshire. She lives in Cambridge working predominantly with historic aviation and air show organisations, like Duxford and the Shuttleworth Collection.

"Spirit of Artemis" : The plane

Tracey's aircraft, The Spirit of Artemis, is a Boeing Stearman. It is extremely interesting that the name of the aircraft is truly related to ancient greek history. First built in 1942, it has been lovingly reconditioned by Ewald Gritsch of 3G Classic Aviation in Austria. At least 8,500 Stearmans were built in the US during the 1930s and 1940s, and the plane served as the primary trainer for the United States Air Force and Navy throughout the Second World War. In the post war years, when thousands of surplus aircraft were sold into the civilian market, Stearmans became popular as crop dusters, as sports planes, and for aerobatics and wingwalking at airshows. The Spirit of Artemis has a top speed of 95 mph, an operating ceiling of 10,000 feet and a range of 450 miles.



The journey & The film

The cockpit and wings of Tracey's biplane will be fitted with cameras, and she will be followed by a film crew in a "chase plane". Footage that captures the achingly beautiful scenery, the inevitable surprising challenges and moments of high emotion that come from an adventure of this sort, augmented by a cache of archival footage of early female pilots (including Lady Heath), will form the basis of an exciting documentary film which will be produced on Tracey's return for release in early 2014.

Tracey left the U.K. for South Africa in October 2013. Her plane had been shipped there and reassembled, and in early November, she took off from Cape Town for her journey northward to the UK. In all she will cover approximately 7,000 miles in some 35 legs over six weeks.

Before Mesolonghi Tracey had landed in Heraklion and then Corfu island was next destination. As this article is written the "Spirit of Artemis" has landed in Split (Croatia).

Information

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Photographs

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