

# Mary Nicholson Pioneering Aviator

## Series: Aviation



Courtesy of Greensboro Historical Museum

Flying was a dangerous activity in the early days of aviation. Improvements in aircraft performance were made after World War I, but the safety devices and precautions we take for granted today were unknown before World War II. Many skilled pilots died in crashes, cutting short promising careers. One of those pilots was Mary Nicholson.

Mary Nicholson was born on July 12, 1905, in Greensboro. She was the oldest of five children and the only girl. Her father, a banker, provided the Nicholson family a comfortable middle-class life. Nicholson was an outgoing child who enjoyed playing the piano for her friends. After attending college for several years, she married Dr. Harris P. Pearson in June 1925 and moved to Ohio. The marriage ended in divorce in 1928.

While living in Ohio, Nicholson learned to fly. In exchange for her lessons, she made parachute jumps to advertise the flying school. After returning home to her family, she flew regularly out of Greensboro's Lindley Field. In 1929 she became the first woman in North Carolina to earn a private pilot's license.

Also in 1929 Nicholson became a charter member of the Ninety-Nines, an organization founded by 99 of the 117 licensed female pilots in the nation. The group was dedicated to promoting women in aviation. Amelia Earhart, the first president of the Ninety-Nines, put Nicholson in charge of one of eight regional chapters.

Nicholson supported herself with various office jobs while she accumulated flying hours. She also flew in barnstorming shows around the state. She never owned a plane, but borrowed one to fly. She made certain to borrow a plane every year on January 1. She believed that flying on New Year's Day ensured that she would fly all year long. After earning her commercial pilot's license in 1934, Nicholson began instructing students.

The national aviation community soon took notice of Nicholson, and in 1937 she moved to New York City to work as the personal secretary of Jackie Cochran, a famous and influential American aviator. Her association with Cochran led to many exciting opportunities and to her involvement in the British Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) during World War II.

The ATA was an organization of civilian pilots who delivered planes from factories to Royal Air Force (RAF) bases, which freed RAF pilots for combat. Ferrying planes was risky work because Britain was under almost constant aerial attack. Cochran recruited twenty-five women from the United States, including Nicholson, to serve as ATA pilots. Nicholson arrived in England in September 1942.

On May 22, 1943, the plane Nicholson was ferrying developed an oil leak that caused the engine to freeze and the propeller to disengage. She was flying too low to use a parachute, and so she tried to land the plane in a field. But she crashed into a stone barn and died instantly. We can only wonder what contributions to her field this pioneering Tar Heel aviator would have made.