

# RAeS WOMEN IN AVIATION AND AEROSPACE CONFERENCE OCTOBER 16 2009

The Royal Aeronautical Society's Women in Aviation and Aerospace Conference attracted more than 100 delegates to hear a wide range of speakers across different job functions and different sectors of the industry.

The conference, sponsored by Airbus UK, also provided the launch pad for the Society's new group, Women in Aviation and Aerospace, and of the group's report into The Future for Women in Aviation and Aerospace.

Keynote speaker Chris Browne, Managing Director of Thomson Airways, the UK's third biggest airline, gave an inspiring address that charted a career that has made her the highest-ranking woman in aviation today. She recalled how two important stepping stones in her career both coincided with major international events that had a huge knock-on effect on the airline industry – the Iraq War and the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

"Do not wait for disasters to sort out your business," she advised. In fact disasters were a good time to make tough decisions such as the merger of two airlines which she masterminded shortly after 9/11.

She also urged delegates to fight for what was right and to work hard. There had been times when she was not welcome as the only senior woman in the business and had thought of giving up. But she had stayed and succeeded.

Clare Walker, chair of RAeS Women in Aviation and Aerospace Committee, told delegates that the group had already implemented a number of the recommendations it had made to the Society. But she acknowledged the group had only just begun its work on its two key remits: to increase the number of women in aviation and aerospace and to encourage more women to join the Society and play a greater role in its activities.

A key plank of its strategy was to set up a database of inspiring role models whose example would help inspire young women to consider aviation and aerospace as a worthwhile and challenging career.

Marissa Dineen, UK leader of the GE Women's Network, told the conference that it wasn't until the Chief Executive of GE read an article in the Wall Street Journal, which pointed out that GE had no senior women amongst its top 180 personnel, that the network came into being in 1997. As a result, the company now has quite a few women at very senior levels within GE.

The network had three focuses: connecting women with each other; helping them to understand career paths; and publicising the achievements of successful GE women to inspire others.

"Our mission is to empower women and give them the confidence so they can grow both professionally and personally," she said.

Round-the-world record-setting pilot Polly Vacher tackled the conference's key theme of networking from her experience of persuading multi-national companies to support her during her historic flights during which she raised hundreds of thousands of pounds for the RIAT Flying Scholarships for the Disabled.

Polly told delegates that the first lesson she learnt was to delegate, enlisting the support of four other members of the British Women Pilots' Association to help her with raising funds, publicity and organising her flights.

"Another lesson I learnt was that companies don't sponsor you out of the kindness of their hearts – they want something back," she said.

Katherine Bennett, Director of Communications and Government Affairs at Airbus UK, told the conference that 13% of graduates being employed by Airbus were female and the company had set itself a target of 20%.

Women bring a different perspective, are quick to try new things and are an important group of opinion formers on key issues such as aviation and the environment, she said.

"There are great opportunities for women in our industry because of the pace of technological development and a change in the way things are being done," she said.

Nicky Smith, the first women helicopter pilot in the RAF and the first to command an operational squadron, told delegates that, if you want something badly enough, you have to be single minded about achieving it.

"You never fail until you stop trying," she said. "For two decades I worked with men in a highly misogynist environment, but I loved it. You have to believe in yourself and not let your gender stop you from succeeding."

Nicky enthralled her audience with stories from her time as a Search and Rescue pilot flying the Sea King helicopter from several UK bases as well as the Falkland Islands. She described the highs experienced after a successful rescue and the lows of searching for the remains of lost colleagues.

The conference finished with an intensive session on networking with 20 top tips from Elizabeth Donnelly, Skills Project Manager at ADS, formerly the Society of British Aerospace Companies, followed by a Speed Networking session.

The task of meeting and greeting as many delegates as possible continued over a glass of wine at the Networking Reception sponsored by aviation law firm, Gates and Partners.

The conference was voted a great success with more than half of all delegates completing the delegate feedback forms and 91% of respondents rating the conference four or five out of five.

#### **FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:**

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