

Marion 'Joe' Carstairs

b1900 London - d1993 Florida



“The fastest woman on the water”

Marion 'Joe' Carstairs was a fiercely independent and openly gay woman who was heiress to an oil fortune. She had a tremendous love of speed and especially of fast boats. She lived on the Isle of Wight in the 1920s and used her considerable wealth to commission, develop and race some of the fastest early powerboats in the world.

In the 1920s powerboat racing with very large engines was a relatively new and extremely dangerous sport in which boats frequently crashed spectacularly, sank and often caught fire. Their design and technology was at the leading-edge and mechanical and structural failure were common but the boats were fast, capable of reaching speeds in excess of 100mph. Their drivers and crews were considered daring and very glamorous. Joe Carstairs was a charismatic and adventurous individual who reveled in the challenge presented by powerboats.

Childhood

Joe's childhood was unconventional. She was born in London in 1900. Her mother, Frances Evelyn Bostwick was an American beauty and socialite troubled by a drug and alcohol addiction. Her legal father Captain Albert Carstairs, A Scottish soldier, may not have been her biological father. Joe felt close to her Grandmother Nellie Bostwick, whom she idealised as a 'Wonderful person' who had 'great power.'

France

At the age of 16 her adventurous spirit was clear and she persuaded her grandmother to let her join the American Red Cross to drive ambulances in France during the First World War. After the armistice of 1918 she remained in France, recovering the bodies of fallen soldiers for identification and reburial in the war cemeteries. She spent some time in Paris involving herself with bohemian friends and becoming infatuated with Dolly Wilde, Oscar Wilde's niece. Joe's mother disapproved of her homosexual relationships and insisted that she marry or be cut off from her inheritance. Joe followed her mother's wishes by marrying a French aristocrat. They split the dowry and went their separate ways immediately after the wedding reception. She returned to England working in several jobs until she established the "X Garage", which was a chauffeur company run entirely by women, formerly the ambulance drivers she knew in France. They took people on tours of the battlefields and war graves in France and Belgium.