



Come Fly With Me!

Since the early days of air travel, flight attendants have provided service, safety, and a dash of glamour. **MARK ELLWOOD** meets six who've worked the friendly skies long enough to see it all.

REMEMBER WHEN FLYING STILL FELT STYLISH, adventurous, even (dare we say it) fun? These six flight attendants do. They're the Number Ones, specially designated by their airlines for having the most years of service. This group worked during aviation's golden age—with its fur-coated passengers, cocktail bars, and autograph-seeking kids—through the eighties travel boom and into the much scarier skies of post-9/11. They were around when flight attendants were still called stewardesses, wore high heels and designer dresses, and carried hatboxes. It wasn't all enchanting, of course, considering the marriage bans, leg inspections, and weight checks. But, as 40-year-veteran Mimi Halperin recalls, "We were meeting a more glamorous standard." Between them, these six have logged nearly 300 years of flying time, and they're still going. These are their stories.

CONTINUED »



An American Airlines flight attendant in front of a Boeing 747 engine, 1970; a group of early TWA stewardesses, 1938, top.



Norma Heape, 69

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
50 YEARS OF FLYING:
CONTINENTAL AIRLINES

WHEN I WAS 23 I TRAVELED AROUND THE world, and it opened my eyes so wide I couldn't close them. I went to Le Cordon Bleu school in Paris, lived for a short time in Hong Kong, and did some work as a model before joining Continental.

We didn't do a whole lot of training back then. They expected you to know how to walk and talk, then gave you information about the FAA. In the fifties we didn't have layover time. At Chicago's Midway Airport, we'd get driven from the plane directly to the hotel, put on lipstick downstairs,

and go have dinner with the hotel manager. It was very glamorous—people would ask me for autographs at the airport.

When I first started, I so wanted to look like the first-class passengers. Something Continental did that really attracted me was that it got away from the military-looking uniforms. We wore red velvet berets and V-neck fitted dresses and carried hatboxes as opposed to luggage. It gave us the appearance of being models. Four or five years down the road, Rudy Gernreich did a uniform for us—a black, fitted long-sleeve dress with a Majorca pearl necklace. The idea was that you could take off your wings and jacket and go out for dinner.

Continental had a lot of celebrity passengers. Mr. Six [the CEO and president from 1938 to 1980] was married to Ethel Merman, and she brought the showbiz people. My first flight was to Chicago on a 707 not long after they had married, and she was onboard singing Broadway tunes to the whole cabin—"Chicago, Chicago..." Years later I helped Muhammad Ali sign autographs. And once Tony Martin kissed my hand when he got off the plane.

President Truman was on one flight out of Kansas City. A person across the aisle asked him about the first thing he did after leaving the Oval Office and going home to Missouri. "The first thing I did?" he said. "I unpacked." Truman was down-to-earth and personable but not very funny.

The longest flight over water back in the early sixties was to Honolulu from the West Coast on a MAC flight—military aircraft command. During the Vietnam War the government needed more planes to transport GIs, so it contacted the airlines. I was one of 17 who volunteered and was based in Los Angeles, Honolulu, and the Philippines. I did it for four years.

I flew the inaugural flight from Newark to Beijing and also to Milan

and Santiago, Chile. I'm hoping to be on the one to Shanghai in 2009, if I can still walk and talk. I've been with Continental for 50 years and never missed a day of work.



Marlene Evans, 71

ESTES PARK, COLORADO
51 YEARS OF FLYING: PACIFIC NORTHERN,
WESTERN, AND DELTA AIRLINES

IN 1956 I WAS WORKING FOR A MORTGAGE company. I'll never forget: My boss, Mr. Ruby, said to me, "Why don't you go get a job with the airlines?" because I couldn't spell and I talked all the time. He did me the biggest favor of my whole life.

It was called Stewardess College then. I was rejected by American Airlines because of a separation in my teeth—I was heartbroken. So I went and had my teeth fixed. I'd just turned 20.

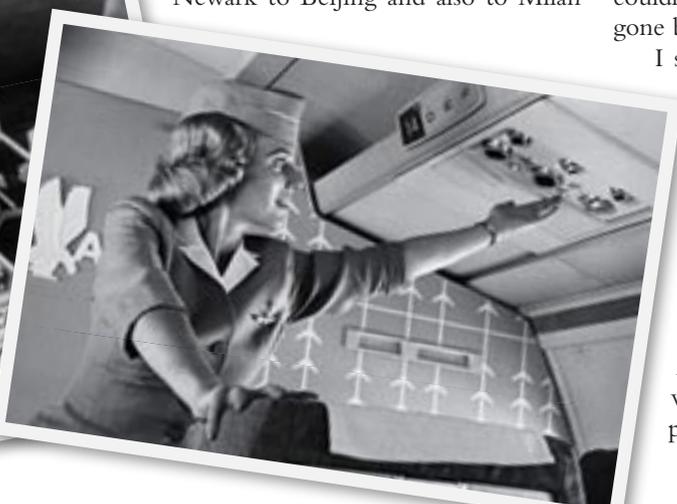
My first job was with Pacific Northern Airlines. I was based in Anchorage and flew intra-Alaska routes. The passengers wore big mukluks, fishing clothes, and parkas. Meanwhile, I was in high heels and white gloves. A dogsled met our flights and we couldn't start the engines until the sled had gone because it would upset the huskies.

I served Johnny Carson and President Kennedy when he was running for office. My favorite was Lassie—though he was actually the no. 2 dog, as the no. 1 didn't travel. He had a pair of first-class seats but lay down on the floor.

My uniform when I started was gray with a white blouse and black shoes. But when I worked for Western Airlines [later taken over by Delta] I wore a sherbet-orange polyester jumper and a blouse with big orange polka



A family boards an American Airlines flight in 1953; an attendant demonstrates the Boeing 707's modern cabin features, ca. 1960, right.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY CONTINENTAL AIRLINES; COURTESY DELTA AIRLINES; COURTESY AMERICAN AIRLINES; COURTESY R. SMITH MUSEUM (2)

Style

dots and a huge bow. With white patent-leather shoes! Now my kids say, “You wore that?”

We wanted to wear slacks, but Mr. Arthur Woodley, our president in the late fifties, said to me, “If I had wanted someone to wear pants, I would have hired men.” And we didn’t serve liquor either because, he said, “This is a family airline.”

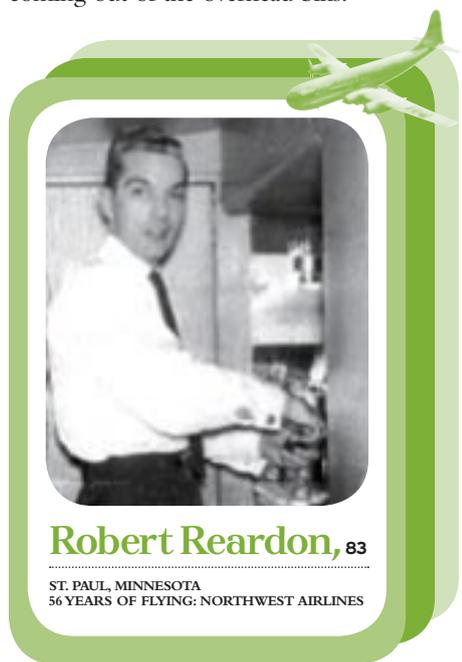
I wasn’t married, but until the late sixties a lot of flight attendants put their wedding rings in their bras when working. They hid pregnancies and had dear “nieces” and “nephews.” Even after marriages were allowed, if your husband was a pilot, you had to quit.

Once, in the sixties, an entertainer of sorts was on my flight to Seattle. We didn’t know it, but under her coat she had a boa constrictor she’d acquired for her act. At some point she got up and said, “My snake is gone!” They found it two weeks later, wrapped around some pipes, still alive. I had visions of it coming out of the overhead bins.



A series of ads from the fifties to seventies shows how central flight attendants were to the airlines’ public image.

As long as I feel all right and can do the job, I’ll keep on doing it. I didn’t mean to turn 83—it just happened.



Robert Reardon, 83

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA
56 YEARS OF FLYING: NORTHWEST AIRLINES

THEY JUST DIDN’T HIRE EVERYBODY BACK in the early fifties—they said they rejected nine out of ten applicants. I knew one girl who was made to have a tooth pulled and have a bridge put in. The standard has gone way down. It used to be a status job, but since we came out of bankruptcy and they cut salaries so much, they’re beating the bushes for new people.

Northwest began hiring male flight attendants because it sold liquor, something the other airlines didn’t do. At that time people drank more than they do now. If you have both men and women you can handle any problem, and we guaranteed one man on each Boeing 377 Stratocruiser, which was an all-first-class aircraft.

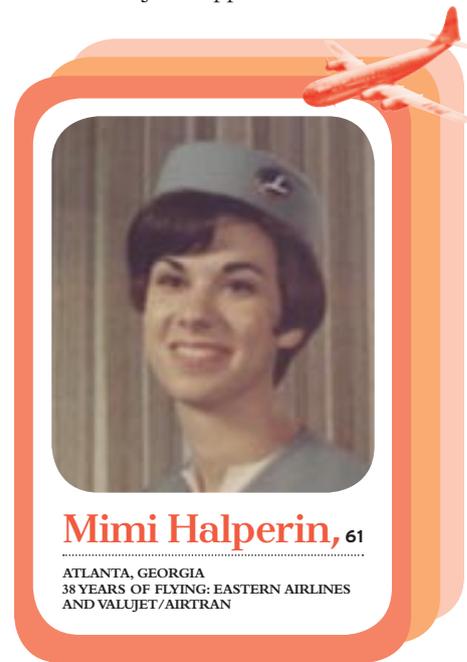
When I started out, each Stratocruiser had a lounge downstairs with 14 seats. We served premixed martinis and Manhattans and any gin, bourbon, Scotch, rye whiskey. It was just like a regular cocktail lounge. There was a table where people always played poker—I don’t know if it was legal or not. Yes, it was smoky, but it didn’t bother me.

Initially the Stratocruiser had 67 seats, but then the airline realized it could use the lounge area for passenger seats, too. Ultimately it crammed in 83 by cutting the size of the bathrooms. At first it had great big men’s and women’s rooms—you never had to wait.

We all signed an agreement saying we’d never gain weight, and I never have. I weighed 162 pounds when I was hired; I’m 160 now. The men didn’t have weigh-ins like the women did. We had one supervisor who would call in these poor girls, ordering them “Gain a pound! Lose a pound!”

Our training lasted six weeks. The girls had to go through one additional week, when the Helen O’Connell modeling school came in and taught them how to apply makeup and things. But we were very lax about a lot of things back then, and safety training is better now.

Male flight attendants dressed just like the pilots, almost identical. The airline was strict as far as appearance went—we weren’t allowed facial hair, though they’d make an exception for a mustache. Haircuts couldn’t come over the collar. And the passengers all dressed as they would to go shopping: suits and ties for the men.



Mimi Halperin, 61

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
38 YEARS OF FLYING: EASTERN AIRLINES
AND VALUJET/AIRTRAN

MY AVIATION CAREER BEGAN IN 1967, when I was hired by Eastern Airlines. I have my original application for employment. It asks: “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist party?” Along with the application, they sent a brochure describing

Style

the qualities the company was seeking in its flight attendants. It said, “After all, the same poise, grace, and efficiency for which Eastern stewardesses are noted are the qualities every man seeks in a wife.”

Oh my word, I was interviewed by a male recruiter and had to pull my skirt tight so he could judge whether my legs were good enough. We always had the two Gs—girdles and gloves. Once I got cited for being underweight; I was so thin, I had to use a safety pin to hold my girdle up. They wanted no jiggle down the concourse. At the time it didn’t seem insulting. We were just meeting a more glamorous standard.

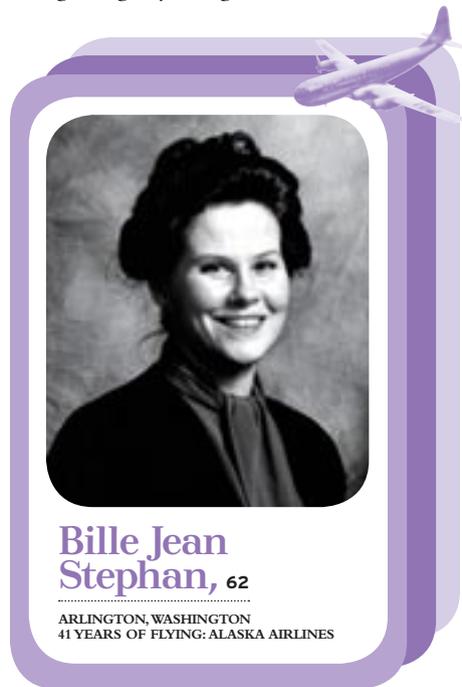
Eastern was one of the legacy carriers, and early on the uniforms were very proper and conservative. That changed with the times: At one point an optional uniform was hot pants, but you had to get approval to wear them. You’d go into the office and they’d assess your form.

In the late sixties we actually provided cigarettes on the first-class trays. When the airlines started to control smoking, the smoking section was generally at the back of the plane. Those people were the drinkers, too, and you were absolutely taking your life in your hands if you worked back there!

We used to play games to entertain the passengers. We offered little airline-stamped prizes for people willing to produce the ugliest driver’s license photo or the oldest penny—or for the person who could guess the age of the flight attendants.

I never would have left my job. It broke my heart to think that I wouldn’t get to fly

again when Eastern folded. I started with AirTran [then ValuJet] as part of its first class of flight attendants, hired in the fall of 1993. At my graduation ceremony I cried all the way through because I was getting my wings back.



I WAS IN COLLEGE IN FAIRBANKS IN 1966 when I interviewed with Alaska Airlines. There were no other companies flying where my school was located. I was the only applicant not weighed, and they didn’t ask too many questions. I was the only one hired at that time. My mother was devastated because she didn’t want me to leave college.

Soon after I began, we flew to Russia. That’s when the Soviet Union was first opening up and was very restrictive about where we could land, how long we could be on the ground. In some places flight crews weren’t allowed to leave the airport. At Leningrad they let us do a quick taxi tour and come right back, but we couldn’t take pictures. When I left some film to be developed at a drugstore in Anchorage, that roll was confiscated. It was never returned. We were being watched that closely.

The first uniform I wore was ski pants, a sweater, and a parka. Then we went into costumes for a while—Gay Nineties outfits harkening back to when Alaska was settled. I wore a long red velvet skirt with a white blouse that had big poufed shoulders; we were told to wear a wig, fishnet nylons, and high-button shoes and carry a carpetbag. The interior of the plane was done in red velvet, too. When we started going to Russia, we wore a Cossack uniform: long black coats and big fluffy tall hats.

I think we were one of the few airlines that did our announcements in rhyme. When we started the Gold Coast run—a marketing program run by Alaska to encourage tourism—we did poems for all our landing and takeoff announcements. After a while it got to be monotonous, especially for the businessmen, but the tourists thought it was phenomenal. “One hello to you / from the Gold Rush crew / at the Golden Nugget jet / our welcome extends / to the flying friends / both new and the ones we’ve met / now fasten seat belts, please,” and so on.

Until the early seventies we flew prop planes. I never had to sweep



The Soaring Sixties, from left: DC-8 jets at United’s San Francisco terminal; Southwest stewardesses; coffee service aboard a Braniff flight.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY ALASKA AIRLINES; GETTY IMAGES (3)

Style

the wings myself, but there were a lot of times when we had to wait for a couple of mechanics to come out, throw a rope over the wing, and shake all the snow off by sliding the rope back and forth. It was standard procedure.



Joyce Avriette, 77

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
55 YEARS OF FLYING: PACIFIC NORTHERN,
WESTERN, AND AMERICAN AIRLINES

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG GIRL IN GRAMMAR school, we had to write about who our idols were. I'd been reading about Amelia Earhart and always wanted to fly because she had. Upon completing our training, each stewardess was given a certificate and had wings pinned on her jacket by C. R. Smith, our president. We were C. R.'s girls.

Playboy Bunnies thought they were the first to bend their knees instead of leaning over, but it was us! I started in 1952 and we were very ladylike, polite—people onboard were guests, not just customers. They were in our airplane home, and that's what a hostess does for guests. You talked to people a lot. We didn't have movies, music, or TV.

One passenger who flew to Hawaii several times a year would say, "Gals, you do such a great job. Give me your address and I'll send you something." We were not allowed to take tips, but we could accept gifts.

All the female passengers wore hats and carried cosmetic bags for jewelry and makeup. They had furs you couldn't believe. Both the men and women dressed beautifully because they wanted to make an impression when they got on and off the airplane.

In 1952 we earned around \$2,000 a year. My first paycheck was \$78, and \$75 of that went to rent: We lived on \$3 until the end of

the month.

Every week they'd give us expense money: 75 cents for breakfast, \$1.25 for lunch, \$2 for dinner. But it was never enough.

All we served on the plane when I started was coffee, tea, and hot chocolate. Until 1957 passengers weren't allowed to drink on domestic trips. But I used to fly a lot from Chicago to Washington, D.C., with senators and representatives who would disappear into the bathroom carrying flasks. They'd come out saying "Aaahhhhh..." It smelled to high heaven!

When we began serving cocktails, there was a two-drink limit. We had a 16-ounce lowball for the first and a little carafe for the second, so it was two glasses but really the equivalent of about eight drinks.

Everyone had the same meal. Most people liked to eat steak when they went out, so that's generally what we served, except on Fridays when we had fish as an alternative. Several years later, on the 707, we introduced a lot of different food, such as chicken Kiev.

Children on the flights we worked would ask for our autographs—they were absolutely darling. We were able to take them up to the cockpit and let them meet the pilots, and we'd give them little wings. Babies got certificates signed by the captain and the copilot. We did that until the seventies, when we got the huge airplanes and had so many kids on board, we could have spent the whole time filling out certificates.

Delta operated the DC-3 (here and bottom) until 1960; a Delta flight crew in 1969, center.



In 1960 my roommate and I decided we'd go around the world for five weeks. When I started we flew only on our own airlines for free, but then they opened it up and we got deals with other airlines—as much as 90 percent off the fare. And if you went around the world, it was actually cheaper than going over to India and coming back to the West Coast, so we thought we'd go all the way. Commercial air travel had made that possible. ■