

From Air Hostess to Flight Attendant: Part 1 - Origins and restricted freedom

Aviation, with its aura of adventure, excitement and unfettered freedom, has fascinated both the aficionado and the casual observer. In the popular imagination flight crew epitomise release from the restrictions of routine and regulation. But mystique is magnified by distance. A closer study of the role of women in aviation from the outset reveals hidden limitations and constraints.

In the 1920s, many women pilots believed the age of the aeroplane augured an end to discrimination. The broad horizons of the emerging aviation industry seemed to offer career opportunities and sexual equality. For these women a pilot's licence symbolised emancipation and power, freeing them from the traditional constraints imposed by society.¹ But women would only find a circumscribed place in the sky.

Formal prohibition took the form of the battle over licences. In 1925, the Permanent Committee of the International Commission for Aviation precluded women from piloting public passenger transport aircraft. Although the ruling was later amended, commercial airlines maintained the ban. Almost as potent was the masculine team culture, partly inherited from the war that prevailed in organised air transport. Executives and male pilots remained skeptical of, and threatened by, the women who even then had passed the demanding exams for airline pilots.² In that environment, until 1929 women's flying records were classified as "Miscellaneous Air Performances".³

On December 31, 1934, Helen Richey became the first woman in the United States of America to pilot a commercial airliner on a regular scheduled flight, flying a Ford Trimotor on the Washington to Detroit route for Central Airlines (later United Airlines). Male pilots, however, claimed she was too weak and rejected her application to join their union. They were supported by the Air Commerce Department, which legislated to limit women pilots



Figure 1 - Helen Richey 1929

¹ Corn, JJ, *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900-50*, New York, 1983, p 35, 73; Reynolds, S, "High Flyers: Women Aviators in Pre-War France" in *History Today*, 39, April 1989, p 36-41.

² Bilstein, RE, *Flight in America, 1900-1963*, Baltimore, 1984, p 102-3; Corn, p 78; Reynolds, S, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics*, Routledge, 2002, p 69.

³ Lomax, J, *Women of the Air*, London, 1986, p 56.

to fair weather operations. The department had previously considered grounding all women pilots for nine days each month during their menstrual cycle. Realising the airline was more interested in her as a public relations mascot than as a pilot, Richey resigned in protest in November 1935.⁴

In Australia the achievements and role of women pilots were overshadowed by the heroic deeds of the male aviators of the early 1930s. The figures that dominated Australian aviation openly endorsed the discrimination. Sir Charles Kingsford Smith did not “approve of women in aviation, it’s not the right place for them”. Horrie Miller, founder of MacRobertson Miller Airlines (MMA), which became the Ansett subsidiary Airlines of Western Australia, then Ansett WA, reiterated that view. For him, “a female commercial flyer would be as out of place as a ballet dancer in a football match”. As such, “flying was an absurdly expensive hobby for a woman”.⁵

Even through to the 1970s prejudice prevailed in Australia. Sir Reginald Ansett was vehemently opposed to women pilots. It was only in January 1980 that Deborah Lawrie (Wardley), a highly qualified flying instructor with 1,700 hours, became the first woman to be employed as a pilot by a major domestic airline. She had applied to Ansett Airlines of Australia in February 1976 but was not granted an interview until the end of 1977, despite less qualified men being interviewed during that period. Regardless of her qualifications and experience, Ansett rejected her application in July 1978. In August 1978, Lawrie lodged a complaint with the Equal Opportunity Board, alleging discrimination on the grounds of sex. Reg Ansett denied discrimination but admitted his strong personal view was that women were not suited to be airline pilots. The airline raised objections on the basis that:

- Pilots needed strength, although there was no strength test for pilots in place;
- Unions would object, which did not eventuate;
- Women’s menstrual cycles made them unsuitable, a judgement disputed by gynaecologists;
- Pregnancy and childbirth would disrupt a women’s career to the point where it would jeopardise safety and incur extra costs for the company.



Figure 2 - Debra Lawrie

In June 1979 the Equal Opportunity Board found that Ansett had discriminated against Deborah Lawrie and ordered that she be employed at its next intake. Although the

⁴ Corn, p 80; Noronha, J, “Helen Richey, 1909-47”, SP’s Aviation, Issue: 12/2014: <http://www.sps-aviation.com/story/?id=1585>

⁵ S Mann, *The Girls Were Up There Too: Australian Women in Aviation*, Canberra, 1986, p iii, 7, 31.

company lodged subsequent appeals, on 4 March 1980 the High Court dismissed the final appeal, with costs awarded against Ansett.⁶

Beset by such enduring prejudice, the formative years of aviation failed to embody equality and the end of discrimination; women were confined to its periphery, their endeavours restricted to those of the lady-flyer stereotype. They became the solitary, long distance heroines whose successes were used, especially in the United States, to promote and sell aircraft and the safety of aviation on the sexist premise that if they could fly, being frail, timid and less capable than men, then anyone could.⁷



Figure 3 - Amelia Earhart

As a result, women were unable to force their way into the cockpits of commercial aircraft. The subsequent development of aviation in the Second World War ensured there would be no place for women in commercial aviation except in the cabin.⁸

The occupation of air hostess was created within this male dominated environment on 15 May 1930 when Ellen Church was employed by Boeing Air Transport (BAT, later

United Airlines) and crewed its Boeing Trimotor from Oakland, California to Chicago. A nurse and private pilot, she had initially sought a position as a pilot but was persuaded to become a “sky girl” instead. Church was to train seven other “Skyway Sallies”, all of whom had to be graduate nurses, aged 25 or under, unmarried, no taller than 5’4” (163cm), and weigh no more than 115 lbs (52kg).

They were not to be the “flapper type”, but rather the well-bred American girl who would refrain from fraternising with crew or passengers. For this they would be paid US\$125 a month (US\$1,868 in 2020) for flying about 100 hours. The concept is credited to SA Stimpson, San Francisco manager of BAT, who abandoned his original idea of using Filipino boys as couriers for the experiment of employing young, attractive women to serve meals and attend to airsick passengers.



Figure 4 - United Airlines' "Original Eight": the first eight stewardesses. Ellen Church is third from left. [National Air and Space Museum]

⁶ McKenna E, & Lawrie, D, *Deborah Wardley, Australia's trail-blazing pilot*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1992; Smith, F, Equal Opportunity Commission Victoria, “Bridging the Gap Between Expectation and Reality” *Women and Work 2025*, Premier’s Women’s Summit, September 2004, p 2-3:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20070928200735/http://www.equalopportunitycommission.vic.gov.au/pdf/expectationandreality.pdf>

⁷ Bilstein, p 76; Corn, p 75-6; Lomax, p 55.

⁸ Reynolds, p 41; Smith, EA, *Breakthrough: Women in Aviation*, New York, 1981, p 15.

Stimpson's early communications reflect both enthusiasm for the innovation and acceptance of using cheap, educated female labour.⁹



Figure 5 - In 1968 American Airlines were still promoting air hostesses' "home-making" instincts to sell the American Way.

In addition to the service function of the job, early duties included dusting the cabin, loading the luggage, forming a bucket brigade to help refuel the aircraft and even pushing it into the hangar. The company selected nurses, not solely for their professional skills, but because they had been taught to obey orders and had the ability to put people at ease with tact and consideration. Essentially, their presence was a continuation of the airline's attempt to allay the public's concern over the safety of flying. The psychological effect of having a young woman as part of the inflight crew was enormous. As a United Airlines hostess explained at the time: "By taking our home-making instincts into the cabins of commercial airliners, we can lend familiar aspects to which travellers may cling".¹⁰ Aviation's first women – both pilots and air hostesses – were used to domesticate flight.

Other airlines would soon follow suit. American Airlines added women to their cabin crew in 1933 and Trans World Airlines (TWA) in 1935. Air France employed women in the aircraft cabin in 1931, the first to fly internationally. Swissair followed in 1934, KLM in 1935 and Lufthansa in 1938. As Lufthansa's director of operations said at the time, the company was looking to recruit "ladies of education and breeding with the ability to give the aircraft a homely domestic attitude".¹¹

Australia became part of the world trend in March 1936 when Holyman's Airways employed the first two air hostesses, Marguerite (Rita) Greuber and Blanche Due, the latter having held a pilot's licence for two years prior to her selection.¹² Ivan Holyman was seeking keen, hard working rather than glamorous girls, no more than 5'6" (168cm) in height, nor more than 8½ stone (54kg) in weight, with a knowledge of first aid, geography and tourist information. Earning £4 a week (\$390 in 2019), they were expected to be lady-like, cheerful, tactful, and well groomed, with an ability to cope with airsick



Figure 6 - Marguerite Greuber at work on Holyman's Airways DC-2 "Bungana".

⁹ Bilstein, p 102; Nielsen, GP, *From Sky Girl to Flight Attendant: Women and the Making of a Union*, Cornell University, 1982, p 8-10; Smith, p 14.

¹⁰ Bilstein, p 101; Hudson, K and Pettifer, J, *Diamonds in the Sky: A Social History of Air Travel*, London, 1979, p 93, 95-6.

¹¹ Hudson and Pettifer, 96-7.

¹² Witcomb, N, *Up Here and Down There*, Adelaide, 1986, p 5; Holyman Airways became Australian National Airways (ANA) in 1936, Ansett-ANA in 1957 and then Ansett Airlines of Australia.

passengers, a common occurrence in the unpressurised, low flying aircraft of the era. At the time, a Hobart newspaper reported that the newly appointed hostesses would offer inflight secretarial services, although Blanche Due admitted that she could not take shorthand, nor was there a typewriter on board.¹³

By 1939, ANA employed 18 hostesses for reasons similar to those of US airlines: reassurance as to the safety of air travel and for publicity purposes. Airlines of Australia appointed two women in July 1936, although Ansett Airlines did so only in 1945 with the introduction of its first DC-3 aircraft. TAA followed suit on its formation in August 1946 and by December had 55 hostesses in service. Until the 1980s, domestic airlines only employed female cabin crew.

The exception was Australia's international airline, Qantas, which used flight stewards from 1938. This was partly because the men – former marine stewards, club stewards and hotel workers from "up around King's Cross"¹⁴ – were both "aerial pioneers of personal care and service" and boat handlers, stowing baggage and equipment, and mooring the Empire flying boats operated in conjunction with Imperial Airways.¹⁵ It was also because Imperial Airways believed it could get more work out of men and saw no place for this "curious hybrid of a nurse and a waitress" in the British club atmosphere of its aircraft.¹⁶ As a result, a single flight hostess was only added to the crew complement in 1948, with the introduction of the Lockheed L749 Constellation. Qantas was quite exclusive in the type of women it appointed, with many from influential families among the upper echelons of Sydney society being "invited" to join the airline. The sole woman was quite literally the company's hostess on board its aircraft, being removed from many of the manual tasks of passenger service.¹⁷ These



Figure 7 - United Airlines stewardesses taking a "no marriage vow" as wedding bells meant dismissal from the airlines. (Johanna Omelia & Michael Waldock, Come Fly With Us! A Global History of the Airline Hostess, p13

women fulfilled a role clearly differentiated from the working class stewards, perpetuating the class differences inherent in the concept of each occupation.

Air hostesses, however, were subjected to work conditions that would never have been endured by, nor required of, a male workforce. A marriage bar and a retirement age of 32 or 35 years encapsulated the constraints. As an advertisement for Airlines of Australia stated in 1937, "Youth is regarded as preferable to experience and hostesses must retire at 35 years"¹⁸ – a tenet that held until the 1970s. But most hostesses never confronted the age barrier, being removed by the marriage

¹³ McRobbie, MA, "A Subjective Study of Air Hostessing in Australia", B.Ed Thesis, Department of Social Science, Coburg, 1989, p 11, 12, 17.

¹⁴ Robinson, M, "Qantas Cabin Crew and Their Union", PhD Thesis, Department of Sociology, Flinders University, 1996, p 144.

¹⁵ Robinson, "Qantas Cabin Crew and Their Union", p. 92.

¹⁶ Hudson and Pettifer, p 84 97; Airline Hostesses' Association (AHA) records.

¹⁷ Robinson, "Qantas Cabin Crew and Their Union", p 162.

¹⁸ McRobbie, p 17.

bar in their early twenties. There is no accurate history of the no-marriage rule but it can be related to the status and image of the air hostess as a “highly visible distillation of middle class notions of femininity”.¹⁹ But these precepts served the airlines’ interests, providing a highly successful marketing ploy of young, attractive, single women, away from home in a predominantly male environment, culminating in the sexist advertisements of the 1970s.

Until the late 1960s, society’s expectation of a woman’s role after marriage was that of homemaker, wife and mother. Most women assumed that they would work for a relatively short part of their adult lives, would receive a lower rate of pay than men and that their prospects of promotion would be restricted. Indeed, in 1947 only 8.6 per cent of married women were in paid employment, rising to 14.7 per cent in 1954.²⁰ The regulations also provided the airlines with cheap, malleable labour since the long-term employment costs of superannuation and long service leave were not incurred. In 1962, the average length of service for TAA hostesses was 2 years and 1 month, a figure that remained constant until the 1970s when the marriage bar was lifted. Between January and November 1962, 53 per cent of resignations of TAA hostesses were due to marriage.²¹ The marriage bar allowed airlines definitive control over their female workers. In an industry that dramatically reflects economic fluctuations, the combination of a high rate of attrition due to marriage and an abundant supply of applicants created a flexible and expendable labour force. Wages, too, were inadequate when compared with other female workers in 9-5, 40-hour/week jobs. Clerks and typists employed in the aviation industry earned more than domestic hostesses.²²

Paradoxically, air hostesses were well-educated by the then current standards. Blanche Due, one of the original hostesses, held a pilot’s licence, had completed a first aid course and seven months’ nursing experience and had taken a business course.²³ Data for the employment history of TAA’s hostesses in November 1962 showed that secretarial, clerical, nursing and teaching backgrounds predominated, with 188 of 211 women having gained an Intermediate, Leaving or Matriculation standard of education.²⁴ A later survey in 1981 confirmed that domestic hostesses were more educated than the population as a whole, with 51 per cent having finished high school and obtained the equivalent of the high school certificate, compared with 30.7 percent of young women generally.²⁵

The airlines have always emphasised hostesses’ appearance and behavior, imposing standards that were personally intrusive and rigorously enforced. Initially height and weight restrictions were determined by aircraft headroom and takeoff capacity but, even with the introduction of larger aircraft, these standards still formed part of the selection criteria. Specifications varied but encompassed an age limit of 21-28 years, height 5’2” to 5’7” (157cm to 170cm) and weight that began as a maximum of 8½ stone (54kg) but graduated to a

¹⁹ Williams, C, *Blue, White and Pink Collar Workers in Australia*, Sydney, 1988, p 91.

²⁰ MacKenzie, N, *Women in Australia*, Melbourne, 1962, p 79, 134, 146.

²¹ Air Hostess Superintendent, TAA, November 1962, AHA records; Stackhouse, J, cites less than two years for domestic hostesses, “The Newest Profession”, *The Bulletin*, 5 November 1977, 51-54.

²² AHA newsletter, 30 January 1963.

²³ Witcomb, p 5.

²⁴ Statement by Air Hostess Superintendent, TAA, November 1962, AHA records.

²⁵ Williams, p 120.



Figure 8 - A United Airlines stewardess checks her shoes and hosiery seams before a 1949 flight from Chicago to New York. [Bruce Mc Allister & Stephan Wilkinson, *Skygirls. A photographic history of the airline stewardess*, p96.] A similar mirror in the TAA hostess room in Adelaide was headed "As Others See You".

height/weight table in the hostess manual. The quip in *Flight Block*, the Airline Hostesses' Association's (AHA) magazine, that "we want every machine to be perfect – except the scales in the Hostess Section"²⁶ was testimony to the practice of weighing hostesses on a regular basis and the requirement to diet if necessary. Grooming standards were stipulated and enforced: hair must be short or worn "up" if longer; makeup was to be "natural"; nail polish must not be chipped and must match the colour of the lipstick; a "light" perfume only was permitted, personal hygiene was detailed, suntanning was not to be "excessive"; and shaving of legs and underarms was required. Uniform regulations, including the designated underwear of stockings – a spare pair must be carried – a firm girdle and petticoat were enforced by physical inspection. Jewellery was confined to a watch and engagement ring; at times even the latter was not permitted.²⁷

The hostess manual required hostesses to conduct themselves in a ladylike manner at all times, stipulating unacceptable practices that included not drinking alcohol in uniform, nor, in view of the

general public when in uniform, smoking, chewing gum, eating sweets, applying makeup, combing hair, sewing, knitting or running. Religion and politics were prohibited topics of conversation with passengers. Standards were enforced by check (supervisory) hostesses and the senior regional hostess in each port. This hierarchical method of control is attributed to Mrs. Hazel Holyman – or "Matron" Holyman – whose appointment as air hostess superintendent for ANA in 1939 marked the introduction of formal training and a rigid adherence to rules.²⁸

Exacerbating these personal restrictions, air hostesses had no work rules or regulation of duty hours; the airlines could roster freely with no legal limitations. While government Air Navigation Orders (ANOs) prescribed pilots' maximum hours, cabin crew could work indefinitely. TAA hostess, Elaine Smith, (later TAA's Superintendent of Air Hostesses) recalled a tour of duty of 27 hours where the pilots were replaced under the ANOs but the "hostesses crewed back to base, then picked up [their] normal roster. ... No thought of relief for the cabin crew".²⁹

Air hostesses were also devalued in terms of their principal role, responsibility for cabin safety. While airlines promoted the glamorous image of their hostesses, their primary

²⁶ *Flight Block*, April 1974, Vol 1, No 2.

²⁷ Ansett Hostess Manual

²⁸ Williams, p 90; Hazel Holyman was the wife of Victor Holyman, co-founder, with brother Ivan, of Holyman's Airways that became Australian National Airways (ANA) in 1936, then was sold to Ansett, on 3 October 1957. The two airlines merged to form Ansett-ANA.

²⁹ Elaine (Smith) Swain, address to the Federal Council of the Australian Flight Attendants' Association (AFAA), 1986, AHA records.

function of ensuring passenger safety in both normal and emergency situations was publicly downplayed. Airline advertising did not focus upon safety and evacuation after survivable crashes. Consequently, hostesses' training in emergency procedures and equipment was not acknowledged, nor was the annual emergency revalidation to which they were subjected by government regulation, nor the regular check flights. The emphasis given to the service function of the job and air hostesses' personal appeal ensured that their skills and training as safety officers were devalued by management and in the public eye.

Air hostessing became the epitome of a short-term job, one that discriminated in terms of gender, age and marital status. But because air travel still carried a tinge of adventure in the 1950s and, even into the decade of the 1960s, was beyond the realm of most of the population, aviation retained its aura of mystique. The job of air hostess was sought-after as one of the most glamorous available to young women. This sense of good fortune was only one of the influences that retarded hostesses in their quest for equality.

Almost 20 years after the first Australian women were employed as air hostesses, amid discontent stemming from excessive hours, low pay and poor conditions, the domestic women unionised.

PART 2 - UNION AND TRANSFORMATION



Figure 9 - Elaine Smith 1956.

In 1955, amid the harsh realities of post-war civil aviation, the successors of the first Australian women employed as air hostesses unionised. The formation of the Airline Hostesses' Association (AHA) was a response to the excessive hours, low pay and poor conditions they experienced in the rapidly expanding and competitive aviation industry.

Although there was an awareness of the need for change, many of the women were intimidated by the companies' authoritarian stance and intransigence regarding employment conditions,³⁰ while the very characteristics of the labour force hampered the development of the necessary union network. Transient, young, female workers in a coveted job, without a long-term commitment to paid employment, counterpoised with a ready supply of replacement labour, was not a sound base for union action. Moreover, many of the women demonstrated great loyalty to their employers, as the airlines were small organisations, even fledgling in the

³⁰ Elaine (Smith) Swain, Interview, Melbourne, 19 July 1990 in Robinson, M, "A History of the Airline Hostesses' Association 1955-1981", BA (Hons) Thesis, Department of History, Flinders University 1990, p 18.

case of TAA; any involvement in union activities appeared as an act of disloyalty.³¹

Because of these constraints, the AHA was formed in Melbourne on the initiative of the Australian Air Pilots' Association (AAPA) under the leadership of its astute new manager, Bruce Crofts.³² Although hostesses were encouraged to organise by individual pilots in the close-knit community of the aviation industry and by a directive of the AAPA, it was not easily achieved. The first general meeting Crofts called saw him "with a list of recommendations to be put with rousing enthusiasm" but facing an empty hall.³³ Undaunted, he persisted until he arranged a successful meeting in cooperation with a TAA hostess, Elaine Smith (later TAA's Superintendent of Air Hostesses). Initially she had tolerated the arduous conditions but after flying for six years she was conscious of the unlimited hours of work and the deficiencies in pay. Seeing the need for an outside body to impose restraint on the companies and represent the "girls" who, she believed, were being treated unjustly, Smith motivated hostesses to attend.³⁴

The Airline Hostesses' Association was formed on 26 September 1955. Forty women attended and elected a management committee of nine Melbourne-based hostesses, three each from Australian National Airways (ANA), Ansett and Trans Australia Airways (TAA); Smith was elected president. Branches were established in each state and an executive formed, comprised principally of the office-bearers of the Victorian branch, a structure that continued through the 1960s. With no reference to the industrial issues, *The Argus* reported, "Committee of ... AHA! Glamour Air Girls Form A Union" and that "forty shapely and vivacious members lent glamour to the occasion [of the formation of] Australia's most photogenic trade union".³⁵ The association, with a membership of 186 hostesses, was to be an affiliate

Committee of...AHA!



This is the committee of A.H.A. . . . the Air Hostesses' Association formed last night. Back row, left to right: Misses H. Sweetnam and P. Moynihan (Ansett), P. Torr, J. Stevens, H. M. Fairchild (A.N.A.), P. Bell (T.A.A.). Front Row: J. McLean (Ansett), E. Smith and C. Grigg (T.A.A.).

GLAMOR AIR GIRLS FORM A UNION

Australia's most photogenic trade union, the Air Hostesses' Association, was formed in Melbourne last night. FORTY SHAPELY AND VIVACIOUS MEMBERS LENT GLAMOR TO THE OCCASION. The girls, some in uniform, straight off duty, decided to form a branch of their association in each Australian State, and also a Federal governing body. A nine-girl Victorian branch committee — three hostesses from each air company — was elected. Committee members are: Miss J. Stevens, Miss P. Torr, Miss H. Fairchild, all of Ansett, Miss E. Smith, Miss P. Bell, Miss O. Grigg, all of T.A.A., and Miss J. McLean, Miss P. Moynihan, and Miss H. Sweetnam, of Ansett. Mr. B. Crofts, Air Pilots' Association manager, said his organisation would help the hostesses establish their own organisation. © PICTURE — PAGE 6.

The Argus, 27 September, 1955.

Figure 10 – The nine Melbourne based hostesses comprising the management committee of the newly formed AHA, three from ANA, Ansett and TAA. Elaine Smith, President, is in front row, centre.

³¹ Elaine (Smith) Swain, Interview, 19 July 1990 in Robinson, p 19.

³² The AAPA disbanded and became the unregistered Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP) on 14 July 1959, Blain, N, *Industrial Relations In The Air: Australian Air Pilots*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia Queensland, 1984, p 29.

³³ Bruce Crofts in the AHA magazine, *Flight Block*, July 1976.

³⁴ Elaine (Smith) Swain, Interview, 19 July 1990 in Robinson, p 20.

³⁵ *The Argus*, 27 September 1955.

of the AAPA. In 1963, Qantas flight hostesses formed the Overseas Branch of the AHA. Until that time, the international women were covered by domestic contracts, with separate clauses for overseas flight pay, duty hours and rest periods.

Consideration must be given to the AAPA's reasons for initiating and subsidising the AHA since, superficially, it did not represent an industrial asset. Its short-term female work force earned minimal wages from which to extract union dues, while the marriage bar created instability, undermining solidarity and any collective response. Initially support may have come from Crofts' belief that hostesses, like the pilots, needed organisation to protect their position in the post-war environment. Besides, there was a sense of benevolence and paternalism in the AAPA that sought "to fix things up for the girls", even into the 1970s.³⁶ But the initiative can also be related to the pilots' welfare and the emergence of their union as an industrial force. At the time, pilots were seeking to escape from a paternalistic relationship imposed on them by the airlines. Their growing militancy stemmed from frustration and career insecurity that was cultivated by Crofts who recognised their unique bargaining power within the industry.³⁷

Hostesses had only recently gained that same power: the ability to ground an aircraft in a dispute. As of 18 January 1954, the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) had made cabin attendants compulsory on all regular public transport aircraft, with a ratio of one attendant for every 36 passengers.³⁸ Affiliation was a means of retaining hostesses' "airborne" bargaining power within the sphere of influence of the AAPA. This ensured they were not recruited by any of the ground unions, as attempted by the Transport Workers' Union (TWU), which could have used hostesses' ability to ground aircraft to support of their own industrial claims. Such disruption would have affected the pilots' security of employment.³⁹ The alliance marked the beginning of an ambivalent relationship in which the AHA was subsidised by the pilots and dependent on their facilities and staff until 1976.

The first log of claims was drawn up by Crofts and Smith and served on Ansett, ANA and TAA in May 1957. Smith was confident that Crofts, as the sole negotiator, "would take care of us".⁴⁰ In 1957, duty hours were limited to a maximum of 48 in any one week, 80 hours in any two weeks, although there was no daily maximum, nor any provision for rest periods. Days off consisted of 48 consecutive hours free of duty in each seven days, *where practicable*. If required to work on a rostered day off, hostesses were only entitled to a substitute day in the following fortnight. Salaries were standardised and increased, on average by £1.10.0/week (\$48/week in 2019).⁴¹ In 1960, a daily limit of 11 hours and a minimum rest period of 10 hours at home base and 9 hours on overnights were introduced; free time was converted to four calendar days a fortnight, rostered, *where practicable*, as two sets of two days. Rosters were to be posted at least seven days in advance, *as far as practicable*, with 24 hours' notice required for a roster change, *except in an emergency or other unforeseen circumstance*. But these were only notional or implied restrictions, since the operators exceeded all limits and

³⁶ Interviews, 23 March, 19 July, 22 August 1990 in Robinson, p. 23.

³⁷ Blain, p 5, 134.

³⁸ ANO 20.16.3.1.8.

³⁹ Lynne (Lucas) Corcoran, AHA President 1968-76, in *Flight Block*, October/November 1976; Len Coysh, Interview, Melbourne, 9 May 1990 in Robinson, p 24.

⁴⁰ Elaine (Smith) Swain, Interview, 19 July 1990 in Robinson, p 25.

⁴¹ AHA newsletter, 24 April 1968. With the introduction of the 1957 award, hostesses commenced on £13/5/0 a week, (\$425 in 2019) AHA correspondence.

the riders, *where practicable and in an emergency*, effectively negated the clauses. AHA records show a duty of 18 hours, 45 minutes on 20 November 1962 for an Ansett-ANA hostess who signed on at 1730 on 19/11/62 and signed off at 1215 on 20/11/62. Lynne (Lucas) Corcoran, AHA Federal President 1968-76, worked 17 hours, 45 minutes before the daily limit was enforced in 1970.⁴²

More limitations were imposed in 1963. Hostesses now had to have four days off each fortnight; they could no longer be deferred into the following roster. Duty-free buffer periods of six hours before or eight hours after a day off provided further protection. These early contracts appeared to establish some control over hostesses' working and private lives but they were often ineffective, undermined by ambiguity, the companies' reluctance to forego old practices and the union's inability to force change.

Crofts' concern that hostesses were working longer hours than those laid down for pilots under the Air Navigation Orders (ANOs) saw him appeal to DCA in 1959 and 1960 on safety grounds but the department was reluctant to legislate on the matter. Still pursuing the issue in 1962, Crofts informed the airlines that the pilots' federation would consider advising captains of their responsibility under the ANOs for the safety and general conduct of operations, requiring them to intervene on behalf of the hostesses. But both companies, TAA and Ansett-ANA, were adamant that this fell under the hostess award, not the ANOs, and the payment of overtime after 11 hours made such rostering permissible.⁴³ In 1963, Crofts argued before the Commission that hostesses were inadequately paid when compared with other female non-shift workers. He cited some 33 awards in evidence.⁴⁴

During the 1960s, the AHA's federal executive began to demonstrate a more militant attitude. Newsletters assured hostesses of their right to union membership, disparaging the "card dodger" and urging individual responsibility to ensure the award was applied correctly. On 23 June 1964, a secret ballot of members disclosed that 89 per cent voted to strike in pursuit of a reduced daily limit and mandatory stand down. With minority membership, however, strike action may not have been enforced. In October 1966, after five months of negotiations, the AHA again threatened to strike, although the appointment of a conciliator saw the threat recede. The more militant stance of the AHA can be related to developments in the AFAP. In the mid-1960s, there emerged a tactical appreciation of pilots' strategic position in the capital-intensive aviation industry, which saw the pilots succeed in introducing the seniority-based North American bidding system and pay formula in 1966. The president of their federation espoused the view that "management can easily learn to live with a tough and consistent union".⁴⁵

The end of an era was sounded, however, on 16 April 1968 in a letter from the AHA's President to the Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP), challenging Crofts' domination of the association as manager, secretary, trustee and industrial officer, and the unequal distribution

⁴² Lynne (Lucas) Corcoran, Interview, Melbourne, 19 July 1990 in Robinson, p 26.

⁴³ AHA correspondence, 21 May 1959, 7 July 1960, 7, 15, 31 May 1962.

By way of comparison, in the United States of America the Air Line Stewardesses' Association (ALSA) tied itself successfully to the pilots in 1948. They introduced government regulations on pilots' flight hours into their own contract to guarantee rest and legality provisions, Nielsen, GP, *From Sky Girl to Flight Attendant: Women and the Making of a Union*, Cornell University, 1982, p 43.

⁴⁴ AHA newsletter, 30 January 1963.

⁴⁵ Blain, p 47-8, 135-6.

of resources between the two unions. Despite the 1966 award, hostesses were still working under sections of the 1963 contract and other agreements, with maximum duty hours unresolved. Crofts' lack of communication was criticised; he had acceded to the companies' changes in operational procedures without consulting the AHA executive. The President proposed the possibility of the AHA seceding from the AFAP, becoming an independent union or affiliating with the Flight Stewards' Association of Australia (FSAA) following an approach by the Qantas flight stewards' union in February of that year; the latter course of action was opposed vehemently by flight hostesses in the Overseas Branch of the AHA.⁴⁶ Crofts' urgent reply showed concern.⁴⁷ While acknowledging the deficiencies, he looked to preserve the relationship, citing AFAP support for the association since its inception. He stipulated that the AHA must launch a recruitment campaign, increase union fees and convert branch committees into effective working units, predicting initiatives that would be undertaken by a dynamic new leadership in the 1970s. It marked the end of the beginning and was a harbinger of things to come.

Within a context of social change in Australia, the AHA would experience its own metamorphosis. In the late 1960s, women's role in society was changing. In 1971, women comprised 31.7 per cent of the total labour force, with 35 per cent of married women in paid employment in 1970, up from 26 per cent in 1966. The increase now included well-educated, middle-class, Australian born women forsaking the idealised domesticity of the post-war years for employment in the tertiary sector. The increase was related to the huge expansion in the public service in the 1960s, where the demand for trained female labour saw the marriage bar removed in 1966. Women's greater participation prompted further reforms, including the principle of equal pay in 1969.⁴⁸ These precedents and the wider discussion and influence of feminist issues flowed into private enterprise and accelerated social change.

One of the protagonists in the transformation of the AHA was an Ansett hostess, Lynne Lucas, who had been a school teacher when joining Ansett in February 1967. Like many hostesses, she had been unaware of the union's existence, an indication of its status of 38 per cent membership and a significant debt to the AFAP.⁴⁹ At the first meeting she attended there were only seven others present and, apart from these eager few, there was general apathy. With poor pay, rostered 11-hour days but no cap on duty hours in any delay, "the job was not a fair deal". Air hostesses were "hard done by". In 1968, at the age of 24, she was elected Chairwoman of the Victorian Branch and, two months later, Federal President of the AHA.⁵⁰ Convinced of the need for action, Lucas issued strongly worded newsletters condemning the apathy in the hostess ranks. She attracted a core group of women who initiated a determined recruitment drive, confronting hostesses in terminals and on board aircraft, demanding support.

⁴⁶ AHA records, Letter to the President, AFAP, from the President, AHA, 16 April 1968.

⁴⁷ AHA newsletter, signed by Crofts, 24 April 1968.

⁴⁸ Hudson, K and Pettifer, J, *Diamonds In The Sky: A Social History of Air Travel*, London, 1979, p 541; Baldock, CV, "Public policies and the paid work of women" in CV Baldock and B Cass (eds) *Women, Social Welfare and the State in Australia*, Sydney, 1983, p 26-7, 39, 41; Ryan E and Conlon, A, *Gentle Invaders*, Sydney, 1975, p 159; Turner, I, *In Union is Strength*, Melbourne, 1976, p 114, 124.

⁴⁹ *Flight Block*, October/November 1976.

⁵⁰ Lynne (Lucas) Corcoran, Interview, 19 July 1990 in Robinson, p 38; *Flight Block*, April 1974, October/November 1976.



Figure 11 - Len Coysh in Adelaide in 1994. He went on to become the Executive Director of the AFAP.

But Lucas lacked industrial relations experience and had only limited access to Crofts because of the typical priority of pilots' interests. In her view, AFAP staff merely humoured the AHA representatives, never believing the association would become an industrial force.⁵¹ To bridge the gap, Crofts assigned Len Coysh to work with Lucas. Having only joined the AFAP as a research officer in December 1969, he was to "cut his teeth" representing hostess interests to develop his leadership skills. As such, the AHA was used as a training ground, where AFAP industrial staff would "fix things up for the girls", honing their skills for the pilots' federation.⁵² Until becoming autonomous in 1976, the AHA was served by transient AFAP staff, their time being disproportionately divided between both unions. Coysh saw the assignment as a challenge, however, being confronted with a union that was "not going anywhere or doing anything", a body with \$960 in the bank (\$11,695 in 2019) and minority membership. Within six months, Lucas and Coysh – known as The Dance Team – launched an Australia-wide recruitment campaign,

travelling across the country to increase membership, from 760 in May to 1,100 in June 1970.⁵³

The 1970 award, settled under threat of strike, was a major achievement. Trunk routes were indisputably defined, with a rostered maximum of nine hours and the right to request relief at 11 hours. Graduated rest periods were as in the 1966 award, with two hours added for "back of the clock flying" – a sign off between 0100 and 0700 hours. Hostesses were precluded from working more than six consecutive days. Salaries rose by 25 per cent, 19 per cent immediately, with three per cent in the next two years, following a similar pay increase in 1969 for the pilots.⁵⁴ The changes were now effectively enforced, however, earning the AHA new credibility among hostesses and with the airlines. Three weeks after the contract was settled, Ansett noted that it had become apparent that the hostesses were now better organised and more militant. It was therefore recommended, "whenever possible a hostess should be relieved before her hours of duty become excessive".⁵⁵

In October 1971, AHA membership became compulsory, with Lucas and Coysh travelling to the state branches to put their case: asking for hostesses to pay for the benefits derived from

⁵¹ Lynne (Lucas) Corcoran, Interview, 19 July 1990 in Robinson, p 38; *Flight Block*, April 1974; October/November 1976.

⁵² Len Coysh, Interview, 9 May 1990 in Robinson, p 39.

⁵³ AHA newsletter, 11 June 1970, signed L Coysh.

⁵⁴ In support of their pay claim, the AHA stressed that tram conductresses were paid more than air hostesses. Because of the implications, conductresses asked the AHA for an apology. Lynne (Lucas) Corcoran, Interview, 19 July 1990 in Robinson, p 41.

⁵⁵ Memo from personnel manager to heads of departments, 23 June 1970, Ansett Transport Industries (ATI) records.

the association's efforts. By 26 January 1972, total membership had been achieved, securing the union's power and financial base and its ability to pay for AFAP staff and facilities.

Significantly, removal of the marriage bar followed, reinforcing the AHA's industrial presence. After nine months of negotiations, initial agreement was reached between the AHA and Qantas for its international flight hostesses but only with the introduction of an early retirement scheme: all women currently employed must resign at 35, those subsequently recruited must sign a 10 year employment contract. The company was intransigent. On 4 August 1972, Qantas lifted the marriage bar, which flowed on to the domestic airlines on 29 September. Both TAA and Ansett opposed the change, arguing that hostesses would lose their sex appeal if married.⁵⁶ But many hostesses revealed that they were already secretly married, some for years.⁵⁷ With increased length of service, hostesses developed a vested interest in improved work conditions, the impetus for further change. Accordingly, in 1973, under threat of strike, a seniority-based bidding system for blocks of monthly flying was introduced for domestic hostesses, providing greater control over their working lives. Additional benefits included an increase in the incremental pay scale from three to five years and an increase in the retirement age. But only to 40 years!

Hostesses resented Ansett's attitude. In a secret ballot, only 11 hostesses nationally voted against continuing the strike, confirming support for strong leadership and solidarity.⁵⁸ While newspaper coverage focused on hostesses' "see-through tops and cork clogs" and concluded that "there has never been a better-looking union meeting", Lucas asserted that the AHA was a "militant union ... tougher than the men".⁵⁹ Agreement was reached that day, following an apology from Sir Reginald. The new award saw an extension in the incremental pay scale from five to eight years, further pay rises, and annual leave increased to six weeks, with 17½ percent loading.



THE "old boilers" were out in force yesterday, in their jeans, see-through tops and cork clogs. They looked proud of themselves as they paraded in and out of the old South Melbourne Town Hall. About 400 domestic air hostesses were at the hall to further Airline Hostesses' Association claims for better wages and conditions. Sir Reginald Ansett's description of them as "a batch of old boilers" had hurt them, but the good of their profession was their major concern. And the hall's hefty pillars have never felt the wrath of a more determined group of women. One thing's for sure - there has never been a better looking union meeting than yesterday's. The floor of the Town Hall has never had a more glamorous patronage, and as for Park St., South Melbourne, the locals were all eyes.

Figure 12 - The "old boilers" with an average age of 30. The Federal President, Lynne Lucas is on the left, next is Lyn Pike who was elected Federal President in April 1980. [The Sun, 26 March 1975]

In 1975, however, strike action was not avoided. In what became known as "The Old Boiler Dispute", 1,600 women demonstrated commitment and solidarity in the first ever strike by domestic airline hostesses. Following a breakdown in negotiations over the new award, a strike was called for 25 March 1975, presenting a threat to the Easter flights, the airlines' busiest period. Sir Reginald Ansett launched an attack on a work force of young women, saying:

⁵⁶ Lynne (Lucas) Corcoran, Interview, 19 July 1999 in Robinson, p 44.

⁵⁷ Stackhouse, J, "The Newest Profession" in *The Bulletin*, 5 November 1977, 51.

⁵⁸ Len Coysh, Interview, 9 May 1999 in Robinson, p 47.

⁵⁹ *The Sun*, 26 March 1975; *The Age*, 25 March 1975.

If we don't get this settled right away, I am making application to the government to dispense with the services of hostesses altogether. ... They are a batch of old boilers sitting on their executive. ... We can run our airline without people to serve drinks. We can attend to safety requirements with traffic officers. They can all have the sack as far as I am concerned.⁶⁰

Such language was linked to the long-term control of an occupation that had previously utilised young women at the peak of their sexual status, one where older women were deemed inappropriate to the image. The attitude that hostesses could be dispensed with related to the expendability of female labour, devaluing their role as safety officers.

Hostesses resented Ansett's attitude. In a secret ballot, only 11 hostesses nationally voted against continuing the strike, confirming support for strong leadership and solidarity.⁶¹ While newspaper coverage focused on hostesses' "see-through tops and cork clogs" and concluded that "there has never been a better-looking union meeting", Lucas asserted that the AHA was a "militant union ... tougher than the men".⁶² Agreement was reached that day, following an apology from Sir Reginald. The new award saw an extension in the incremental pay scale from five to eight years, further pay rises, and annual leave increased to six weeks, with 17½ per cent loading. Basic maternity leave was introduced: hostesses could now work until 12 weeks' pregnant but must return six weeks after confinement and maintain health, weight and appearance standards. Another rise in the retirement age, but only by five years to 45, was indicative of the companies' reluctance to relinquish the youthful image of the hostess. In the following years, the AHA continued to win further gains, including superannuation and in 1981, after a week-long strike, improved maternity leave that allowed up to 20 weeks after confinement, the retirement age being raised to 50 years, a ranking system with the supervisory position of purser, and the abolition of weight restrictions. The women could now wear lower-heeled shoes in the cabin and, if necessary, glasses and dental braces.

By now, with the association demanding more attention than the pilots would concede, both unions agreed on the need for autonomy. The severing of ties began in November 1975 with the AHA's first industrial officer, and an office in Melbourne in May 1976. But autonomy also saw a challenge to the leadership from a Qantas hostess, Maureen Martin, Chairwoman of the Overseas Branch. Following a strong campaign, she became the Federal President from 1976-80, after which the presidency returned to Lyn Pike, Chairwoman of the Victorian Branch. Coysh saw the leadership contests as the association maturing, moving from a leadership-led organisation to a participatory democracy.⁶³

In these years, technical, safety and health committees were established, along with executive representation on the International Flight Attendants' Association (IFAA);⁶⁴ the goal being recognition of the AHA as a professional body with knowledge and expertise to contribute to the field of aviation.⁶⁵ As a corollary, the AHA convened a safety awareness seminar in October 1980, with international speakers and representation from Australia's

⁶⁰ *The Age*, 25 March 1975.

⁶¹ Len Coysh, Interview, 9 May 1999 in Robinson, p 47.

⁶² *The Sun*, 26 March 1975; *The Age*, 25 March 1975.

⁶³ Len Coysh, Interview, 9 May 1990 in Robinson, p 56.

⁶⁴ Lyn Pike, Victorian Branch Chairwoman, was elected Vice-President, Asia and the Pacific and, in October 1977, President of that body, Robinson, p 51.

⁶⁵ Interview, Maureen Martin, Sydney, 11 August 1990 in Robinson, p 59.



If the hostess was out of uniform would you know which airline you were flying with?

Until recently probably not. But from next June you won't be in any doubt at all. Ansett will be offering you a real choice of the planes you fly in, the times you depart, and the services you get both in the air and on the ground. In June we start taking delivery of our new fleet of 12 Boeing 737's and new generation 727's and start phasing out of our DC9's. This means we'll soon be offering you Boeing comfort and reliability on all our jet routes.

You'll be far more likely to find a departure time that suits you, rather than one that just suits the airline. And you'll check in faster, get on and off quicker, and get your baggage sooner.

We'll also be offering major service benefits that we can't reveal now for reasons that will be obvious to readers who are also in a highly competitive situation. But don't wait until next June to try the new Ansett. Our competitive philosophy is showing up right now in lots of little ways that already make

Figure 13 - Ansett's full page "galley curtain" advertisement in national newspapers was to promote its new fleet of 12 Boeing 737s, a new generation of B727s and the phasing out of the DC9s, which would offer passengers a "real choice" of aircraft and departure times, along with faster check-in and baggage collection.

airlines, the AFAP and the Department of Transport (DOT), where cabin crew were acknowledged for their primary role in passenger safety. A month later Ansett launched a full page, national advertising campaign depicting a naked "hostess" wrapped only in a galley curtain.

In 1981, the AHA's Federal Safety Coordinator was critical that "Airline marketing still promoted a 1930s image of a flight

attendant, with complete disregard for the 1980s reality".⁶⁶ The professional image that the AHA was projecting was undermined by sexist advertising sited in the past.

Len Coysh saw the AHA's transformation from "tame cat to wild cat"⁶⁷ in the 1970s as unleashing a totally unexpected form of female militancy that achieved concrete benefits for its membership. In so doing, the AHA overturned the stereotype that women are poor unionists lacking a commitment to paid employment, of them being reluctant to unionise and disinclined to resort to collective bargaining and strike action. But hostesses were no longer the short-term workers portrayed in the glamorous image of earlier times but rather working women who had supported the AHA throughout the 1970s as it reshaped their conditions of employment. For them, 1981 was a benchmark when many of the structural goals of the association were achieved. Even so, the gains

Figure 14 – (Right) Ansett was "coming on hot and strong" about "Free" hot evening meals and the "popular" Ansbax sandwich for lunch for Economy passengers, as well as free drinks on all flights in First Class. Other inducements included on-the-hour schedules for major routes and Apex (advance purchase) discount fares.

Ansett. Coming on hot and strong.

All Ansett we're coming on hot and strong. There are hot evening meals and the popular Ansbax, open sandwich for lunch for Economy passengers. Free And free drinks on all flights in First Class. Plus on-the-hour schedules on many major routes, a great range of Apex discounts and year-round discount fares. Great immunities. And we're going to keep coming because we're working hard to give you, the passenger, what you want. Next time you fly by Ansett and notice the difference.

ANSETT
AIRLINES OF AUSTRALIA

⁶⁶ AHA Federal Safety Coordinator, News, (Perth) 23 April 1981.

⁶⁷ Len Coysh, Interview, 9 May 1990 in Robinson, p 64.

were not the result of a union acting in isolation. Rather they stemmed from the economic and industrial ethos of a turbulent time in Australian industrial relations history.

Reflecting changes in society and soon the aviation industry, the association's constitution was amended to allay, ironically, charges of discrimination. To maintain coverage of any male cabin crew employed by the domestic airlines and on overseas flights on Australian airlines, the AHA became the Australian Flight Attendants' Association (AFAA) on 9 January 1984. Following an amalgamation with the former flight stewards' association, a new union, the Flight Attendants' Association of Australia (FAAA), came into being in June 1992.

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